

SERIOUS



A NOVEL

PORPENTINE CHARITY HEARTSCAPE

WEAKNESS

Blind Cleavage

The Nexusa painting, worth two million dollars, has two bold slashes across its center, swallowing Paris and its river, along with thousands of bodies, horses, cars, birds, a watercolor sunset, in fact, the entire universe.

Trianon writes down the damage in a little black book. A simple but effective blemish. X'ing it out. Cancel, nullify, delete.

He hears a sound outside, like someone moving around. He feels his ponytail to make sure no strands have fallen to the length of his neck. He should cut it soon. Unprofessional.

The glass door to the backyard patio slides open. The stranger is taller than Trianon, but that isn't saying much. He wears a nice blazer that contrasts with his short, messy brown hair, oddly cheap like a strip mall haircut that grew out. Trianon's eyes flick across the face for a second, catching as much detail as he can before darting away. An impression of blankness, boredom, kind of jockish, but undermined by something sullen or delicate. A flash of dark and brown, eyes rimmed like he doesn't get enough sleep. Mid 20s? Stop analyzing. He isn't a painting.

Trianon clears his throat. "The owner said I had the place to myself."

The blank face stares at him, as if waiting for something.

"If I'm in the way, I can come back later."

"Are you his kid?"

The tips of Trianon's fingers press white against the black book. "I'm appraising the damage."

"The damage?"

"Conservator. I'm seeing what needs to be fixed."

"You're repairing my work."

"Sorry?"

The stranger points at the painting. "That's me."

"Oh. Nexusa." He tries to inject enthusiasm into his voice. He was excited to meet artists through his job, but Nexusa isn't super interesting. Classical landscapes with some passé modern injection, like a giant soda can floating in the Danube. The kind of art a rich person buys to fill out a room.

The artist pauses. "Yeah."

"I'm Trianon."

"Sure."

"Did he call you?"

"The old guy?"

"Uh. The owner. Yes."

"Yeah. He's a friend of mine."

"Okay. Well, I'm sorry for." Your loss? Do you even paint your own paintings?

"How many restorations have you done?"

"My girlfriend is a lot better. But I've done a few—"

"Your girlfriend?"

"She's an art conservator. That's how I got into this."

"And before?"

"Um." Trianon scratches the inside of his wrist, trying to use less filler speech. "Acting. A little acting."

"What kind of a little acting?"

"I was in high school movies. Movies about high school. Just in my early twenties."

"High school in your early twenties?"

"It's very common. In movies."

"Because you're not a child. Because you're trained."

"Right. It can be hard directing children. And labor laws...yeah. But it's not part of my life anymore. It was only a few movies. Not big ones."

"You look young. I understand why they cast you."

"Oh. Thanks." Trianon straightens up, deepening his voice a semitone.

“How did you get into acting?”

It always feels like a lie, when he picks out the few spots of actual activity in his life, padding his resume in real time. “I did a little modeling.”

“So I make art. But you are art.”

“It was just catalogs. Teen modeling.” Trianon picks up his messenger bag and slings it over his shoulder. He wonders if he should leave. Let the artist be alone with his painting. Like a funeral. “It was nice talking to you, Nexusa.”

“Insul,” the artist says suddenly.

“Sorry?”

“I prefer that.”

“Right.” Trianon vaguely remembers an old interview. Nexusa is just one of a few names that the artist uses. Something about *nom de seasons*, using a new name for each palette shift. Nexusa was summer. Fall has begun.

In the awkward silence, Trianon realizes how much his stomach hurts. He goes to the kitchen and opens the vault-like refrigerator, bulging with fresh produce and small batch condiments and artisanal drinks. “Do you want anything? The owner said it was okay.”

“Water.”

“Sure.”

Insul doesn’t move, so Trianon fills a glass and hands it over. Then he cracks open a bottle of syrupy red liquid with a tropical wave on the label.

Insul says, “What’s that?”

“Uh. I guess it’s like, a wine cooler? Alcopop?”

“Aren’t those for teens?”

“I like sweet drinks. And I don’t like getting too drunk, so the low alcohol content is—” He wipes his lip, the back of his hand stained red. “People made fun of me for it in college.” He feels a lick of anger, or maybe it’s the gentle heat of the alcopop.

“Did you graduate?”

“I mean, it doesn’t matter. It’s about who you know. Getting experience.”

"How old are you?"

Trianon hesitates. "Twenties." He waits for Insul to reciprocate, but nothing happens. It feels bad to have given something away like that. Exposed. He can't parse that blank expression. Maybe it's a snobby, automatic rich person thing. The way you shut your face off when passing a homeless person.

"Are you?"

"Sorry?"

"Getting experience."

"Well. Look at me. I'm in this place, right?"

"A nice house."

"Yeah. Yes."

"Moving in circles."

"Like I said. It's about who you know."

"Then you'd better impress the old guy."

Trianon grabs another alcopop and breaks the seal. It feels good to be inside someone else's house, drinking something frivolous he wouldn't buy for himself, not responsible for maintenance or groceries, just passing through. "My report will be thorough."

"How many words do you need to say the painting is fucked?"

"Haha. It's more about analysis."

"Forensics?"

"Just a few thoughts."

"What kind of thoughts?"

Trianon starts talking and walking and the house fades away, words spilling out as if preprogrammed. Insul follows, the glass of water draining to a clear shape in his hand.

"There was a dinner party. Someone could have done it then. But the cameras weren't even turned on, so who knows." Trianon runs his hand along a dark hallway, looking for a switch. "But

I figure it's someone who knows the house. Family. Friend. Some kind of history."

"Like rape?"

"What?" Trianon puts his empty alcopop on what feels like a dresser. Something brushes past his arm and he looks back to see Insul placing his empty glass next to the alcopop bottle.

"When you get raped, it's usually by someone close to you. Shared history. That's what I heard."

The red light of a thermostat burns through the darkness. "I don't think that applies to paintings."

"They have history."

Trianon isn't sure how to respond. He fumbles around again but can't find a switch. Insul steps past him and a room lights up automatically. Trianon follows him inside, picking a tennis racket off the floor. Reddish-brown wood and a faded inscription. Looks antique.

"You like tennis?" Trianon remembers playing it in high school PE. It seemed more elegant than football or something like that. Less likely to get his small frame bashed around.

No response, so he lowers the racket, but it catches on something. He looks down and sees Insul's fingers hooked into the strings. "Let's play."

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Trianon serves the ball. "There's been a lot of art vandalism this year."

"Why do you think that is?"

"People want to destroy something beautiful. Sorry. That's a little melodramatic. I just mean, art is valuable, right, but it needs to be vulnerable to the public so they can view it."

"Soft target."

"Sorry?"

"Public space. Hard to secure. Like a school."

"Sure." Trianon hits the ball back. "And culturally there's this meme that art is..."

"Important?"

"Right. It's on a pedestal. People feel insecure."

"So they want to humiliate it."

"Right. They grew up with cartoons where art is used as a signifier. References to ancient paintings and statues as a catch-all for an intellectualism that died before they were even born."

"Why do you think there's been so much vandalism, Trianon?"

"I don't necessarily think it was a trend. It might be one person inflating the statistics."

"One person?"

"The sound sculpture at Gal-Beringg. Someone blew the speakers out." Trianon barely manages to return Insul's serve. A tingling sensation nibbles at his arm. He shakes it out. "The Nongolden Arch at the Tinker Memorial. Set on fire. And you obviously know this, but your other piece, the one at um, the Twin Zeum, someone pissed on that while it was in storage. Sorry about that."

"It looked better that way."

"Haha."

"You think it was the same person?"

"It would be a long drive for one person. But it all happened on the West Coast. So it's not impossible. And this, uh, felt like the others."

"Felt like what?" Insul lobs the ball high, bouncing it off the ceiling. Trianon looks up, neck craning, an uncomfortable twinge in his spine. He swings and misses.

"I don't know. Casual or emphatic or something. Barbaric? There was no statement. The art world is full of stunts. And historically, a lot of vandals had this like, intense reason for doing it and wanted everyone to know. They saw everyone looking at this object of desire, and had to insert themselves into that space, like a shortcut to love, God, justice, I don't know. But these were all broken with, um, disdain? And no one took credit. So this person doesn't need to get caught. Or maybe they're not satisfied yet."

"Is that what you wrote?"

"I don't want to overanalyze it. It could just be something stupid."

"Stupid?" Insul hits the ball at a careless clip. Trianon barely manages to deflect it.

"Some people vandalize because of frontal lobe damage. Low IQ. It can be a very simple crime. Not even a crime. An illness."

“Were there any retarded guests at the dinner party?”

Trianon fumbles his serve. “Well. Haha. It could have been a worker.”

“Like a retarded menial laborer.”

“I don’t think that word...”

Insul smashes the ball. It comes so fast Trianon doesn’t even try to hit it, just flinches. He searches Insul’s face for anger, maybe he said something bad without realizing it. But it’s empty like always. He picks the ball up and swings, missing his own serve. His arm feels sluggish. “I have to go to the...I’ll be right back.”

He finds a bathroom and locks the door. His stomach hurts. He should have eaten more if he was going to have those alcopops. He sits on the toilet without lifting the lid. Stressed about his job. Still feels like an impostor. At least he has someone to bounce his thoughts against. Insul is annoying, but he’s direct.

He sees his reflection on the floor, in the black marble with glittering gold streaks. He covers his face and leans back, trying to remember what he wrote in the little black book. Was it useful? Was it an *insight*? It doesn’t have to be clever. Just document. His girlfriend will take care of the rest. But he feels hollow as a pipe, conveying matter from A to B. If he could formulate his thoughts into some kind of security brief or psychological profile, he’d feel like more than a camera. Something to impress his girlfriend, or the director. The museum is creating all kinds of new jobs after the recent upheaval, there has to be some label he can squirm inside. It’s all made up anyways.

He gets up and washes his hands. He feels stupid for this performance but he wants the right sounds to come out of the bathroom. It would look weird to just sit in a room for a long time doing nothing. He looks in the mirror to pad the time out. Thick eyebrows on a delicate face, flushed with exertion, shut your mouth, you look like a child with it open, crying for candy.

A single strand of hair dangles free, escaped from his ponytail. Green dye from last year’s Halloween dare stains the tip, the main reason he put it up. He looks like an energy drink.

He tucks the strand back in. He’ll get it cut tomorrow. He’ll hand in his report. And everything will be under control. The sound of running water is soothing. His hand lingers on the faucet handle, reluctant to shut it off.

His left eye droops. He tries to raise it, but can’t. He fumbles for the bathroom door, hands glistening and wet.

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He walks quickly through the dark hallway. Something makes a steady sound. Thock. Thock.

Thock. He follows it back to the tennis room.

Insul bounces the ball against the wall. Trianon fumbles in his messenger bag, finding only softness: a change of clothes yielding under his touch, a phone charger cable wrapping around his finger. Did he forget his pills?

"You must miss your girlfriend."

Trianon looks up. "Yeah. Of course."

"What's she like?"

Trianon takes his wallet out and shows a small photo to Insul.

"A wallet pic. Like the old days."

"Yeah. Real boomer."

"She has nice hair."

"I'm lucky to be with her."

"Do you love her?"

"Uh. Yeah, of course. She's amazing."

"So it's pretty serious, then."

"We live together. Yeah." Trianon's face aches, telling him he's manually keeping his eyes synchronized, straining his muscles. "Maybe there's profit involved."

"Profit?"

"Insurance or something. On the painting. Sorry. I was just, thinking out loud. Trying to sound smart. Like a detective. I'm a little drunk."

"On alcopops?"

"I'm a lightweight." It was supposed to come out airy and interstitial, the kind of thing you say at a bar, but in this quiet, austere house in the desert, it just sits in the silence. Insul starts bouncing the ball again.

"Want to play?"

The sound of the ball hurts Trianon's head.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"Again?"

"Yeah, I, forgot something."

Double Fault

Trianon feels his way down the hallway, almost tripping on the rug. He swings by the kitchen, grabbing another alcopop. He can't see a stern old guy like the owner drinking these. Maybe he has a kid. No, his son's grown up by now, judging from the photos. It must be his wife.

The glass door to the patio is so clear and sudden, exposing such a stark vista of pristine desert night, that Trianon feels like he's looking through a spaceship window. He slides the door open and steps outside, releasing an acoustic pressure he didn't realize was there, an uncomfortable sound-muffling quality of the house.

The air is cold but it feels good to inhale. Other people's homes have a funny smell. And after this he'll be in his hotel room, which smells like floor chemicals. He doesn't like the smell of floors. Or walls. Ceilings are fine. They keep the sky up.

The alcopop glows neon red in his hand, in his throat. He stares at the pool, mesmerized by the caustics. It has an interesting shape. Rectangular but curved at one corner. An unusual embellishment. Asymmetrical.

The shape has a hand, white and wrinkled. His eyes adjust and he sees someone floating face down.

The alcopop slips from his grip. Not dropped like a movie heroine gasping in shock, the opposite, he grips it too hard and it pops free, slicked by condensation. It torpedoes into the pool, dyed red fluid spiraling around it.

The person doesn't move. They float there longer than human breath.

Trianon pulls his phone out and dials 911.

No signal. He lifts it up and walks around, but his arm quickly turns to jelly. He goes back inside, to the tennis room. Insul is still there, balancing the ball on his racket.

"Do you have reception?"

"You look scared."

"I think someone's hurt in the pool."

"Hurt a little or hurt forever?"

Trianon kneels down, feeling nauseous. "I think forever." This close to the floor, the court smells like old sweat. "Can't you call the number?"

"What number?"

"You know. 911. Ambulance. Police."

"I don't have a phone."

"You don't have a phone?"

"Not with me."

"Is there a landline?"

"Didn't see one."

Trianon keeps looking at his phone, hoping the answer will materialize in the form of green bars, absolving him of responsibility.

Insul leans back, racket resting on his shoulder like he's posing for a magazine cover. "You don't like talking about the bathroom."

"What?"

"You were vague the first time. When you were actually going to the bathroom. But the second time, you said the bathroom, specifically. People are specific when they're making an excuse."

"That's not your—I needed some air. Need some air."

Trianon heads for the door and trips, almost banging his head on the wall. His right leg feels weak and heavy. He grabs his messenger bag and shakes it. Nothing rattles inside. "I need my pills."

"Your pills?"

"They were in my bag."

"Maybe you forgot to pack them."

"Maybe. I don't think so."

"When was the last time you didn't have your pills?"

Trianon answers without thinking, like he always does when he knows the answer. "Eighteen."

"Near the end of high school."

Trianon feels bad. He wishes he'd had the pills during high school. A time when he was sitting

next to so many people, every failure of his body visible to them.

“Did you stop acting because of it?”

“The pills helped. I was normal. But it got worse. Not terrible, but the camera could pick it up. I think it was the anxiety.” Trianon tries to slow his cadence down. He must be in shock, to go on like this. “But I have better pills now.” Do you? Could you really have forgotten them? Stop talking. You can’t ignore the problem. You have to report a body.

“How long have you been on pyridostigmine?”

Insul is obviously a snoop, obviously lacks boundaries. Might be a kleptomaniac. You can never tell with artists. Is this some kind of piece? Is it being filmed? But it’s very difficult not to respond when someone asks him a question, especially when it means not having to think about a corpse. He used to compulsively overshare, and now their mutual lack of boundaries is setting each other off.

“My adult life. Most of it. After I stopped doing movies. Maybe when I was 21, 22—”

“Four years ago.”

“Sorry?”

“You’ll be 26 soon.”

“How do you know that?”

“You opened your wallet to me.”

“To show you a picture. Not my ID.”

“I can’t only see part of something.”

“Sure. That’s why you’re a great artist.”

Insul stops responding, his face blank.

Trianon checks his phone again. Of course there won’t be a signal in the tennis room. You have to try outside, a different slice of outside, or get in your car and drive, and tell them you had nothing to do with it, in fact you know nothing— “When did you get here?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Did you see anyone here?”

“Just you.”

Trianon mumbles something, have to go, car, town, thank you, goodbye, then he’s swimming through the dark hallway, through the kitchen, the living room, past the X’d out painting, and the house spits him into the front yard. He goes over to his car and puts his hand on the cool metal, trying to calm down.

Don’t forget. This is the same darkness as the other side of the house. You’re still in it. Get your phone out. Call the desert authorities.

No signal. He walks around his car and lifts the phone up and this time, for some bizarre reason, he sees green bars, unstable and flickering. His arm hurts, stretched out like an antennae. Is it really helping his phone? Maybe it’s a myth. But he’s not going to interrupt the tenuous signal. He presses the 9 button. His arm sags and he holds it up with his other arm.

“Need help?”

Insul stands at the front door, backlit by the living room light. He still has his racket, balancing the ball on it with slow, steady tilts, catching it just before it falls off.

“I’m good.”

Insul baps the ball into the air and hits it with a crack. It soars over the black slope of the house, into the desert like it fell inside a painting. “I’m not.”

“Sorry?”

Insul walks down the steps. Trianon presses the 1 button, then he presses it again and drops his arm. He listens for a ring.

Nothing. He looks at his phone. 912. His fingers feel huge and clumsy.

Something explodes on the side of his face. The phone drops to the ground, cracking on the driveway.

Insul hits him with the racket again. Trianon coughs, his fingers grinding into the gravel. It seems so oppressive to have to defend himself on a low-energy day like this, when his entire being was calibrated for collapsing into bed. “What are you doing?” He puts his hands over his face, covering his skull. His frontal lobe. Don’t want to end up like those low IQ art vandalizers.

“I’m not going to hit you there. A concussion is serious. It could give you brain damage. And I need you walking. For about another minute.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Leave me alone.”

"I can't leave you in the front yard. You look really suspicious."

"Fuck off—" Trianon tries to spring up, his hand tightening into a fist, gravel stinging his palm.

The racket slams into his face again. He's on the ground. The floor. He was right to distrust floors. He reaches out and feels something soft but taut. His car's tire, big and comforting, prickly with the rubber hair of vent spews. Maybe he can do some kind of sideways flip, land perfectly inside his car. No...probably not...

Trianon looks up at the grid-covered sky. The center of the racket is dark and dripping. Painted with his face. Maybe it's just his nose, those bleed easily. His fingers trace across his cheek. The racket grid is imprinted onto the skin.

"You look like a waffle."

"I'm not a waffle," Trianon says, voice muffled by the nosebleed.

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The yard curves past the pool into an outdoor dining area with weatherproof couches surrounding a fire pit. The wall is short but it's enough to cut the horizon out. That feeling of being exposed to space again, to a radioactive unfeeling referenceless void.

Insul is tearing open bags of artificial logs and dumping them in the fire pit. Now he's pouring lighter fluid into the pit. Then he takes a long-neck lighter and touches it to the wet logs and the pit flares up, lashing Trianon's legs with heat. He steps back, throat tight with smoke. He wonders if he could wander, if he could repeat this motion, for one step seemed like nothing to Insul. Like testing a wild dog.

He takes another step. The racket points at him like a sword.

"Give me the book."

Insul drops the black book into the fire. Trianon's theories char black and disintegrate.

"Phone."

Insul looks at the phone and slides it into his blazer pocket. "You're shaking," he says flatly.

The business casual voice Trianon wore for the nice house is gone, replaced by the bloody-nosed voice of the backyard, this dimension of fire and water. "You hurt me." Sometimes when he runs too hard in his morning routine back at the city, he feels sick and swinging in temperature, the way he does now. So stupid, to have missed most of his running days this month. Did you think society had progressed past the most basic survival needs, when a stranger with a racket can beat you repeatedly in the face?

You hurt me. The words linger on the air. Insul doesn't say anything.

Trianon's legs wobble. "I need my meds."

Insul takes an orange vial out of his pocket and shakes it, like he's waving a toy at a cat and waiting to see what it does.

"Just one. I'll stop shaking if you give me one, I'll do whatever you say. It'll be easier for you—"

Insul pops off the cap and sprinkles the pills into the fire. "I don't need this to be easy."

Trianon steps back, the fire suddenly very warm and loud in his ears. "Think about your career. Don't throw it away."

"This is my career."

"What?"

"Don't pretend. We're not pretending anymore."

You're not Nexusa, even if I want you to be. The real Nexusa is at a party somewhere, in a well-lit, surveilled part of the world, subject to its consequences. But Insul is a dark hallway. The art destroyer, appearing as if summoned by the burning of the notebook, hypotheticals transformed into flesh.

"Then who are you?"

"I'm the sick, retarded adult who drives around breaking things. Give me your shirt."

"Not my shirt."

Insul takes a step closer and Trianon flinches, the grid marks on his face tingling. He unbuttons his shirt and the desert chill hits his naked skin. He tosses the shirt to Insul, who passes it on to the fire. Being exposed like that really sets off the old fight or flight, but his legs don't tense the way they should, weak and tingling.

"Your pants."

Trianon doesn't move. This is what people do when they're about to kill you. He's seen movies.

Bide your time. Cooperate until the right moment. Besides, these pants are too tight. You'll run better without them.

He wonders if Insul wants his boxer briefs too. Maybe it'll end at the pants. Once they're off,

he'll know either way. Underwear is the final line for a death, small or large.

He unzips his pants and rolls them down. His wallet falls out. Cards slide from it like a failed magic trick.

Insul sorts through the contents of the wallet.

Museum ID. Medical insurance card. Driver's license. Two concert tickets to Insane Females. Bubble tea punch card, 7 out of 12 holes.

Insul holds the ID up to the firelight. "You look serious."

"It was my first job. For a long time. I wanted to look right." Why is he telling Insul this? Ingratiation. Humanize yourself.

Insul pockets the ID and throws the pants into the fire. "Stand here." He points to the edge of the fire pit. As Trianon moves toward it, Insul circles behind. Trianon's tongue is heavy and dry. He tries to think of something to say, the desperate echolocation of a hostage, pinging into the horrible silence.

"You're going to the museum. To break something. Aren't you?"

"You don't need to think anymore. There's no point storing new information."

The back of Trianon's neck vibrates, air being displaced behind him, and he bolts past the pool, the wall shaking and swelling in his vision until his hands slap into it and haul him up the side. The desert appears, a pale road running through it toward the neon embers of the town where his hotel is. He hooks his arm over and scrabbles with his foot, trying to push himself over.

His spine turns white-hot and folds in half, dropping him hard on the ground. The wall seems high as heaven from down here, stars cheap and plentiful along the rim.

The racket strikes his clavicle, then his ribs, twisting and spinning and smacking. His limbs feel like a storm unattached to him, banging into a table and knocking an ashtray to the ground, a puff of preemptive funeral dust. Something crunches and he looks for pink-white bone jutting through his arm. But only the racket is broken, jagged sticky red splitting open the antique frame.

Throbbing stillness.

He looks up. Insul's face is split into squares through the grid of the racket. For the first time, he shows emotion. His pupils are dilated and his mouth slightly parted, revealing glistening upper teeth. He looks excited, but there's something else.

Trianon remembers doing ecstasy at a rave in Noman Park. The first hour or two was amazing,

then it was like running toward the edge of a cliff. It felt so good to run but he couldn't stop thinking about the drop.

Insul has that same nagging look behind the ecstatic expression, facial muscles tensed against the suction of time. Maybe he's already thinking: where are my car keys? How long will the drive back take? Where will I stop for food?

"You're afraid this is going to end," Trianon says, another voice coming out of him, too tired to sell or modulate itself, marinated in blood and alcopops. An X slashed in a 2 million dollar painting. A body in a pool. Even he can't feel those anymore. You can see those in the movies. One hour thirty minutes. And cut.

"You need me," he says.

Insul listens through the racket, blood oozing from the splintery rupture in its side.

"You need my fingerprint."

"Do I?"

"The museum uses a keycard-fingerprint combination."

"So?"

"They have a Gachalennium hydraulic sculpture in the back. Ten feet tall. Nine million dollars."

Insul pulls back the racket to swing. At the same moment, Trianon says, "They have the Pitch Piano."

The racket freezes an inch from his face.

"One hundred years old. Drips once every ten years. Playing the slowest song. The centennial is coming up. So many people will be there. They won't even know it's broken until it's too late. And—"

Insul drops a knee to Trianon's chest, holding him in place. His voice comes out weak and crushed: "...exo-body from the Plague Dreams collab. Full haptic feedback. Synthetic nerve mass packed in plastic. You could switch the parameters and make them, move the wrong way. They could hurt themselves."

"I'll get in without you."

Insul swings the tennis racket and Trianon flings his arm up. It goes numb and drops to the concrete, hand hanging limp over the side of the pool. He screams *NO* over and over, thrashing against Insul's blows, trying to grab the racket with his other hand. His fingers catch the net and

he holds tight as Insul twists the racket back and forth. Finally he slaps Trianon in the face, hard as a car door. Trianon's teeth cut his tongue and squirt blood through his lips. Insul pulls back for another blow but his hand is caught, Trianon snapping up to bite it. Insul shakes his hand, pulling free of the weak jaw, but not so weak it doesn't leave a mark.

He sticks his hand over the pool and studies the bite marks, above the same turquoise water as Trianon's limp-wristed, battered fingers. He stays like that for a minute, catching his breath.

Beneath the battered mask of drying blood, there's something else. Your pre-existing condition, Insul thinks. Trianon's left eye droops, the other wide with panic. His lips can't fully close, teeth bared. "This is what you look like without your pills," Insul whispers.

"This is what I look like when I play tennis," Trianon slurs, a trickle of blood escaping the side of his mouth.

Insul laughs suddenly, high-pitched, startling Trianon.

Warfare

Trianon lays by the fire pit, somehow more disturbed by the hair in his face than the wounds on his body. It's easy to feel normal when his hair is just right, but when it pricks the delicate skin on the back of his neck, or brushes his cheeks, it's all he can think about. He picks it from his face, wincing as the bloody strands unstick. He tries to turn his head to see what Insul is doing but it hurts. "What are you looking for?"

"Rope." Classic. That's the first thing they teach you in cartoons. Subjugate your neighbors with this marvelous fibrous noodle.

"I won't try anything."

"It would be strange if you didn't."

Insul goes inside. Back into the luxury space station, flipping through kitchen drawers.

Trianon takes inventory of the yard. There's a gate on the far wall. Looks like a simple bolt latch. But his legs are heavy and tingling and he's not sure if he can trust them twice. He has the memory of trying to run with legs like that through the park as a teen, desperate to keep up with the others. Those early tests to see if he fit into some configuration of "hot" or "cool". His legs sank to the grass, dead weight, jeans stained dark green at the knees.

"No duct tape," Insul shouts, as if announcing they'd run out of milk.

Trianon shivers and moves closer to the fire. His shivering stops, but not just because of the raw heat on his naked skin. At the edge of the fire pit he sees something tiny and round, a white circle etched into four segments.

Trianon looks back at the house. The glass door reflects the flames, and Insul's outline inhabits them like a domestic demon, flipping open cabinets.

Trianon quickly grabs the pill and puts it in his mouth. He's not used to doing this without water. He tries to work up saliva but his mouth is dry, stripped by the low-humidity desert night and the fire and the fear. Just one swallow, that's all he needs. But the pill sticks to the roof of his mouth and even breathing feels hard now. The reason he needs this pill is the reason he can't swallow it.

He crawls to the edge of the pool and dips his hand in. As he cups a palmful of pool water, the alcopop bottle drifts past, trailed by a crimson nebula of dyed booze. At the edge of his vision, at the edge of the pool, at the edge of the universe, the body floats, and it seems, magically, like its fresh everflowing blood.

The glass door screeches open. Trianon slaps the water into his mouth and swallows. His eyes blur as he tries not to cough from the chlorine.

“Going for a swim?”

Trianon’s voice is hoarse and irritated by the chlorine. “Yeah, I did a few laps while you were gone.” What percent of the water is chlorine? Alcohol? Corpse juice? It’s in you now.

“I couldn’t find any rope. Or duct tape.”

“You don’t need it. I swear.”

“You’re right.”

A little hope trickles in. Maybe Insul is calming down. Maybe it’s one of those mental illness episodes you hear about. Where someone goes fucking crazy and burns your clothes and does 9/10ths of a murder on you.

Then he sees the vial in Insul’s hand. It isn’t pyridostigmine. A faded old label with the colors of an unfamiliar pharmacy. Like seeing someone else’s underwear in your room.

Insul flicks a blue pill on the ground. Trianon picks it up. It has a 4 on it.

“Sedative?” No no no, can’t lose consciousness, not around this guy, wake up with dirt in your mouth, or never wake up at all, he’d just have to push you in the pool—

“Warfarin.”

“That’s a blood thinner.”

“You run, you bleed to death.”

Better than ropes. Invisible chains in his bloodstream. He’s already bleeding, and alone in the desert, he’d be emptied before reaching town.

“This could kill me. No matter what I do.”

Insul tosses him a box of band-aids. “Then seal yourself.”

The cover has characters from a movie that was popular when Trianon was 16. A princess with flaming hair and some kind of birdoid mascot. He dumps out the band-aids, tabs of green and pink littering the ground.

“These are kid’s band-aids.”

Insul doesn’t answer. Trianon peels back the adhesive backing and slaps one on his arm, his cheek, all the wettest places. His face feels tight and uncomfortable, a cartoon mosaic.

“Now take the pill.”

“You don’t need these. You already took my pyridostigmine.”

“Somehow I don’t think your myasthenia is so gravis. I think you could get away if you really tried.”

“I swear.”

“I think the problem is you don’t really believe in yourself.”

Trianon’s throat burns with chlorine. “Okay. Um. Can I get water? It’s hard to swallow.”

Insul goes to the kitchen and returns with an alcopop. Trianon feels a flash of anger. More disorientation forced into him. But it’s a relief to rinse out the taste of pool water with the sugary liquid.

He can take the pill. It’s fine. His grandmother was on warfarin. She had to take it at a certain time before tests because it took, how long to kick in? A day? Two days? And apparently Insul doesn’t know that.

Of course, he’s been drinking. Had to make sure gran didn’t take wine with dinner because it made the warfarin more potent. And now decades later he’s chasing warfarin with an alcopop. Really capturing the youth segment.

Trianon takes another sip and swallows the pill. It feels awkwardly big and dragging in his throat, but he didn’t want to drink more than necessary.

Something clicks on the ground next to him.

Another blue pill.

“What?”

“Take it.”

“That’s insane.”

Insul grabs Trianon around the neck and drags him to the edge of the pool and Trianon flails but Insul is so fucking strong and then Insul dunks him back so his head is underwater and the pool pours straight down his nostrils.

Die in this swimming pool, where all souls go, starting with the owner of this house, then you, then all of humanity, Trianon thinks sub-atomically, thinks in muscle twitches, the heels of his

feet banging against the hard poolside, bruises forming like cloudy spurs, a tantrum, a tantrum for life.

Insul pulls him out, black hair guttering fat drops of water, green tips spiraling on the surface tension. He gasps for air but fingers fill his mouth. He gags on the hard, bony protrusions, saliva shooting up Insul's wrist. Something grainy slides down his throat.

"Two."

Trianon flops onto his back, chest heaving up and down, chlorine burning his sinuses. Two pills. Blue ones. His grandmother took teals. 6mg. Blue is 4. 8mg so far. That's a lot. But if his grandmother could take 6, he can take 8. Generational rite of passage.

Something lands on his chest and sticks there, tiny as a crumb, but it still makes him jump. He picks it off, the pill leaving a spot of blue dye.

"You're killing me."

"You can do 12 milligrams." Insul's face is a mask of exposed teeth and swollen pupils, almost witchlike. He looks extremely interested.

"No, I—" Insul grabs him by the shoulders. Trianon spasms, "Fuck I'll do it, stop, I'll do it," and swallows the pill, adding it to the sludge in his throat.

Insul shakes another out of the vial. "What do you think? 16 milligrams?"

"What?"

"16 milligrams."

"I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Dying."

Insul lifts the pill up and down like it's the sun of all that they are. "If you take this, we can get in the car." His tone is soft.

Trianon puts it in his mouth, and to his surprise, his throat swallows it without any water, slack and open.

Your Order

Trianon wakes up through his face, sticky and dried shut, breathing through a plug of copper coagulate. Space station smelling air. The interior of a car.

Something cuts across his naked chest. His hand drifts into it and it bends. Seatbelt.

Is it morning? Deep gray sky, made darker by tinted windows. This is his car. His grandmother left it to him. She got her windows tinted against the bright sun of the south-west coast. Darker than legal, but no one ever pulled her over. And now anyone glancing at this window won't see a naked, wounded guy. At most, an outline on which the mind will fill in clothes and unharmed skin.

Broken shards on the floor reflect a bloody lip. Fragments of a face covered in pink and green bandages, dried blood caking his upper lip like magma, chlorinated black hair with crunchy green-dyed tips.

He swallows a wad of bloody mucus. "You broke my CD?"

"It started playing."

"You don't like Dungeon Star?"

"I don't like music."

"That can't be true."

Insul doesn't answer. A minute later, he pulls off the freeway. Strip mall signs scroll through the otherwise empty sky. Is this a good place to run? Can't see the sidewalk, too sunk in the seat, but it feels like a flat, depressed sprawl. Maybe a few groggy workers walking to the bus for their early morning shifts. Wait for a little more light, and a denser population.

Insul's blazer is off, so Trianon can see his bare arms gripping the steering wheel, muscles toned but slender. His hooded eyes make him seem sedate, lost in thought. And he probably hasn't slept. But every time Trianon moves, or breathes, or licks the inside of his mouth, the fight leaves his body.

*

He can hear more cars now. The wheeze of a bus.

If you're going to run, you need to do it soon. While the pyridostigmine is still in your system. If it hasn't left already. Hard to get a sense of his body, with the enormous organ of his skin blinded by contusions.

Sequence the steps. Release the seatbelt with one hand, flip the door lock with the other, slide that hand down from the lock to the handle, pull and throw yourself out. You'll be in the world then. Saved.

Trianon stretches his legs, trying to get Insul used to him fidgeting so that when he makes the first motions of his escape, it won't trigger Insul like a trap. Hopefully.

As he moves he becomes aware of a wet sensation, pooled under his back and thighs. He looks down. The gray cushion is darkened with blood. Not fresh. But he lost some. Unknown quantity of fuel will be missing from the next training exercise.

Ask to use the bathroom. Any bathroom will be within yelling or running distance of a person. He won't make you shit in the car.

"I need to use the bathroom."

"What?"

"I need..." To use the bathroom. The problem is some of the words are inside and some are outside.

Insul slows down and turns into a drive-through. "You need food."

Food. That's why his torso feels like a black hole with nerve endings.

"Stay down." Insul pulls the seat handle and drops Trianon on his back, igniting hidden bruises. He crawls into the backseat, panting with exertion.

"If you say anything, I'll kill the cashier, then I'll kill you."

They pull up to the ordering mic.

Insul turns his head slightly. "What do you want?"

"Uh..." Trianon's mouth remembers what he always orders. "Classic Burger with Extra Special Sauce. Orange Creme Soda."

"You're bleeding a little more than I wanted. I think you need some Vitamin K."

The mic crackles. "Hey, what can I get for you today?"

"Twenty Garden Salads. No dressing."

"Was that twenty Garden Salads?"

“No dressing.”

“Anything else?”

Insul studies the menu. “Cup of applesauce. Water, no ice.”

“Anything else?”

“That’s it.”

“Okay, I’m going to read that back to you. Twenty Garden Salads, no dressing. Applesauce cup. Water, no ice. Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, sir. Your order will be at the next window.”

*

Trianon picks a small crouton out of the salad. It hurts to chew, but the salt is comforting.

“This is a lot of salad.”

“The iceberg lettuce has Vitamin K. I read that it’s good for coagulation.”

Trianon gets through five salads before he feels sick, sick on top of sick.

“It’s a lot of fiber.” Injected into a belly full of nothing but alcopops and blood and pool water.

Insul passes back his half-drunk cup of water. Trianon drinks it in a single gulp, licking the plastic for droplets.

“I think I’m really sick. It’s too much—”

“The salad has chicken in it.”

“It’s that white chicken stuff...”

“You need protein.”

Trianon feels intense dread at the idea of eating more salad. Doesn’t romaine lettuce get that e. coli in it a lot? And here he is, eating an abnormal amount of romaine. This won’t be an ordinary food poisoning. This is a state-ordered, highly experimental, lethal formulation of e. coli.

“Eat your salad.”

“It tastes like shit—”

The tires scream and the car skids to a dead stop. Trianon slams into the back of Insul’s seat, falling onto the floor.

Insul takes his foot off the brakes and looks back. Romaine lettuce sticks to Trianon’s bloodwet skin, twenty cartons of Garden Salad burst across his body. He tries to crawl up from the floor but he can’t. Normally missing a dose wouldn’t be this bad, but for some unexplainable reason he doesn’t feel as strong as he should.

Insul starts the car and gets back on the road.

Trianon lays there, lettuce warm and lifeless on his skin, cooking on his furious impotence. He’s surrounded by civilization, people strolling to school, work, the supermarket. They’re right behind this door.

The car slows. Red light?

Trianon pops the lock and pulls the handle, pushing on the opposite door with his foot to propel his body. The sealed atmosphere of the car is broken, traffic noise flooding his ears.

Insul’s seat jerks back, crushing Trianon, then his arm shoots back and grabs the handle. Trianon twists his head back just before the door slams shut with hair-whipping force.

Insul looks down with his hooded eyes.

“I could pull this car over and burn it. I don’t care.”

Trianon can’t respond, can barely breathe, his ribs compressed by the seat. He tries to inhale in a way that signals his acceptance.

Housebroken

At some point Insul slides his seat forward just enough for Trianon's lungs to expand all the way. He's still pinned, but the pressure is strangely comforting, no more choices to make, just inhaling the car smell. The same one that made him fall asleep when his grandmother drove him places.

He wakes up and the sky is dark. He doesn't know where they are. Buildings are larger, but it could be anywhere.

His abdomen feels taut and uncomfortable. "I have to use the bathroom."

The darkness in the front seat doesn't say anything. Trianon squirms. All the liquid in his body feels concentrated down there, lips cracked and veins shallow.

"Is that a euphemism for pissing or escaping?"

"Piss. Pissing."

Insul drives for a few more minutes, then parks in a haze of blue and red neon. "If you get up, I'll kill you." The seat shifts and darkness drains from the car, leaving Trianon with his wounds.

His chest labors up and down, lettuce lifting with each movement. Is Insul waiting silently outside the car? Is this a test? Or his only chance to escape?

He listens. And listens. Then he strains against the seats, trying to crawl up. He can't reach the seat lever from here, his arms folded awkwardly, head sunk low, fighting gravity. He hooks his foot up and twists, trying to get into a better position. Then he stops. Someone is by the car. Maybe he should yell—

The door opens, exposing Trianon's face to a blast of cold night air. Up the street is a hardware store, upside-down between Insul's legs.

"Wrists."

Trianon can only get one arm in the air. Insul sighs and reaches down, easing the seat forward.

"Wrists."

"I'm trying," Trianon says, voice shaking with his arms.

Something makes a tearing sound and he cringes. Insul's hands rotate his wrists, duct tape bringing them closer together until his hands are clasped like prayer.

*

The electric light through the windows gets dimmer, more occasional. Leaving the city behind.

“I can’t hold it anymore.”

It’s maddening how Insul doesn’t answer him. He looks around the car, taking inventory. Insul’s blazer rests on the backseat, bloodied by Trianon’s spatter. Salad boxes are pushed against the opposite door by his feet or crushed between his body in random places. Random documents are crammed in the door pocket. A museum pamphlet (so old he must have grabbed it on the day he started working there) and a pizza flier (he lusts for a gory slurry of greasy pepperoni and tomato sauce). Maybe he can give Insul a paper cut.

The car stops. Insul scoots his seat forward, gets out, and drags Trianon from the back, fingers hitched into the duct tape.

They’re on the side of a forested road, lit by a lonely and flickering light pole. An engraved-wood sign says JETTLE HIRAN MEMORIAL PARK.

Insul prods him forward and shards of bark bite his feet. “What if I cut myself? You said the warfarin—”

Insul rummages inside a trash can and pulls out some plastic bags. Trianon steps into them and feels something like chicken grease and a French fry squeeze between his toes. “That’s on loan,” Insul says, pushing him into the park. Each step is nauseating.

I could run. It’s dark. I’d get lost but so might Insul. Surrender myself to the chaos of the forest and escape Insul’s deterministic universe.

But he keeps imagining a cliff edge, unseen in the darkness, fuck, even an arroyo, gully, gulch, ravine, depression, indentation, what have you, would suffice. He wouldn’t be able to shake the vertigo, not knowing if each step he took was into empty space. And even if he didn’t fall, the warfarin in his system would make the inevitable cuts he got lethal, especially if it took hours to reach the nearest town.

“I know you’re thinking about running.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You know I’m a lot faster and stronger than you, right?”

Trianon doesn’t answer. He might look weak, but Insul doesn’t know about his morning runs. He’s actually pretty fast, in short bursts. But this forest would be an endurance slog.

Insul stops. “Here.”

“On the ground?”

“Hurry up.”

Trianon faces the other direction, legs tingling as his nerves unpinch after so long in the car. He tries to push down the edge of his boxer briefs without showing Insul anything, constrained by the duct tape. His cock shrivels in the forest chill. You can bleed in front of him, but you were never good at public urination.

“Just give me my hands back—”

Insul grabs the underwear and pulls hard, the band cutting into Trianon’s waist then ripping apart. Insul flings the ruined fabric into the bushes. “Fucking go.”

Something bright stabs through the trees. Insul’s head snaps toward it like a hound. Flashlights and laughter. Hikers passing nearby. Haven’t seen them yet. The mumble of a private conversation.

Insul grabs Trianon and pulls him in the other direction, away from the safe, familiar sounds. It doesn’t seem like much further away but now the voices are gone and everything is black and crunchy all around.

Water hits the ground, but not his own. Insul is pissing, face still hard, looking sideways. Trianon feels his own bladder contract in response, but it’s like a chip of ice is blocking his urethra.

“Do it.” Insul shakes out, already done.

“Trying.”

“Stop wasting my time.”

“I’m trying, fuck.” Trianon feels completely sick. A memory, the kind buried so deep it feels like a dream, of an adult standing over him as he was taught to urinate.

A whisper grinds over his shoulder. “You’re at the museum. We were always at the museum. You are not here.”

It gushes out, crackling on the bark and leaves. The emptier he gets, the more aware he becomes of being watched.

Insul says, “Anything else?”

Trianon’s stomach gurgles but he shakes his head. Insul grabs his hair and marches him through the forest, piss dripping down his legs. He hears people walking down a path, just behind some

trees. They sound drunk. Meandering, but getting closer. He thinks about running.

As if sensing his thoughts, Insul's grip tightens, arching his head up. They cross the illuminated grass in silence, disappearing into the darkness. Above Trianon's head, the trees sway like silent mothers, and then he sags in Insul's grip, stomach and skull folding in on themselves like wet paper.

The Only Color in the Box

He bites down on something plastic and sweet nectar pours down his throat. A persistent dream, poking through a black velvet curtain, then retreating.

Soft darkness.

Mom is driving him to the zoo. It was a nice drive. Listening to her hyperpop playlist, buildings taller than he's seen before, palm trees splitting the sky. It gets hazier after that. It smelled warm and grassy and fecal at the zoo, so he tried to retreat inside the simple, frozen taste of his ice cream. Are they happy in their cages, he asked. Their leathery alien faces, drooping and elongated, held no answers. He doesn't remember a single thing an adult said to him that trip. A silent film, no intertitles.

Is this orange ice cream? He usually got mint and chip. But it really tastes like orange.

He reaches for mom, trying to find her hand. But there is only vinyl, depressing as his fingers push into it. His hand drops from the rear of the driver's seat, indentations rising until the dark material leaves no trace of his touch.

He's curled up on the back seat. The heater is on, sending warm childish waves of drowsiness through his body.

But it's not just the heater. Something wraps his body, too small and angular to be a blanket. But with his body curled up, it covers just enough. Insul's blazer. "Your jacket..." Trianon says, afraid Insul will get mad at him.

The darkness in the front seat shrugs. "Everything I'm wearing is from the desert house."

The desert house. Someone will find the body. And the billions of Trianon droplets scattered across the poolside. There will be an investigation.

"I cleaned up after us," Insul says.

Trianon looks at him, startled. Insul laughs, a chip of that high, unconscious laugh. "Your face moves so much when you're thinking. You look like an actor having an emotion. You really didn't know?"

Trianon stretches out and almost knocks something off the seat. Nestled against his side is an empty bottle of orange creme soda and a plastic box of convenience store sushi, half-eaten.

"You looked dead," Insul says abruptly.

Trianon's duct-taped wrists dip up and down, hands clumsily pressed together to shovel sushi into his mouth. It's hard to chew with his weak mouth. Dormant taste buds, deadened by a

monotonous diet of blood and rapidly inhaled air, tingle at the sweet rice and imitation crab meat. And then the tray is empty.

Insul lifts a gallon bottle of water off the floor and holds it for Trianon. He sucks on the spigot like he forgot the taste of water. His sore throat expands, taking the water so fast he feels like he's going to choke, but he can't stop. He never knew how many flavors water had, every mineral note amplified in his jaw's amphitheater. He reaches for the bottle so he can steady it.

Insul pulls the bottle back, Trianon's lips making a wet popping sound at the sudden withdrawal. "You're not going to get too strong, are you?"

Trianon stares at Insul with his bruised, drooping eye, lips too slacked by the gravis to keep water from dribbling out of his mouth. Insul's eyelids flutter like he's trying not to laugh.

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Driving along the coastal highway. The sea seems gilded and unreal to Trianon, something in his visual cortex incapable of processing it. But it's not just the ocean. The car is a little blurrier than usual.

"I didn't think it would be this hard to move you upstate. Maybe I should dump you in the sea."

Trianon's verbal-bargaining center lights up, emboldened by the sushi calories. "I said I'd get you inside the museum."

"The museum..." Insul trails off. "It probably won't be very interesting."

"You know it's the biggest one in the state."

Insul leans over the steering wheel, rubbing his face like he has a headache. Can he see the road like that? Trianon starts to panic. It was already scary enough riding this highway as a child. There's no room for error. Nothing to repel the car if it veers too far.

Get his attention. "Hey. Can we listen to the radio?"

Silence. The car drifts a little into the incoming traffic lane.

Trianon fidgets in the back seat, hoping Insul's trap-muscles will react to him. Nothing happens. The car drifts another few inches.

Trianon pops the car lock. Insul looks back at him. "What are you doing?" He seems surprised more than anything.

"Trying to keep you on the road."

Insul drifts back into the proper lane, his spine straightened like nothing happened. Trianon starts breathing again. He picks at the sushi tray, feeding himself stray bits of rice and browning avocado.

An hour of silence passes. Fragmented levees break up the smooth sand of the coast, crumbling without funding. Insul hasn't said a word. Trianon feels like he's in a micro-afterlife, forced to experience the interior of his car forever.

Something vibrates. Insul takes Trianon's phone out of his pocket and lays it on the passenger seat. He looks at it for a second then returns his gaze to the road.

Trianon lifts his head, trying to see the phone notification without Insul noticing him. His misaligned eyes show him two phones, name and number blurred uselessly. He hasn't had double vision since high school. His eyes are going to drop out of his head and roll away, and his doll limbs will tumble after, lost in the chasm of the car floor.

He rests his head back on the seat, vinyl smeared dark red with the struggle of the past twenty-four hours. His body may be weak, but his mind is still there. As long as you keep it sharp, you'll get out of this. He shuts his eyes and goes back to his mom's car, drawing with crayons until the only color in the box is black, and the paper is dark, and everything is dark.

Window of Opportunity

He wakes up and the car is motionless. That must be why the velocity of his dream faded. Nothing on the radio, no more snacks, no more road.

Insul says, "I need to blindfold you."

Maybe he's taking him somewhere private. Like a residence. "Okay." Use your ears. If it's a public street, run and scream.

Insul rummages through the glove box and pulls a scarf out. A gift from Trianon's girlfriend, last winter. Insul holds the scarf up to the ceiling light, studying the thin material.

A house is around other houses. There will be chances to leak out into the world. To end this nightmare. And he's slept and eaten. Strength enough to tear away in the space between a car and a house. He looks up to see Insul staring back, the circles under his eyes darker than before. He must be tired after all that driving. The scarf rubs between his fingers, scratching audibly in the sealed car.

Insul rolls down Trianon's window. "Get some air." Trianon edges over to the frame and rests his head on it. Cool breeze, refreshing after being trapped with the warm stink of iron, lettuce, and ammonia. He closes his eyes and almost smiles in relief, losing himself in the salty wind that flows like something moving and alive and possible. Are they near the ocean or some inland lagoon? It's hard to tell because they're parked in an underpass, concrete spiraling with graffiti like a signed cast. He cranes his head to get a wider angle, his eyes adjusting to the faint glow at the mouth of the tunnel.

Daylight. And soon there will be people and he will run. All he has to do is run. Everything seems simpler now.

Something makes a chunking sound just under his head. The window rolls up, pinning his neck to the roof of the car. His lungs expel and he tries to fill them again, a rough wire of air sawing up and down his throat.

Insul watches Trianon's face change color.

"You know, it's stressful driving someone across the state against their will."

Trianon's bound hands grope for the button but his trapped neck locks the rotation of his body. His shoulders twist in their sockets, arms banging against the door panel, fingers fluttering inches short of the button.

"Having to take care of you like an animal. Knowing you're thinking about escape every single second. You should try to empathize a little more."

Insul reaches around the front seat, his fingers occupying the button Trianon is failing to touch. A single press will crank the regulator arm the last five inches or so. Trianon doesn't know if his neck will slice off and drop to the street, or resist in a dead, useless way, the mechanism grinding against his crushed cartilage.

Insul taps the window button and Trianon flinches, a spurt of piss spattering the vinyl seat between his naked legs, memories of urinating dogs. The window drops an inch and Trianon swallows a white-hot shot of air, it isn't enough, he can't pull his head back—

Insul gets out of the car. A strand of mucus dangles from Trianon's nose, oozing onto the street. He pants quickly, mechanically, his body shaking with each hff.

"Look at my face."

Trianon can't close his eyes, they feel like they're going to pop out of their sockets. So he's forced to look at Insul's dark irises glossed over with the reflection of the underpass, and the way his lips open a little when he's studying something.

Insul holds a plastic tube in front of Trianon. "I can't let you see where I live."

An additional line of neuron-death dialog pops into Trianon's head: *So I'll see where you die.*

Trianon looks stupidly into the tiny hole in the tube. Then he's blind, burning and blind, thrashing his head between the glass and the frame, suffocating himself against the hard edges but unable to stop his own body, his spinal cord twirling like a snake in hot grease.

The car window drops halfway and his head slips free, banging against the ceiling and dropping to the seat. His taped hands slap against his face as if he could crush the heat away, tears stinging and bursting through his fingers.

Insul drives as Trianon suffers in the back, nerve fire rolling from his face and eating through the roof and polluting the sky. Trianon doesn't feel like he has a face anymore, his hands dipping into a boiling pepper soup.

The car stops and Insul drags him out, Trianon's legs powered by the combustion engine of the pepper spray located in his mucus membranes. The air is salty, his tears must be staining it. The air grows colder, the shadow of a building, perhaps, then a door clicks open and he's thrust inside the acoustic enclosure of a hallway.

He falls down, gritty sand digging into his knees. He wonders if he's having an allergic reaction or if all pepper spray feels this horrible.

Insul pulls him into a smaller space. Not a closet. Tile floor and bathroom acoustics.

"You're really going to keep making noise until I do something, aren't you?"

“It’s f-fucking pepper spray—”

Trianon’s tongue hangs out, sucking in quick bursts of air, the only way he can cool himself. And even those little slices of air are getting thinner and thinner.

Insul leaves, and Trianon hears him down the hall. The gasp of a fridge opening. Is Insul getting something to eat while you choke to death or experience irreversible blindness?

“Get in the bath.”

Trianon grabs blindly until he feels the rim of the tub. He rolls inside, banging another bruise into his back.

Something splashes his face, an angel-cold coil running from his eyes into his mouth, down his chin, spiraling along his neck, clinging to his chest. The milk is tainted with capsaicin from his eyes but he laps blindly at it.

Gradually he returns to his body, to the sound of his own panting, tongue hanging out for the milk. He tries seeing through his puffy eyelids. Insul’s brown eyes reflect a face streaming with white fluid, a band of red across swollen eyes, soggy bandages clinging like leeches. A few strands of green hair cling in wet spirals.

The milk cools but it doesn’t quench, and it’s going to run out. “Milk. Doesn’t. Work.”

“What?”

“Soap. Water.”

Insul wets a towel and gets soap on it and rubs Trianon’s face, spraying the detachable shower head over it periodically. Dried blood dissolves and runs down the drain, cartoon bandages peeling from his face, no longer brightly colored, rotted brown, dirty water trickling in two black rivers from Trianon’s feet. He opens his mouth and greedily swallows the shower spray. Insul holds the stream for a few seconds, brow furrowed, then docks the shower head.

The tub starts to fill. Trianon sinks down, muscles relaxing in the warm water, eyes dragged shut by his disease and the swell of capsaicin. “You’re such a bastard.”

“I’m protecting myself.”

The water is up to his neck now, jumping as if fast forwarded. His wrists are free, duct tape removed, revealing the deep creases of his struggle. His arms float.

He senses something in his periphery. He looks to the side and his leg kicks, sloshing the water. Insul is watching him, cross-legged on the bathroom floor.

“Your skin,” Insul says, with something like fascination.

Trianon looks through the soapy water. His torso is covered in purple-red bruises, barely recognizable.

“I think the warfarin is kicking in.” Insul grabs Trianon’s wrist, lifting it from the water. It looks so thin and pale in his hand.

The grip tightens. “You’re hurting me,” Trianon says in a trembling voice. A disposable razor rests on the rim of the tub by Trianon’s free arm. Not his weapon of choice. But maybe, raked across the eyes...

Insul lets go. A dark purple band cuffs Trianon’s wrist. Bruising so fast, like a mood ring, like the temperature-sensitive foil on action figures he played with as a kid.

Insul says something about the museum and Trianon tries to listen, but instead he slides into the water, dead weight against the porcelain. The water tastes like blood with a hint of spiciness. A fine broth in which to cook the male. It’s comforting underwater, unable to hear anything. Escape. Into the sewers. Into the sea. Insul will never see that coming.

Insul grabs him by the shoulders and pulls his head above water. Trianon’s eyes twitch dystonic from the capsaicin, and then the water is back, the water without water, the black water that all bodies may find if they wander without succor.

Garderobe

Something rubs his face, thick and fluffy, catching the waves of heat coming from his broken skin.

“You have to be normal, okay?”

“Yes?” Horrific confusion, incoherence.

“No more bruises. We’re waiting for the warfarin to leave your system.”

Then the bathroom is empty. Must have passed out again.

He looks over the edge of the tub. Still empty. There’s nowhere for Insul to hide, even if part of his brain keeps inserting that six-foot frame into the gaps of his vision.

A large white towel lays on the floor. Trianon crawls out of the tub and flops onto it. He feels feverish and dehydrated, eyes still burning.

Bottles of water are arranged along the wall, neat as chess pieces. He drinks until he coughs, spitting it up on the tile.

You have fuel. Think. Plan.

The air smelled salty, unless it was just the confusion of his own mucus-blood drip. He’s near water.

No obvious street sounds, so it’s either in a remote area or sound-proofed. If it isn’t remote, the driveway must at least be hidden from the street, considering the state of Trianon when he was dragged to the door.

He looks around. His vision is blurry but there isn’t a lot of ground to cover. A small but fairly modern and mid-upscale design. Maybe a secondary bathroom in a nice house. And if it’s by the sea, it probably is.

He opens the cabinet drawers. Empty. The razor on the side of the bath tub is gone. And the mirror has been ripped off the medicine cabinet, revealing vacant shelves. You can make sharp glass from mirrors. Like a game. If he could punch the drawer hard enough, it would separate into little logs. But he can’t punch anything at all, he can barely lift his arm. His myasthenia has never been this bad. New layers of weakness have been eaten away by caustic applications of shock and brutality, Insul dissolving his overpainting and restoring it to the hidden pigments underneath.

An economy-sized bottle of orange soap.

No window, but there's a fan.

The ceiling creaks. There's a second floor. Which means he can tell where Insul is, to a certain point.

He crawls to the door, jellied legs dragging behind him.

Something bites his ankle. The image of a snake flashes through his mind, brilliantly emerald and fangs bared. He kicks his foot and hears a rattling sound.

A chain runs from his ankle to the base of the toilet.

*

Trianon lays against the wall, staring at the chain with dull red eyes. He feels like he's losing himself. Staring from the outside as his body surrenders to inertia and numbness.

Be rational. Insul probably won't kill you. Not until the museum.

The anxiety recedes, replaced by physical urgency boiling in his gut. He crawls up on the toilet and shits long and sick, his intestines poisoned by a soup of lettuce and sugar. He feels like a tool. Cleaned out, oiled, disassembled, making sure it will function as needed. What happens after he fulfills his purpose as a human key? He leans back on the toilet, another water bottle pointed straight down and cascading into his throat. He feels clammy and cool after emptying himself so completely. A sick kind of calm.

Insul will come back sometime. The chain. Wrap that around his neck. No. Insul is too strong. The best plan is to wait until the museum. It's an incredibly public space. You'll find a way to alert someone. He'll get careless. Greedy.

It feels colder now. Is it night? The bath severed his already tenuous grasp of time. Like he surfaced on the other side of the world on some antipodean beach.

He slides off the toilet and curls up on the floor, naked and shivering. He pulls the towel over himself, legs exposed and pale.

*

The door opens. For a second, Trianon sees the white wall of a hallway. No new information.

Insul looks different in his house, the thin mask he wore at the desert fading. He slouches and his hair, mildly groomed before, is pure bedhead. He isn't wearing the stolen clothes either, just white pants with black stains and a brown cardigan over a loose v-neck shirt. It looks like something a middle-aged woman would wear.

Insul sees the look on Trianon's face. "I found them in her closet."

"Her?"

"The lady who lived here."

"Do you get all your clothes from old people you kill?"

"Yeah. It's easier than deciding what to wear."

"Okay."

Insul looks at the chain around Trianon's ankle. "I didn't have that, either. Found it in her drawer. Think she used it for a cuck fetish. She was trying to get me to..." He catches himself and his face hardens.

You have to keep him talking. That's got to be a psychological big brain tactic in some organizational handbook. Like a hostage crisis. But usually the guy saying the big brain stuff has a megaphone in the parking lot, absolutely not inside the bank, absolutely not chained next to the psycho. That's how they can say all that stupid shit, because it doesn't even matter. They get to go home.

"What's the black stuff from?"

"Burning things."

"Things like evidence?"

"Yeah. Burned your car. Burned my old clothes."

"Nice."

Silence. Trianon gets nervous at the idea of Insul forming another thought, his thoughts that transmit directly to his muscles with animal curiosity and ease.

"When was the last time you picked out your own clothes?"

"I don't know. I never thought much about it." Insul stands up. "I'm going to get rid of these now."

Insul leaves, pulling off the cardigan and shirt as he does, a flash of smooth warm skin, kicking off a shoe into the hall with a careless flip, then the door slams shut.

Black Box

Bang.

Trianon wakes up. A gunshot. Cannon. Earthquake. His arms fly, disoriented, hitting the walls. Nothing moves except his own raging heartbeat.

The slam of a door? No. It was a heavy sound. Like something thudding onto a floor. It was directly above, where Insul's footsteps go. His bedroom?

Trianon falls back asleep.

It doesn't feel like much later when something touches him, this time with no preamble, no bang, but it wakes him with the same jolt.

Insul is wearing an orange parka jacket, legs long and bare under the fringe, his eyes groggy. The outline of a zipper is pressed into his neck.

"You were talking in your sleep."

"Huh?"

"Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"What was in your dream."

"Uh. Hard to describe."

Insul hunches next to Trianon, his knees projecting sharp. "Tell me."

"Why do you want to know so bad?"

"I don't have them."

"Everyone dreams."

"I don't."

"Like when people dream in black and white?"

"Not even that."

"Maybe you don't remember them."

“Tell me what was in your head. Was it pictures?”

“Yeah. Um. Like a daydream but more distorted.”

“What’s a daydream like?”

“You know. When you see a little movie inside your head.”

“I don’t see that.”

“What do you see?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t know people could see pictures in their head until high school.”

What’s that called? Aphantasia?

Insul looks pissed, those tired eyes letting through more emotion than usual, so Trianon starts talking fast. “I used to write down my dreams, longest thing I ever wrote. I felt bad because it could have been a novel. It had enough words, fifty something thousand, I looked it up. But probably not fun for anyone to read. Um. I read something about why people dream. If you don’t dream, like really don’t dream, you could get brain damage—”

“Really?”

“Uh, I don’t think they have it figured out, but I read dreams are how you get rid of bad connections in the brain and get better at processing emotions. Otherwise you can get really obsessive and weird—”

Insul stares at the bathroom wall like he’s watching an invisible bug. “Just tell me the dream.”

Trianon feels pissed at being interrogated like this. He managed to fall asleep on a hard bathroom floor and now he’s all wired and forced to remember the horrifying situation he’s in. “Uh, there was a clown, and a bicycle, and some symbolic stuff...”

Insul twists the soft lobe of Trianon’s ear.

“Okay. Fuck. It was high school.”

Insul has a strange look. “Was it your high school?”

“Just a dream high school. And it was in a valley. And the valley had a mountain rising above everything. The air was pretty. Uh. I don’t know what I mean. The air was very clear or clean and curved like a lens and it was like you were at the high school but also the foot of the mountain. Then the mountain exploded with huge flames. Orange and black and red. It wasn’t like a movie explosion. Or maybe it was. It was like bombs and lava and all that stuff mixed together. All these huge explosions bursting out slow and spreading and hot, filling the air. It was so scary. It was like the end.”

“Why do you dream about bombs?”

“It wasn’t bombs. It was the end. Um. I guess I didn’t start having these dreams until I was, uh, 17? When the wildfires got really bad. The air was poison for months and months and you couldn’t go outside or open the windows. Even if you kept the windows shut you felt sick. That happened for years. I don’t even think it stopped, we just moved. That’s where the dream comes from. Okay?”

Insul can’t see his high school in his head. Just a stream of words. CAFETERIA. NOISE. FRIEND. BEST FRIEND. The word after that pops in his head like a blown bulb. He places his hand on the ground. It feels wet. No. Cool bathroom tile. There is blood, but it’s dry, just a little warfarin drip from last night.

He releases Trianon’s ear. “Sometimes I wake up and there’s noise. It hurts my head. That’s the closest I get to pictures.”

“Was that the bang?”

“The bang?”

“In the ceiling.”

“I fell off the bed.”

“And you came down here?”

“I was bored.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty exciting down here.” Trianon’s voice shakes with anger. “You could squirt antibacterial soap in my eyes or something.”

Insul stares at Trianon, his pupils constricted like black seeds. “You have too much energy.” He presses a finger hard into Trianon’s chest, leaving a petal of a bruise behind. “You have to be careful with that warfarin in you. If you hurt yourself, you’ll bleed to death.”

He grabs Trianon’s wrist. Trianon pulls back and hits the side of the bath, cold porcelain on his spine. Insul twists his arm, exposing blue veins to the fluorescent light.

“Is all this blood inside making you too excited?” Insul digs his nail into the delicate leaden rivers running into Trianon’s palm.

Trianon’s lip trembles. “No. I’ll go back to sleep.”

“Promise?”

“Uh huh.”

Insul shuts the light off and his weight creaks on the stairs. Trianon curls up next to the toilet, wide awake.

White Box

The merciful gaps in reality are over. Now his body has enough fuel to keep him awake. His blurry dreams are replaced with sharp memories, whetted by sensory deprivation, in this lightless oubliette masquerading as a bathroom.

Something fills his hands, plastic covered in buttons. And there's a computer screen. Pixelated robot girls jumping around. Yeah. That's a nice place to be. In your room, in your girlfriend's apartment, wearing noise-canceling headphones, playing emulated games from vintage Semi-Novan consoles.

Oenone comes in and watches him. Is she saying something? He pulls his headphones down.

"What game is that?"

"I forget. It isn't translated yet. You send these robot girls on missions and there's thirty-two of them with unique abilities."

"That's a lot of girls. How do you play?"

"You pick six to go on a mission and you keep going until you win or they all die. When one dies another falls from the sky. They have a projectile attack and a melee attack. You can also call in missile strikes. It has a neat strategic layer actually, the stuff you do in the platforming part affects the world map, like if you destroy a mecha depot—"

"That's amazing." She seems distracted by his hair, running the dark tresses through her fingers. "You're getting pretty long."

"Yeah, I keep meaning to cut it."

"I mean, you don't have to. But if you're feeling insecure about that cute little face, you shouldn't be."

"Haha. I'm just lazy." Hard to concentrate on the game. Maybe he should drop it. But his brain is queued with an intricate sequence of tactics that only make sense within the idiosyncratic rules and troubled production of this game. Enemy telegraphing, animation canceling, glitch exploits, using the invincibility frame of each death to get through the hardest parts.

"It would probably be a good idea for the whole having a job thing. I don't think dyed hair is that big a deal for the museum, it's just, kind of Halloweeny and not a super good dye job."

"Yeah. It was a dare."

"Anyways. I need to talk to you about something."

“Yeah?”

“A painting got vandalized down in Nu Plaza. One of our donors wants us to look at it. I got you a comped trip down there.”

“Really?”

“Mhmm. They want you to get some field experience.”

“Wow. That’s...”

“Exciting, right? Honestly, with how crazy things have been at the museum, it’s a good time for people without a lot of classic experience or a degree.”

“I’ve been trying to do a good job—”

“Mhmm. But I think it’s more important to make a good impression. You know how it is. The museum is really social and they want people who they like working with.”

“Who, exactly?”

“It’s pretty fluctuate-y over there, so try to be nice to everyone. But mainly you want to impress the director. She can be a little intense but she’s cool.”

“Cool.”

“Next year I don’t want you worrying about stupid stuff like rent and groceries, I want to be on vacation at like, some snowy mountain, drinking overpriced drinks and getting room service and having hotel sex.”

“Haha, yeah.” Trianon touches her blond hair, mirroring her movements, as his other hand mashes the controller, a robot girl crashing through a pixel door and lasering an insurgent in half.

“Speaking of. Did you talk to the doctor about different medications for myasthenia? Figuring out if it’s causing low testosterone...erectile kinda stuff?”

Straddling her in bed, trying to get hard. He looks at the mirror and feels scrawny and insufficient. Weirdly tired. Like he’s going to fall asleep.

“Um, yeah, I should do that soon.” Trianon doesn’t want to say, *it might be something else. Genetics. Doomed to fail you forever.* It’s easier to think of it as a side effect of something external.

She puts a hand on his cheek. “I mean, this baby face is cute. But some stubble would be hot. I

like the scrappy feel.”

“Haha. I’ll work out more. That would probably help.” *Awaken The Male Glands...Suppressed By A Lifetime of Ambient Cuckery.*

“You should ask the director about martial arts. She’s super into them. Like actually kinda good. It would be a great conversation starter.” Rolling her eyes now. “People love that authentic personal connection.” But Trianon appreciates the tip. He has no idea how to talk to people. It’s like she gives him the magic codes.

The doorbell rings. She looks at her phone and says, “The sushi is here, babe.”

The sushi tastes funny. A little coppery. But he ignores it.

“Sorry for the lecture. All that job stuff. I can really get into professional mode.”

“It’s okay. It helps having someone to keep me on track.” *I wouldn’t leave my room otherwise... and it scares me.*

“Mhm. I just. I know you didn’t have an easy time growing up. That’s why I want you to have all the stuff you never had.”

“Thank you. Seriously.”

She holds him. “You know I’ve got your back.”

He rests his head on her chest. Normally he’d try to raise to his full height, he was always insecure about that in high school, being shorter than some of the girls. But he’s full of sushi and he feels good about the future.

He closes his eyes.

You're Breaking Up

All the robot girls are dead and the screen is red. Must have fallen asleep. But he doesn't feel rested. He turns over to hold his girlfriend but her side of the bed is empty. And hard, and cold.

His foot kicks out and hits the wall, rattling the chain.

It hurts so much to come back. The more he realizes where he is, the harder it is to breathe. Too long with the light off, claustrophobia like a previously unknown but drastic allergy. At some point he tried to reach the switch but it was just a little out of reach.

Footsteps. Not above. This floor. There was a hallway out there. And a kitchen. This isn't just superstition. There is a world outside.

The door opens. His faith is rewarded. The hallway is still there, letting in dim natural light (morning?). It isn't just darkness forever. He looks up, squinting.

Insul puts a bowl on the floor. Looks like oatmeal. Trianon's stomach punches him at the sight of it. He reaches out and Insul pushes the bowl just beyond his reach.

"Not yet."

Insul closes the door and they're in the darkness together. But where Trianon is incompatible with the darkness, struggling to fit into as small a part of it as he can, Insul swells to fill it.

Trianon tries to say something, to fill the void with at least one sense, but air is escaping him, he's hyperventilating. That's a sound at least, a high desperate sound like a crushed animal.

Something lights up. It hurts his eyes.

"Unlock your phone."

What could Insul do with that? Cash app. Email. Everything. Insul has his body, but the phone is his soul.

"Can't," he whispers.

An arm shoots from behind and wraps around his neck, pulling him into Insul's chest. The phone dances in front of Trianon's face, a hypnotic and solitary light.

"Unlock it."

"Fuck—"

The arm tightens against his windpipe, blurring the screen.

“Hhakkgh.” His finger floats in front of him, split in two. He pokes at the phone but misses, his left eye drifting out of sync. He tries again with the other finger. That one’s real. He swipes a pattern and the phone unlocks, revealing a tower of missed messages. The arm relaxes a few notches but stays locked in place, forcing Trianon to watch as Insul checks the inbox and sets all incoming messages to be forwarded to another email.

Now the music app. “You have one song on here. It must be important.”

“I don’t even remember.”

“Then you won’t care if I play it.”

Muddy, distorted guitar kicks in, bleeding into trap beats and sludgy vocals that snap Trianon back to high school.

*“Feeeling bacteeeeeerial,
Infected by the reeeeeeealllll”*

Trianon closes his eyes. Dungeon Star. A penetration from the old world. No. The world before that. Something childish and prefiguring.

Insul deletes the song. Then he taps the gallery icon. Scenic pictures of the desert. Then the house, viewed from the bottom of the hill. No hint of floating corpses or bloody tennis rackets. Insul pauses at the museum pics, then sends them to his phone. Doing research?

Scroll, scroll. Memes, memes. Trianon hopes he’ll gets bored soon. Hunger pulses from his stomach, then collapses to nothing then spreads again through his entire body, making every sensation more brittle and sharp. He wants that bowl of oatmeal so bad.

“She looks familiar.” A blond woman smiles at the camera over a plate of tapas.

“Just a friend.”

“Do you think she’s pretty?”

Trianon doesn’t respond.

Insul leans over his shoulder, face glowing in the phone light like a campfire storyteller. “Is this what you like? Is this your type?”

“She’s just a friend.”

Insul scrolls through the gallery. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure this is your girlfriend.”

Trianon doesn't respond.

"What's her name?"

Trianon tries to think of a fake name but he can't for some reason. Not a lot of air getting to his brain. "Oenone."

Insul deletes the rest of the gallery and Trianon's lip starts trembling. He suppresses the urge to grab the phone.

Now Insul is reading his messages.

"Oenone really wants you to talk to her."

"She's worried about me."

"Then you should text her back."

"R-really?"

"Yeah. I think that's a good idea."

"Okay." Some kind of ransom? For a second he feels the soft blankets of Oenone's bed, the warmth of pajamas. He'd give anything to feel that again. He'd never leave.

"You're going to break up with her."

Trianon almost laughs. "What?"

"You're going to text her and tell her that you're breaking up with her." Insul's breathing is fast on the back of his neck.

"I'm not doing that."

Insul squeezes his throat, tender on the window-crushed bruise. Trianon panics, thrashing against Insul's chest. "NO—" He punches behind, hitting something that could only be a face. The darkness flings him against the wall, phone spinning across the floor. Insul picks it up, revealing a trickle of blood under his nose. He holds the glowing phone out so he can see Trianon, just in time for Trianon's unchained leg to shoot out and kick him just below the knee. Insul folds, banging against the wall. Trianon grabs the edge of the tub to pull himself up.

Something incredibly heavy crushes Trianon between the legs. He screams and grabs Insul's foot, prying at the toes, gripping the ankle, trying to get the weight off. An aching, ruptured sensation pushes up through his hips, boring through his abdomen. He falls on his back and his hands hit the side of the tub, arms bent at right angles by the cramped space.

Insul gives him the phone. "Type what I tell you to type."

Trianon takes the phone with shaking fingers. It drops on his chest with a soft thump.

"Pick it up. Good. Now say hi to your girlfriend. In a normal way."

Trianon can barely think. He types, *Hey*.

"Good." Insul's foot eases a little, but it's still firmly planted on Trianon's genitals, pushing his balls back into his pelvis. "Now type, *we need to talk*."

Trianon types it, tears streaming down the sides of his face, wetting his ears.

His phone vibrates. Even this pathetic mechanical substitute for her touch is too much, it came from her fingers somewhere far away, he's crying so hard he can barely read the message: *I'm here. What happened? Are you OK?*

"Type *I'm breaking up with you*."

"I c-can't."

Insul's foot digs between his legs. Trianon can't feel his balls anymore.

"Please, please don't," he whimpers. Insul's toenails, long and untrimmed, feel like they're cutting into the base of his cock. He types mangled, unrecognizable words. Autocorrect passes through them like the breath of God, forcing him to say what he can't bear to say. *I'm breaking up with you*.

New message: *What?? Where are you?*

"Type *I never loved you*."

"Please please please—"

Insul grinds his foot and Trianon drops the phone with a crack next to his ear. He twists on his side as much as he can and picks it up.

I never loved you.

Tears spatter the phone, blurring the text. He's just going to kill you anyways, and she's going to think you hated her, and you'll never get to tell her what really happened. Her memory of you will be ruined. Everything you shared, rewound backwards through time and erased.

At the other end of the burning foot between his legs, someone is laughing.

"Type, fuck off retard cunt."

Mucus drips onto the screen, fingers smearing it as he types.

Send.

No reply.

Insul grabs the phone and reads the conversation. "Wow. You really typed that."

Bzz.

Bzz.

Insul takes his foot off. Whatever was under there is crying and curled up. He tunes it out and reads the new message. Then he kneels down and shows Trianon what it says: *I'm super worried about you. Please don't make any decisions you can't take back.*

Vibrate. Another message: *Where are you? I'll call 911. You aren't alone. Please hang on.*

"Why does she think you're going to kill yourself?"

Trianon's voice, nasal and wet. "People cut ties when they're d-desperate."

"Would she really call the police?"

"Yeah."

Insul types something. "I'm not going to let that happen."

"What did you say to her?"

"Eat your oatmeal." Insul kicks the bowl over, spilling it across the floor, then leaves Trianon in the darkness.

Retouching

Another day in the darkness. Broken only by another bowl of oatmeal, bland but unkicked, not tasting of bathroom tile.

Light fills the bathroom. Trianon shields his eyes. Insul is wearing the orange parka and jeans that fit him, tucked into ordinary brown boots. His hair is slightly combed. Another mask?

Insul looks over the bruised body chained to the toilet. "Let's cover this up."

He drops a duffel bag on the floor. Clothes? Next to it he places a makeup kit.

Trianon flinches. "Hold still." Insul rubs eyeshadow and concealer onto the sorest feeling parts of his skin.

"I learned how to do this from a domestic abuse support video."

Insul wets the towel and wipes dried oatmeal off Trianon's hands (from pawing at the sticky floor, finding the oatmeal by touch), and a few drops of blood from Trianon's chest. From the fight last night? The blood of Insul's nose, clinging to him like reverse leeches, carried unknown this whole time.

"Can you try looking less scared?"

Trianon swallows and tries to relax his face.

"You still look fucked up."

"Wonder why."

"That's why I kept this." Insul has a white pill.

Pyridostigmine.

He pops it into Trianon's mouth. Why does he want Trianon looking normal? Are they going outside? That means the chain goes off. And he gets to wear clothes? Unless it's another naked car ride, to a terminal beach—

As if reading his face, Insul dumps the bag out. "Get dressed."

*

Being in the living room feels like impossible luxury. The ripped-off bathroom mirror lays on the couch. Trianon peeks at it.

A dark blue parka jacket, a little too big for him. His head sinks weakly into the collar, mouth concealed, nose and dark-rimmed eyes staring dolefully over. There was a hair tie at the bottom of the bag and he put it on, a clump pulled back so his black hair is only spilling over one side of his face, sprouting into wild green tendrils. It's amazing what being kidnapped does for your volume.

Black tee. Jeans, a little tight, hole in the knee, but comforting after so long with his bare skin exposed. No underwear, his bruised balls irritated by the denim.

"Cover that up." Trianon pulls his sleeves down, concealing the bruises.

Insul puts a finger under Trianon's chin, lifting it up. In the mirror Trianon sees the straight line of the car window bruise across his throat. But Insul is looking at his face.

"You look like one of those, fucked-up muppets. But it's fine." He zips Trianon's collar up, covering the crush-line. He walks off, typing something on Trianon's phone.

Trianon realizes he's no longer seeing double. He looks around. Tasteful, magazine-looking ceramics and wood and wicker. Blinds pulled, leaking overcast haze through the slits. And there's the door. He wiggles his legs. Sore, but he doesn't have far to run. He just has to get outside—

He looks back and almost leaps off the couch. Insul is standing next to him. Holding up the phone.

"We're meeting your girlfriend."

"What?"

"You're going to tell her everything's okay, and you need space. If she calls the police, you lose."

This is a good thing, right? This is our chance.

"Then we'll take care of the museum."

They go to the door. "Hmm. I can't spray you again. Not on the way out." He puts his hand over Trianon's eyes. The door clicks and outside air rushes in. Trianon's mouth waters at the atmospheric breach. Insul's hand forms a tight seal, pressing down on his nose, blotting out all light except glowing lines of membrane and a tiny sliver of the ground.

Wooden steps. Creak, creak.

Pale sand. The seaside. From desert to beach, the barren habitats of a psycho lifeform. Thank God he didn't run for the door. No one would have been there to hear him screaming. It's not

good beach weather.

“To be honest, I don’t think you could really identify the house, the way your eyes are.”

A car. Different car. Smells like lavender. Very clean. A single interior design magazine on the floor of the passenger side.

“I just wanted to use the spray. See what it felt like.”

“Oh.”

Insul puts his hand on the back of Trianon’s head, making his spine go erect. He doesn’t know whether to calm down, to stay still, or to act immediately, before it’s too late—

Insul slowly pushes his head down, below the window. “Stay like that.”

They drive for a long time. Trianon snuffles, his breathing compressed from bending over. He reads the front cover of the magazine a few times, marveling at the koan-like effect of the article teasers (*Ultimate Go Wild, Summer Now, The Woman Who Brought You Tables*). He flips through the pages, hiding in each of the rooms, on lux couches and ottomans and wicker chairs. Sleeping in the master bedroom of a family house. You could fit so much family in it. So much love. Wandering through beautiful backyards with trellises. But not the kind with swimming pools.

*

Insul tugs on the scruff of Trianon’s jacket. He wakes up. They’re parked on the side of a coastal road. A big building is up ahead. Maybe they’ll have interior design inside.

Insul leans over and looks him in the eyes. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Uh huh.”

Insul’s eyes are heavy and hooded, his face completely simple and devoid of intention. His fingers play with the back of Trianon’s hair, sending tingles down the nape of his neck.

“If you say anything, if you try to run, if you do anything but what I told you to do, I’ll grab her like this.” A tight, painful grip of hair. “And I’ll do this. But faster.” Insul lowers Trianon’s head against the dashboard until his nose squishes into it. “Back and forth. Until her face is gone. Then I’ll grab you and I’ll—”

His gaze rolls across Trianon's face. "Maybe your eyes. I think I could do that quickly."

Trianon forces himself not to react at this revelation, of this perspective, this person who views all humanity as a flat surface covered in eyes like buttons, simple toggles to accomplish a task.

Something tightens against his abdomen, then makes a clicking sound. He looks down to see his seat belt slide off.

"Let's go."

*

The lobby is covered in wall-to-wall murals of sea turtles and dolphins drifting through perfect blue shallows.

"I always wanted to come here," Trianon mumbles, too tired to filter himself.

Insul studies a starfish in the kid's touch pool. "This animal looks retarded."

"It's just a starfish."

"What does it do?"

"Uh. Mainly just chill, probably."

Insul puts his hand in the water. "Do they bite you?"

"I don't think they put dangerous animals in the kid's pool."

Insul wipes his hand off on Trianon's jacket. "Let's go."

They walk through tunnels of water-bearing glass, ending up in a dark hall lined with aquarium walls full of floating jellyfish. Trianon wanders over and tries to find something besides jellyfish. He wants to see a turtle. But maybe the animals are sleeping.

"Trianon?"

He looks down the hall and sees his girlfriend.

Shark Week

Oenone walks over quickly, tucking her purse under her arm. "Hey. What happened? Are you okay?" She looks closer. "Are those cuts? What happened to your face?"

Insul is looking at jellyfish, or pretending to look. He's close enough to hear everything.

"Nothing. I..." He remembers what Insul told him to say. "I got drunk. The car broke down. My phone ran out of battery. I went looking for help and fell in a ditch. With my face."

This is crazy. I'm in public. I have to run. But she won't run with me. She's stubborn. Dignified. I can't communicate *that guy is going to kill you right now* faster than Insul can react.

"That's horrible." She touches his arm. It sinks into the blue fabric of the parka jacket, Insul's marks exploding under her touch, bruises blossoming and cuts sparking. He jerks away. "Tri?"

He looks at the floor, tongue paralyzed. His skinny arms hang from the parka, barely belonging to him. He notices a purple band around the wrist, squeezed there by Insul's hand. He pulls his sleeve down. "I'm okay."

She relaxes a little, but still looks upset. "You said some really messed up things to me. I thought you were, standing on the edge of a bridge or something. I was this close to calling the police."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Did you really mean what you said?"

"Um." He looks out of the corner of his eye at Insul. "I. It's not your fault." Insul is definitely not looking at the jellyfish. *I'm breaking up with you. Say it to her.* He feels like he'll cry if he has to say that.

"Tri—"

"Sorry, I just need space, I don't know—"

Insul listens to the catch in Trianon's voice, the stammering breakdown. Aquarium light shines across his smile.

"Why didn't you just call me?"

"I don't know."

"The museum is asking where the report is. I vouched for you."

"Sorry. I was writing it..."

"And?"

"I lost it."

"You lost the report?"

Pages burning in a fire pit under a dark cobalt desert night.

"Um. Yeah."

She crosses her arms, looking away like she's trying not to say something. "We have a life together. You have a responsibility."

"I know. Oenone, I—" He almost says "I love you," but knows the darkness down the hall can hear.

"You look sick."

"I'm fine."

"Don't relapse on me, not now, please. If you'd even said something, let me do damage control, that would have been okay, but you just left me."

He stares at the glass numbly.

"Are you on drugs?"

"No."

Insul looks directly at him.

"I mean. I was stressed out. I—"

"Fuck," she says.

Thinking is hard. Maybe he should run. But it's hard when there's all this blood inside people and their eyes are on the surface of their face and you can just reach out and...

A security guard walks past the end of the hall. Maybe that guy would react fast enough. That's his job, to provide security...

But a few steps more and the guard is lost from sight. The hall has a curve to it, a recession for viewing the jellyfish. Trianon feels like the whole world is warping that way. He can't see the

jellyfish or the coral or the seaweed, just how thick the glass is and how it would feel if his face slammed into it really hard.

“So the book with the report in it, that’s gone? And you didn’t make any backups?”

Maybe telepathy is real. Maybe he can compress everything that happened this week, every bizarre and horrible incident, and beam it straight into her head. Because the only other way it feels like it can come up is with the contents of his stomach.

She says, “I’m going to lose my job.”

“They can’t fire you—”

“You work there too. But you don’t get it, somehow. The land mines I keep steering us away from.”

“Oenone—” He wants to say it’ll be okay, but she’s right. He doesn’t know where the land mines are.

“Do you know how many people are fighting for our exact positions? How could you be so stupid?”

Insul raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t care if you get high now and then. But driving drunk, passing out in a ditch, you’re scaring me.”

Trianon tries to find the jellyfish, but the water only seems to be full of drifting plastic bags. Sweat burns under the parka, trapped by the insulating layers.

Oenone takes a deep breath. “Okay. I’ll tell them there was a fire or something. You got mugged. I don’t know. We have to go to the museum and fix this in person. I’m not letting the excuses I have to make for you sit in an inbox and give me an anxiety attack.”

“Okay.”

She pinches a green-dyed tip of his hair, letting it drop in disbelief. “You can’t go in like this. You look ridiculous. Like a teenager.”

Insul frowns.

“We need to find a hair place.” She gets out her phone and flicks through it distractedly.

Silence.

“Come on.”

She tugs at Trianon but he’s frozen, lips moving not saying anything.

“You said you wanted a life with me. I don’t understand why you’d jeopardize that.”

“I want to, I, I just really have to take care of something.” He looks over her shoulder, paralyzed.

“Do you remember how things were when we met? You promised that was just a phase. That you wouldn’t go back to being a burnout—”

His vision blurs, hiding Insul’s face from him.

“I had to listen to my parents tell me I was dating below myself. I told them you’d figure your shit out. I didn’t judge you.”

He stammers something but he doesn’t think they’re real words, just contradictions crashing in his throat.

Oenone holds up her phone. “I found a place ten minutes away. They specialize in men’s haircuts.”

Insul is standing next to them. Trianon’s stomach flips.

Oenone looks up. “Can I help you?”

“Why are you talking to him like that?”

“Excuse me? This is a private conversation.” She glances down the hall. The security guard is facing the other direction.

Insul looks uncomfortable, his gaze roaming around, not settling on anything. “You called him a burnout.”

“We are in a relationship. This is none of your business.”

“You said his hair looked stupid.”

“Were you listening to us?”

“I just think you should talk a little more respectfully to your, your...you know...this...” He gestures at Trianon.

“Okay, but—”

"You're not supposed to yell at a person like a dog and, treat them like an animal."

Oenone sighs, her face clearing and recomposing itself. "I didn't realize how loud we were. Sorry for disturbing you. Let's go, Tri."

Trianon stares at the jellyfish, mouth hanging open so his front teeth are slightly exposed, looking lost in thought, or like his jaw muscle's acetylcholine receptors are overloaded by a cannibalistic immune system.

He realizes everyone is watching him. It feels cold in the tunnel, like he's in a submarine trapped on the ocean floor. He pulls his sleeves down and wraps his arms around himself.

Her face softens. "Are you sure you're okay?"

A vein twitches in Insul's neck. Would her blood be dark on the glass? Green?

Trianon pushes past them, walking fast out of the tunnel, then looks back. Oenone's still standing where he left her, mouth open. Like she wants to say something but refuses to yell over the long distance.

And Insul isn't there at all.

*

Trianon sits in a dark corner. A huge tank of murky water towers above him, but it looks empty. That must be why no one else is here. Although he hasn't seen anyone for awhile, so the aquarium must be closing soon. Maybe they'll lock up with him inside and he can sleep here. Live here.

When he was in high school he remembers this one event, sleepover in the aquarium. Bring a sleeping bag and look at the fish. Sometimes he'd get invited by relatives but he never went. Something about his nights felt too private and obscene to share in a public space like that. Insomnia, needing to use the bathroom constantly, jerking off just to fall asleep. How could everyone else just lay there and fall asleep so cleanly? Like the kind of sleep you see in movies.

His stomach growls. There was a cafe selling corn dogs but it's probably closed by now. And he doesn't have any money.

He looks at the wall. Still no fish. Not even any plants. There's a placard. "...Great White Sharks are notoriously difficult to keep in captivity...often refusing to eat...was released into the wild where sadly she passed on a week later...this tank is being cleaned while we prepare our next exhibit. Thank you for your patience."

What even happened today? Something's wrong with his brain. He wraps his arms around his knees and rocks. He was going to escape. But Insul said something scary. You mean frightening,

don't you? Disturbing?

Get it together. Find a maintenance door. This place has multiple exits. Insul can't be everywhere at once.

Trianon tries to get up but his legs collapse. Even with the pyridostigmine, he feels so weak down there: racket marks, bathroom tile bruises, malnutrition. Try again. They're just numb from lack of use. So use them.

The air thickens next to him. He looks up, eyes sunk and rimmed with purple. Insul leans against the glass, a shadow framed by the clouded water.

It's not just the physical damage. Whatever ties him to Oenone is wrapped around his body like a rope, tangling him up. And it throbs like her very blood is passing through it. If he moves the wrong way, he might snap it.

Trianon swallows. "Is it okay?"

Insul puts his hand out. It doesn't seem to have any blood on it.

Trianon reaches for it, his thin fingers bending in Insul's grip, pulled up easily.

Cold Case

As they drive, units of time pass that Trianon can no longer measure, the LCD clock like xeno cuneiform. All he knows is that it's dark.

Insul pulls into a vintage-looking drive-through, road cutting between a cashier booth and a tiny kitchen connected by an awning. A bored-looking teen comes to the counter, a tablet leaning against the spray-painted window behind him, silently streaming a mukbang show.

Insul turns and says, "What do you want?"

*

Trianon dips his corn dog in ketchup, savoring the sweet honey batter.

"How is it?"

"It's really good," he mumbles. He doesn't know why he thought of corn dogs. He'd forgotten that comfort.

The pyridostigmine is wearing off so it's hard to chew the last few bites, but he manages. He leans back and shuts his eyes, listening to the car-moving-sound, wrapped in an envelope of evening, the solar terminator silently crackling around them.

*

He can tell he's dreaming. Or he's dreaming of being self-aware of dreaming. But he takes his pills anyways, from a nice full bottle. One before his grandmother drives him to class. Another at lunch.

Sitting on the bed, bright sun streaming in. How strange to think the bottle was empty. He doesn't feel good about that. Better take them all now just in case someone tries to steal them. Better take them all now to get strong. Enough for the rest of your life. No more melting face, no more retracting lips, no dopey gaze they can call retarded.

It's empty. Did you take them already?

You're running out of sunlight. You just sat there, not appreciating it. And now it's gone. And your grandmother hasn't knocked like she usually does, the only one to act like a closed door meant something. She hasn't knocked for a long time.

*

A wet sucking sound wakes Trianon up. Insul sips water through a straw, ice sloshing as he lifts the paper cup to his mouth.

They're in a large parking lot. There's something familiar about the big building nearby. Is that the museum? Trianon's glitchy eyes make everything a little unfamiliar, like a dream of the museum, not the actual thing.

He looks down. He's holding a juice box, deflated from suction or squeezing, chicken nuggets spilled across the fast food bag on his lap. His legs look pale and nervous through the jean holes, a chicken crumb caught like a fly in a web of frayed denim. When did that happen? Try to be present for the apple juice, Trianon. It's one of your sole pleasures now.

Insul makes a tally mark on his hand in pen. "Lot of security today."

Trianon remembers going to a mixer with Oenone. The director was talking about the vandalism epidemic. Seemed pretty upset, even if she talked about it in a sardonic way. Installing metal detectors, contracting off-duty cops as freelance security...

He feels tired but jittery at the same time. Hard to think outside the present moment. But he needs to think ahead. Just a little. Almost there. The museum. The perfect place to escape. If he doesn't get caught first. It isn't a fucking desert, it's in the middle of the city and it's full of people. Fall into it like a ball pit.

But it won't happen if Insul gets paranoid about security. Distract him.

"Um. Thanks for the corn dog. And the chicken nuggets."

Insul looks ahead blankly. "Whatever part of me you're looking for isn't in here."

"Huh?"

"You're not going to find a nice person. Don't waste your time playing me."

A flock of families flows toward the entrance, one child skipping ahead like they're going to throw themselves through the glass door.

"Why does your museum have so much art?"

"It's a museum."

"Expensive art. Like you were making it up. So I wouldn't hurt you."

"Um. After all the natural disasters. Most museums in the state shut down and consolidated under this one."

"So it's a trap."

“They’re installing new security measures. But last time I was here I saw a lot of construction. They don’t really have their shit together.” He’s telling the truth. But he hopes they’ve got it locked down by now.

A woman with blond hair and big sunglasses checks her phone in the parking lot.

Insul watches Trianon’s face. “Oh. There’s your girlfriend.”

Trianon swallows, deprived of anything to say, if Insul can take the information from him without his mouth opening.

Insul takes Trianon’s phone out of his pocket and looks at the notifications queued on the lock screen. “She’s been messaging you a lot.” His voice is full of disdain.

Fuck him. Oenone was just stressed. Insul doesn’t know about the good times they had, he couldn’t possibly understand the unvoiced happy fog of relationships. Probably impotent, probably hates women...

“The back entrance is down that way?”

“Yeah. Where the trucks unload.”

“Password.”

“Huh?”

“Tell me the password.”

“I can type it in...”

“Password.”

Trianon sweats, an ejaculative stream of numbers spilling from his lips. “44332211.”

“And you said the keypad needs your thumbprint.”

“Yeah.”

“What about cameras?”

“Sure.”

“If it’s by the loading bay, it’ll have cameras. We’ll wear jackets.” Insul turns and speaks slowly to him like a child. “When we go, don’t look up. Keep your eyes on the ground.”

“Why do I have to hide?”

As Trianon says this, he knows his motive is obvious, but a big, knotted part of him was hoping a camera would spot him and that this silent, anonymous, lensed guardian would solve everything for him.

“You could be a missing person by now. I don’t know what your girlfriend told them.”

“I think she just thinks I’m a fuck-up.”

“Are you a fuck-up, Trianon?” Insul looks at him with that expression that betrays no hint of what he expects him to say. An unmarked trap, placid and innocuous.

Trianon sinks into his parka and the blurriness of his weakening eye muscles. It’s a relief not to see the world in full detail. To keep Insul as a horrible blur in the driver’s seat.

But the blur sees him. “I always wanted to cut off someone’s finger and use it to open a door.”

Trianon’s eye muscles tense up, snapping the world back into focus. “You always wanted that?”

“Before I stopped reading, it seemed to happen in books a lot.”

“Wow, cool, I like to read too, what kind of books...” Trianon feels foolish but unable to stop from trying to change the subject.

“It’s just so stupid. Feeding you, transporting you. It’s a lot of trouble.”

“Sorry.”

Insul takes Trianon’s hand and pulls his index finger back, the rest of Trianon’s fingers splaying open at the strain. “I could take it off with my bolt cutters. Walk across the parking lot and press it on that scanner.”

The finger bends the rest of Trianon’s body with it, painful enough to lift his ass off the seat, skull grinding into the headrest, stammering until a full sentence finally comes out. “What if I gave you the wrong password?”

“I don’t think you did.”

Insul looks around. Checking for witnesses?

“It needs to be warm,” Trianon says.

Insul looks at the nuggets. “You should have eaten them faster.”

"I mean the finger."

"Feels warm to me." Insul's thumb throbs where it presses into the knuckle, vein pulsing against bone.

Another family crosses the parking lot, oblivious to the mobile torture cell in their midst. A seagull cries and swoops down, savaging a piece of trash. As the family enters the museum, Insul lets go of Trianon's hand and gets out of the car. Boots scrape on asphalt. The trunk opens, covering the back windshield.

Trianon pops the lid off Insul's ice water and thrusts his fingers inside with a wet crunching sound. So cold it hurts. He looks back. Insul is by the side of the car, surveying the parking lot.

The ice bites his fingers but he doesn't remove them. Insul slides back into the car. He's holding bolt cutters.

Trianon's teeth chatter.

"What are you doing?"

"My fingers are cold now."

Insul raises an eyebrow at the sight of all of Trianon's fingers squeezed into the cup. He drops the bolt cutters on the floor. "Whatever." He checks the time, looking a little pissed off. "Get your hood up." He leans over to unlock Trianon's door, then sniffs.

"You got this car dirty too?"

Trianon looks down. Dark spots have stained through his jeans, and below, light red wetness is smeared into the seat until it looks like dirty grease. "Sorry."

"I can't keep stealing cars. This isn't GTA."

Insul pulls the jacket up, revealing an oozing cut on Trianon's skinny torso. The skin around the cut is suffused with blood just under the skin, a drifting halo of crimson purple. Trianon's exposed belly trembles. "Is it infected?" he mumbles, lips suddenly dry.

"Just the warfarin. It's making your blood weird."

Insul starts the car and rolls out of the parking lot.

They drive for another unspecified time unit and appear in an alley, just a microscopic slit in the side of this city, and there you are, Trianon, anonymous and forced to get out and stand in the smell of dumpster, barely able to stand, really, but dread is your spine now, a powerful substitute for vertebrae.

“Get in the trunk.”

No. Please no. He remembers the soot on Insul’s legs back at the beach house. It’s what Insul does with contaminated things. Burning alive inside a trunk...

He slowly walks around to the back. The trunk is empty. The bolt cutters are in the front seat. He should have grabbed those and rolled the dice. But then Insul might have turned them back on him, and getting hurt with bolt cutters is really scary. As a victim, he would have used the bolt cutters ethically. Just enough to open the neck up, nick an artery, and then run, but Insul, Insul would see all these fingers...

He puts his hands on the edge of the trunk. Breathing so fast. Can’t go in the dark again. Even smaller than the bathroom. Forced into tinier and tinier compartments until you’re compressed to a screaming dot.

Trianon jerks away and Insul grabs him. “Don’t burn me, don’t burn me,” Trianon says, slurring into incoherence, already smelling lighter fluid trickling through metal holes—

Insul pushes him against the brick wall. A large vent exhales steam from an unknown building, anonymous as an anus, warm on Trianon’s jean holes. Only this close to Insul’s face do certain details penetrate Trianon’s blurry vision. How tired Insul looks. Didn’t sleep very well last night. We know that. It just didn’t seem like he needed sleep or food or air, any evidence to the contrary a ritual observed from undead reflex.

Don’t get psyched out. Important to remember he’s flesh and blood.

“I need you to get in the trunk,” Insul says quietly.

Trianon crawls inside. He looks back but air whips fast into his eyes, the slam of the trunk, sealing him in.

Dummy

His fingers have explored every corner of the trunk. Nothing. If it weren't for the motion of the car, transmitting every blemish of the road into his bruised torso, he would be lost in a sensory void again.

Trunks are supposed to have a safety latch. But he couldn't feel one. An old car? Or did Insul remove it? Wouldn't be surprising. How many people do you think have been in this exact same situation? Well, not exactly the same. You doubt he lavished the same effort on those old people he killed. You're important, you can get him into the museum...

Are you trying to make this a point of pride? A superior class of victim? The car fumes are giving you brain damage.

No, you just smell bad, Trianon. Locked in this trunk with at least seven layers of fermenting sweat, sweat like sins: ambient anxiety sweat, anticipatory dread sweat, raw terror sweat, revulsion sweat...

Stop hyperventilating. You'll run out of air. You're in outer space, after all. A small, emergency pod with the bare minimum required for survival. The unfeeling metal has no way of understanding how hot it's getting in here.

Stop pressing your hand into the thin carpet of the trunk. You're going to break your fingers. Your whole posture is like a rabies skeleton. Silently pushing your bones into the hard sides of the trunk, a slow, weird panic. Your muscles, chosen by God to demonstrate weakness, can't afford the strain.

You could bang on the trunk. Try to kick out a brake light. But Insul is probably keeping to the side roads. And he'd notice before anyone else did. Trianon clutches his throat, larynx flashing with the sensation of a motorized window edge.

*

That wasn't sleep. More like a short-circuit. Hyperventilation in an enclosed space. He flexes his fingers. Still slow, but they benefited from the time out. He could probably run a little too, after the pins and needles wear off. He always appreciated the feeling of his body repairing itself after sleep. A reminder that myasthenia gravis isn't degenerative, that it can be kept under control.

The car slows down. Red light?

Completely stopped. Not moving.

A door opens, then he hears footsteps along the side of the car.

The trunk pops open, revealing the night, bright and shining after so long in true darkness. Insul drags him out and he falls on the asphalt. White lines run along the ground.

Insul pulls him up. Tall grass billows alongside an illuminated walkway, which runs through an outdoor mall with a layer of apartments on top, a gated community in the sky. A few shops are still open.

“Pull your jacket down.” Trianon tugs it lower, covering up his bloody jeans as best as he can. In the same moment, Insul pushes him inside a clothing store. Didn’t see the name but it feels like H&M or Forever 21 or something. Painfully bright mirrors, radio pop, dark mannequins like inhuman ink monsters. Oenone used to go here sometimes and he would tag along and react to her outfits, although he felt nervous sitting so close to the changing room. How could he ever have thought of himself as an intimidating male presence?

The clerk comes over and Insul quickly pulls Trianon’s hood down. Under the rim he sees a white dress with a black belt. There are no bruises on her arms.

“We’re almost closed but I can help you really quick!”

Of course you are. Fewer witnesses at night. And anyone who does see something is less likely to get involved.

Run for it? You’re already in the most well-lit area. Leaving it means entering the darkness, where he will find you, and re-kidnap or simply kill you before anyone even finishes their 911 call.

Part of you wants to scream HELP ME to the clerk. Part of you sees the clerk bleeding to death behind a clothes rack. Your brain betrays you a lot faster after you got mauled with a tennis racket, doesn’t it? Violence isn’t fictional anymore.

But maybe he’s calming down. He bought you a corn dog. Wait til the museum. It’s the only thing he seems to care about, so he’ll be distracted. And their security is a lot better than the aquarium’s.

“Who are you shopping for?”

“Uh. My sister.”

Insul has a sister? Maybe that’s a line of appeal. You’re an only child, but he doesn’t know that. The oldest and the youngest, and right now, you feel the youngest, weak in all the ways you were weak back then.

Electro house beats throb from the ceiling, manic and depersonalizing. Trianon sinks into the coats hanging along the wall. They’re soft and he almost cries at their touch. We’re going to Narnia this bitch...fall backward into a world of mere Christian cruelty...

A phone rings. The clerk says, "One sec." Trianon can't see properly through the gravis blur but it looks like Insul is slipping things off hangers and stuffing them up his parka. One of your lesser crimes.

The clerk returns ("Sorry about that!") and rings Insul up. Trianon tries to make eye contact with her, but this entire transaction is designed like machinery. There is no room for a dramatic physical intervention, not from this perky but tired clerk who is about to clock off and order a cab back to her apartment so she can eat leftover takeout and watch her streaming service of choice. He needs a justice-minded, paranoid vigilante, a concealed carry citizen looking to be a hero. Protect me from this psychotic degenerate...

They go back to the car, Trianon evaluating every patch of darkness for a possible escape route. If there was a lot of traffic right now, he'd run into the street. Cars are stronger than Insul, more random and ferocious.

Trianon expects to be placed in the trunk, but to his surprise, Insul motions to the front seat. Trianon sits there, trying not to disturb whatever favor promoted him to this position.

Insul snaps off Trianon's hair tie and throws it out the window. Dark hair falls over his eyes and he shakes his head until he can see again, just in time to watch Insul unzip his jacket and throw the shit he stole onto the back seat, along with the bag of legally acquired merchandise.

"Put these on."

"These are girl clothes."

"They're looking for a guy."

"You're crazy if you think this will fool anyone—"

Insul lifts his hand and Trianon cringes. It swipes lightly along his cheek. "You don't grow hair very fast."

He's trying to break down your identity. This is a direct attack on Western values.

Sounds like your dad's voice. He was a streamer, kind of an ironic right-wing personality. But think about it. The last century saw an unprecedented loss of population. The world can't afford decadence. It needs a solid workforce with a real work ethic, building dams and roads and drones. We can't afford experimentation. We're at war with eternity.

"Let's talk about this," Trianon says, trying to firm up his voice.

"You couldn't save yourself in the desert. And you can't save yourself now. Take off your clothes."

Trianon's shirt gets stuck over his head, arms too weak to pull it the rest of the way. He inhales bloody, bacterial fabric.

"For fuck's sake." Insul's fingers dig under the edge of the shirt and toss it away. Then he unzips Trianon's jeans and peels them off. Trianon stops resisting, startled by the putrid stains welling through his battered flesh, his pale skinny legs made alien by bruises.

Now Insul is wiping the blood off Trianon, using his old clothes dampened with a water bottle.

"Keep your new clothes clean."

Maintained like an animal. It tickles and feels weird. But it isn't pain.

A spray bottle from the glove compartment. This is what an insane person would keep an unknown malevolent fluid in. Acid? Insul squirts a cut and Trianon spasms at the shock of his skin not melting away, then the simple pain of chemical irritation.

"You keep your antiseptic in a spray bottle?"

"It's convenient." Insul rolls bandages hard over Trianon's cuts.

"Ow."

"Get dressed."

Sleep deprivation floats Trianon just an inch behind his body. Muscles weakening again. Can't afford the stress hit. Save your energy for the museum.

Is that the excuse your fear makes? What's the difference between being cautious and being a victim? Because it's kind of scary how confused you've been getting.

This is what Insul shoplifted. A skirt, black and pleated. A 4-pack of girl's underwear. Quick generic transformations.

Okay. Check the contents of the bag. See what the clerk picked for Insul's sister. A pile of shirts, lumpy with whatever else is under them. Did you get upsold, Insul? Trianon picks one up and looks at the tag. Juniors section. Are you really that small?

He unfolds it.

BASED AND LATTEPILLED.

He wants a clean shirt, but not that one. He checks the others.

DRAMA FREE ZONE

BE KIND

BE KIND

BE KIND

BE KIND

AFTER THIS WE'RE GETTING TACOS

This is the kind of womb-crazed consumerist communism that led to the present crisis in Western thought. Stop yelling so loud, Dad. You're going to blow out your mic.

Okay. What's the least humiliating shirt? These are the end times, can't afford to pass up a premium source of cotton insulation. Maybe we can subliminally reinforce the message to get tacos...or be kind...maybe that shit really works, maybe Insul just needed to see the right slogan t-shirt...would that be so crazy, to be a little kind for once...in this fucking society...

Fuck it. He grabs one of the green shirts. *DRAMA FREE ZONE*. Or maybe *BASED AND LATTEPILLED*. Let future generations hash out the canon. The forensics team will get a nice clear shot...maybe the store can put it in their catalog...be your authentic, best, facially reconstructed self...

"Lift up." Insul tugs underwear onto Trianon's legs. Trianon tries to lift up but slides down the seat a second later, his muscles imploding. Insul's hand dives under his back, fingers on his tailbone, lifting him easily, pulling the underwear the rest of the way, cock pushed back toward his belly.

Next comes the skirt. At least there's two layers now. It felt weird being naked under the jeans. And it's soft, after so much time spent bruising on hard floors. He looks down. The shirt exposes a milky hint of his belly. He tugs on it but it won't go much further.

Insul pushes salmon and seafoam green sneakers onto his feet. Didn't even remove the tags.

The makeup kit is out again. Rubbing something into Trianon's bruises, camouflaging the cries for help written on his broken skin. The kit rattles as Insul grabs something else. It travels through the blur of ocular fatigue and materializes into a black pencil hovering over Trianon's eye. His pupil dilates. Nnnhhhh. Hhhhh. Hhhhh.

Insul looks down. Trianon's ribs rise and fall, stretching his shirt with weak breaths. Insul puts his hand on Trianon's chest. "Stop breathing so fast. You'll pass out."

"Hhh."

Insul puts his finger below Trianon's eye and pulls down the lid, drawing along the rim. Then the pop of a mascara stick, and Trianon's lashes get wet and sensitive.

Insul unscrews lipstick. "Try to make a face like...uh...forget it." Trianon's lips are peeled back, exposing his teeth. He tries to shut his mouth but it feels like it's melting off. Insul traces the uneven line of those slack lips.

"When it's done, can I go?"

No response.

"You should say something like, I'll let you go after this."

"Why would I say that?"

"You're not even going to try to make me trust you?"

"I thought being really scary was enough."

Now his arms are being pulled into a cropped pink bomber jacket with a hood. "They won't even know it's you." Insul seems proud of his plan. This is like a hobby for him. Or he's stalling with these elaborate measures, because he's actually scared of what they're about to do.

Trianon slides up in the seat, high enough to see his face in the mirror. Dark hair falls over purple-bagged eyes black with eyeliner. Pastel pink lips frame his dirty teeth. He tilts the mirror down. From this angle he can see the green tips of his hair spilling past the window-crush line on his neck, onto the shiny pink shoulders of the jacket. Between the open flaps of the jacket, a pale turquoise shirt proclaims *DRAMA FREE ZONE*. And below, his pale, bruised legs being swallowed by black tights.

He barely recognizes the anomaly in the mirror. Disgusting freak. He pulls the skirt down, stretching the pleats out.

Insul takes off his own shirt and Trianon recoils from the blur of those naked, wiry limbs. Like seeing into the exposed workings of a machine. The machine puts on a white dress shirt and starts buttoning up. The machine bites its lip with a distracted look, staring at the roof of the car as if all future violence was displayed there like a debriefing.

"Ready?"

"No."

"Your life's purpose is coming up. Don't miss it."

Driving fast. The night rushes by, whipping Trianon's hair through an exposed gap of window. He wants to roll it up but his fingers freeze, throat uncomfortably tight. As if the window could snap shut on him like a trap.

He finds a water bottle on the floor. Barely manages to twist the cap off. Fuel. Precious fuel. This is it. The night you escape. The end of this false reality.

Water spills from his mouth, too loose to contain it, spattering in globules across the hydrophobic pink surface of the jacket. He leans back, using gravity to drain the rest of the bottle, then coughs as too much goes down too fast.

“Doing okay, Tria?”

“Tria?”

“I don’t want you looking suspicious on camera. You need to relax. Get in character.”

“My feminine side.”

“You don’t have a masculine side.”

Trianon sits there, feeling the panic attack swell in his chest like a tingling balloon, trying to stay limp so it won’t pop. A soft, heaving stillness. “Why are you trying to hurt me?”

“I did hurt you.”

“Why?”

“People don’t do things unless they’re scared.”

“You’re trying, trying to, break down my identity.”

“You don’t have an identity.”

“What?”

“You’re nothing, just like I am.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s why we ended up in the same place.”

In his dissociation, the mirror showing him a corpse-skinned portrait, it seems somehow horribly true. The museum appears in the distance, huge and glowing against the skyline, blue lights shining across its pillars for autism awareness week.

Trianon's sneakers hit the asphalt, bouncy with athletic gel, propelling him through the parking lot with Insul's hand hovering behind him like a gun. Cold wind blows up his skirt and he pushes it down, face flushed. The night air running through his flimsy layers makes him feel somehow naked, these fabrics with no weight to them, soft and clinging.

They're actually doing this. Breaking into a museum at night. Now that the moment has come, escape no longer seems so simple. "I have to piss." It sounds pathetic the moment he says it. It's one thing to want to live, it's another to be so transparent about it.

"You should have thought of that."

Insul is quick and alert, in bright contrast to the black hole of his beach house temperament, his hibernal sadism. He pulls their hoods down, the orange parka and pink bomber jacket like lost clouds of twilight drifting into the museum alley, into the glare of a bright overhead light gleaming on a keypad.

Insul tilts his head expectantly. Trianon enters the password with numb fingers, then presses his thumb on the scanner.

Please wait...

Gusts of air sweep down the side of the building. Maybe they deleted his log-in. Maybe this ends here.

The biometric box beeps and flashes green and the door clicks and Insul pushes him through.

Fuck. Now they have his thumbprint on file. He's an accomplice. He needs to make sure the cameras capture him being coerced. And he needs to survive that coercion.

The hallway is a patchwork of bulletin boards and posters from past exhibits, lined with black doors with small windows showing aisles of tightly crammed equipment. Walking with Insul, this dull ordinary place he spent so much time in feels like returning to high school or something, oddly grubby and banal against this dangerous feeling. Someone walks toward them. Light and sound guy, hairy big dude, was it, Kennan? He actually knows that guy a little. They had some fairly lengthy conversations about games, amiably infodumping at each other about the unexpected mechanical depth of obscure retro erogames from Semi-Nova.

Kennan's eyes flick briefly across them as he passes. Trianon feels time slow down, sweat bursting from his armpits. Kennan's going to say something, because Trianon is obviously a boy in a dress, and Insul's going to drag Kennan into a storage room and radically misappropriate lighting equipment...

Kennan's face shows no recognition. He leaves by the same door they came in, letting in the

light of the alley. It shines harsh and electric between Trianon's bare legs, a shadow so slender and delicate that it feels like he's looking at an alien or the ectoplasmic extrusion of a spirit.

The director's office is over there, vivid aquarium colors visible through the blinds of her window. He remembers the director telling him about the delicate pH requirements of her fish, some kind of special gravel blend, rare species rescued from the lakes when they got flooded with saltwater. No sign of activity. She's probably gone home by now.

An elevator dings. Insul pushes Trianon into the rear stairwell, and he feels for a moment the strength of that body that could crush him, peripheral and uncaring, tensed against threats. The door of the stairwell slams heavily, startling Trianon. They ascend the pipe-railing stairs past orange, roughly painted walls.

Second floor. The stairs are hard on his legs and he fights for air, sinking against the rail. Insul grabs his arm and pulls him along.

They enter the third floor. It's nicer up here. The feeling of being inside a large building that can support itself with seeming autonomy.

There's the new fitness lounge. He wishes he'd had a chance to use it. Would have been easier to keep up with his morning runs if it was on a treadmill in a nice room with his supportive girlfriend, not running down the street getting yelled at by guys in trucks. This whole experience has probably burned a lot of calories though. Thanks Insul.

That's where he first met the director, actually. Sweaty and competent in her colorful fitness clothes.

"Trianon! I've heard so much about you from Oenone." She hits the punching bag hard enough to hurt his ears. "We need fresh blood. A generational perspective. So glad you're part of the family now..."

Towel slung over her shoulder, cracking open a detergent-blue sports drink. "...maybe we can spar sometime. It's a great skill to learn...endorphins...discipline...ten times the neurological impact of meditation..." She sniffs, wiping a few grains of white dust from her upper lip.

An intern walks past, pushing buds into her ears, queuing a playlist on her phone. Another automatic glance, then total dismissal. Trianon can't believe how normal everyone is acting. The last time he was at the museum was in black trousers and a button-up shirt and dress shoes, secure in his uniform. Now he's in a strange body screaming wrongness, and this familiar place feels like a lost dimension of night.

He licks his glossy pink lips, feeling the cracks in the wax. "I got you in. Can I go now?" Even as he asks, it seems too simple for his pain to end now.

"You'd be in the pool right now if that was all I needed."

“What do you want?” Find the criteria for freedom. You need a goal, delusional or otherwise, or you’ll go crazy.

“Show me what you promised me.”

“Okay. Um. The exo-body thing, Plague Dreams assembled it on site so it should be in the exhibit area...”

He opens the door to a dark room. Pushes through the curtain to an empty black floor. “It was here. I swear. They must have moved it.”

Where the fuck is security? They used to be everywhere. Probably sitting in a circle in the basement, jacking off silently at nothing, the unspoken creed of their kind...

Next room. “There’s the Gachalennium.” The plastic-metal-glass sculpture towers above them, covered in pachinko neon and coin slots and neural learning generated anime girls. The printer at the bottom is supposed to spit out a card with a generated girl on it when you pay, but there’s a sign taped over it.

Insul stares at him without expression. “This is already broken.”

“Sorry, I guess they didn’t fix it yet, um, I’m sure we’ll find something...”

“Why are you stuttering?”

“Because you’re angry at me.”

“I didn’t say I was angry.” But Insul’s face is hard and closed, as if already done with this place.

They enter the unfinished new wing. Skeletal rooms full of power tools and plastic sheeting. Trianon waits for Insul to do something terrible to him in this inchoate rift, a place to be unformed, leaving behind a bloody burrito in clear plastic, the fate of things that become useless.

“Look,” he says, trying to keep them on a verbal, pre-physical plane. “You’ll like this room.” He leads Insul down a long hall to a metal door.

“Keypad.”

“Yeah.” That means it contains something desirable. Something you’d want to destroy.

Beep beep beep beep boop. Thumb press.

The door slowly closes behind them. A cool, dim room, insulated from the rest of the museum.

Safe from light, heat, and humidity. His sensitive skin always felt nicest in here.

200 lux maximum recommended for oil paintings.

Just a couple weeks ago, he was seated at one of these tables, Oenone touching his shoulder and showing him how to put paintings back together. Solvent to remove antique, discolored varnish. Painting adhesive into a cracked forest, then covering with clear plastic film so it can be pressed with heated metal.

Insul picks a piece of paper off a desk and punches a hole in it. He looks up at the ceiling, his eye fringed by the torn edges of the hole. He grabs a broom and stands on a table and punches the handle into the camera. He drops down and flips his hood up.

“What are you doing—”

“No one watches cameras. The only thing that matters is not appearing on the footage.” Insul runs his hand along an Artzybasheff with water damage, anthropomorphic furnaces lined with cummy cracks. “What’s this room for?”

“Preservation.”

“So this is your room.”

“Yes.” Remember who you are. You had a job. A good job. You’re a person with an identity and a future and a place in the—

Insul walks past a Henry-Robert Brésil in its convalescent frame (went from total obscurity to a collector’s item when Haiti became mostly uninhabitable), a flat, depthless jungle enclosing flamingos like a stage backdrop or the 2D forests at the edge of old game levels. Claustrophobic greenery that encloses the pink birds like a verdant cube.

Trianon leans against a table, staring at his salmon and seafoam sneakers through the black tangle of his hair. There’s something important about this table. Or the concept of tables.

The first day he was hired, he got the tour. The director was there, flushed from her workout. Oenone, smiling encouragingly. A few other staff members, brisk and indistinct. He nodded and zoned out.

At some point there was a dark detail that woke him up: “...these were installed after the Datura mass shooting...” Thirteen dead at a museum up the coast, one of the reasons it shut down, along with all the other reasons museums were being liquidated.

Then the director hunched over and pointed at the button box clinging to the underside of the table.

Insul pushes him along, heading toward a slab connected to fat ridged tubes. Trianon falls down on purpose. It isn't hard. Insul looks back at the slap of Trianon's knees to the hard floor, amusement in his face, maybe, the way you can watch a cloud and fail to discern whether it's drifting in the wind or if the sky just makes you dizzy. Then he continues in his circuit.

Trianon ignores the pain in his knees and quickly inspects the very close, yet subtly excluded dimension of space hidden from Insul's height and standing position: the undersides of tables.

A small box with a red button. Not far away. But far enough to catch Insul's eye if Trianon heads directly for it.

He catches up with Insul. Have to do this in his orbit. The slow swing of a treasonous moon.

"What's this?"

"Vacuum table. For books and paper. Suck the dust and spores out, control humidity, control heat..."

Insul examines it closely but doesn't seem to be able to figure out how to torture someone with it. Editorializing, Trianon...

A little closer. Not there yet. Keep the verbal dimension alive. He points at a faded brown illustration. "This cuttlefish is drawn with its own ink. You know how sepia is associated with old pictures and movies? Sepia used to mean cuttlefish pigment, named after the most common, um, genus of cuttlefish. The ink sacs came from a really old species, fossilized for maybe hundreds of thousands of years. They used to think animals didn't go extinct."

"Why not?"

"Because God doesn't make mistakes."

Anger darts through Insul's face, another microexpression leaking from a sealed, subterranean layer, unconscious and unpredictable, keeping Trianon tense. They come to a clear case with something metal inside. Insul opens the case and sniffs at a tarnished knife with a brass knuckle guard. On the table is a can of microcrystalline wax, bars of pencil lead, and a jar of mineral oil.

"What's this?"

"Trench knife. For fighting in, uh, trenches. They were made out of bayonets and—"

Insul takes the knife and fits his fingers into the guard. Trianon's abdomen tightens, peeking pale from under his shirt. *DRAMA FREE ZONE*. Can't you read...

Insul moves on, scraping his newfound knife appendage along a row of paintings hung for

restoration, slicing through millions of dollars per second. This is your fault, Trianon. The terror of breaking your dad's new console, amplified to infinity. You let vermin into the granary—

Stepping toward the table with the alarm button feels like jumping between two skyscrapers. He leans against it, a believable piece of exhaustion, then looks over. Insul is shredding a vintage book, yellowed fragments fluttering to the floor.

Trianon gropes under the table. Did he get the wrong one? He fumbles desperately, resisting the urge to look back.

"I'm bored," Insul says.

Trianon's finger brushes something tiny and button-like. He presses it. At least he thinks he did. He pulls his hand back to the edge of the table and turns around, just as Insul comes over, paint flecks stuck to his knife. He stares down at Trianon. "Are you going to throw up?"

"Maybe."

"Don't throw up."

"Okay."

Insul does look bored. Really, really bored. Trianon trembles, neck hurting from staring up at those heavy-lidded brown eyes, hard edges colliding phantom with his skin, flashes of palm and nail, the taste of copper spectral in his craw. Insul notices his legs shaking, skirt whispering with their movement.

Trianon points, struggling to aim as the ghost of his index finger detaches itself. "The painting. In that alcove. I really like it."

"What is it?"

"Dante and...um..." Trianon's throat feels completely dried up in the infernal air; pepper and paint, spices and solvent, what demons breathe.

"I don't care about Italian people." Insul leans his wrist on Trianon's shoulder, the tip of the trench knife tracing his spine through the pink jacket, bumping into the swell of his shoulder blade. Blade on blade. Insul opens his mouth to say something, when the door opens.

Insul's arm sinks further behind Trianon, concealing the knife from view. His eyes narrow.

Trianon almost doesn't recognize her at first.

Malebranche

The director wears an athletic top and workout leggings, black and white with sharp lines, red hair pulled back in a sweatband.

“Did someone press the button in here? I got an alert on my phone, I think it’s another false alarm, I keep trying to get them to fix...” She trails off when she sees the tall stranger and the gawky girl.

“...are you Plague Dreams?”

Trianon’s sweaty thighs stick to the table. Say something, Insul. Can’t you think of an excuse?

“Did someone let you in? We’re not supposed to have non-staff back here.” She sniffs and wipes her nose.

Trianon feels the tension in that concealed arm, knife cold against his tailbone. He realizes Insul isn’t comfortable. He doesn’t know what to do when challenged.

The director steps closer. “Have we met before?” She puts her hand on her head, as if to deliver an expression like, silly me, so forgetful. Then her bloodshot eyes widen.

“Trianon?”

“Hey,” he says, voice cracked, terrified of becoming present in this scene.

The door finally swings shut, sealing them in the soundproof chamber.

A cold snake slithers up Trianon’s back, Insul whipping the trench knife from concealment. He slashes at the director’s face, but the knife bites empty air as she stumbles back. Rattle rattle as she fumbles in her purse, keys and lip balm clicking and clattering on the floor, and Insul coming again with the knife.

A hissing sound and he darts back as if bitten, hellish tears bursting from his eyes, nose dripping. The director holds the pepper spray in front of her, breathing heavily. Her pupils are dilated, bigger than Trianon’s ever seen them before, even after she spent fifteen minutes in the bathroom before coming back to finish Trianon’s interview. “It’s you.”

The sick, retarded adult who drives around breaking things.

She steps back and Insul sprints to cut her off, knocking a rack over, door blocked with an inpainted Boldini. The director squeezes the spray again and he ducks clumsily, orange aerosol painting the portrait of a noblewoman behind him. He coughs and spits on the floor, trying to close the distance.

The director's Nike's squeak on the concrete as she sidesteps him, shaking the pepper spray. Insul's head jerks toward the noise and he swings blindly, banging the knife against a restoration frame. It flies off his fingers and skids across the floor.

The director looks at the blocked door, red ponytail swinging uncertainly. Insul's hands slap across the floor, probing for the knife. The director waves the spray at him, lips moving in tortured shapes like she's trying to find civilized words but none of them are sufficient. A movie Trianon can't understand, dubbed in fever dream.

The director finally notices all the slashed paintings and eviscerated books. Her face scrunches up, eyebrows forming a V. Whatever she was going to say turns into coughing, the atmosphere of the room thick with pepper spray, hellish particles flying into Trianon's abraded skin, his myasthenia-slack membranes, making him acutely aware of the tiniest openings in his body. He sinks to the floor, choking on the spicy air.

Banging metal sounds. Someone knocked over a cart, white and black paint racing across the floor, swirling hypnotically at Trianon's fingertips. He catches a glimpse of Insul's face between table legs. It's not as red as, say, the face of someone pinned between a car window and sprayed directly in the eyes with pepper spray. Looks like it mostly caught his left eye, the right one fluttering bloodshot.

The director splashes through the paint, staining her sneakers monochromatic. Insul holds up a PVC backing board, blocking the orange spray of her canister. She kicks him between the legs and he doubles over.

Trianon feels laughter tickle his throat, or maybe it's the capsaicin. Just your luck, Insul. Someone who actually knows how to defend themselves.

Insul grabs a square-tip knife and swings. Trianon can't see if it connected or not, but the director drops the pepper spray, then touches her chest, fingers coming away red. Trianon sees it now. A shallow cut, bounced off her clavicle.

Insul leaps for the pepper spray. His fingers close around it then release like the false promise of a claw machine. The director has him by the hair, pulling her arm back for a punch. Insul's hand rattles around in a tray of tools, stabbing a scalpel into her, then another, quilling her with tiny restoration blades.

Her fist socks into his face, breaking his balance so he hits the ground hard. Maybe he isn't six feet tall...maybe it's five something...

The director looks around for the pepper spray. Trianon can see it easily from down here. It's under a table. He thinks about crawling over and rolling it toward her, but it's too late, she's backing away from Insul. She spills her purse across the floor, her hand scrabbling through detritus. As Insul closes the distance, she throws her phone at his head, so hard the case pops off. They grapple and fall between tables in a tangle of cords, tools yanked to the floor in their

struggle.

Trianon manages to stand up and heads for the door. The room oozes with double vision, two sets of twins brawling in the haze.

“Stop,” the director says, crying like someone too busy to cry. “Stop moving.”

Trianon understands. Wrestling an animal so palpably dangerous the only way to survive is to hold on. Hugging a gator’s jaw shut. His eyes refocus, sharpened by the instinct that everything is about to be decided. Sweat drips down Insul’s nose, sclera inflamed with capsaicin, lashes fluttering, faster as an orange cord wraps around his neck. He rolls onto his back and the director straddles him. His fingers try to squeeze between the cable and his skin but the director pulls it tight, ghhhgghghkk, and Trianon can see her trying, really trying to do something she’s never done before.

Trianon pulls on the frame blocking the door and his muscles turn to cold water, he staggers back and falls down. Smart of Insul to keep his blood sugar low, to keep his everything low. He pushes himself upright, skirt pooled around him, cotton ass cold on the concrete. His bruised knees frame the violence: the director’s polyester thighs straddling Insul as he pants like an animal against the orange cable as it loosens and droops and pulls taut again. His eyes flick at Trianon, or maybe at some kind of strangulation-induced phosphene. One arm is pinned by the director’s foot, the other thrashing through floor debris, groping the dials on a small machine, lighting up red dots. Looks like a hot air pencil engine. *Remove tape, glue, adhesives, and varnishes from priceless historic documents...*

The director pulls back on the cable, her knee pushing into his chest for counterforce. He coughs up saliva, fingers tangling with the cord for the hot air pencil.

The director’s foot slips off Insul’s shoulder and she cries out, afraid to lose control of the stronger body under her. She pulls the cable with both hands and it draws up around Insul’s neck, changing the color of his face. He arches back, looking upside down at Trianon, eye contact or upskirt or bursting blood vessels. His mouth widens, teeth locked together. Trianon’s breath catches, a second of silence, of something.

Insul stabs the pencil into the director’s neck, 500°F of hot air shooting into her larynx. She opens her mouth like she’s screaming but salivary steam whistles out instead, degrading into a gurgling staccato. Insul spasms as she rolls off him, cable slacking around his neck. The director thrashes on the floor, vocal tone changing as the pencil turns the soft moist tissue of her throat to jerky.

Insul lays on his back, sucking down air. He tries to get up and falls on his side. The director is silent now, except for the superheated air using her neck for acoustics. She was going to read his report. Maybe she still can. Probably not.

“That went pretty bad.”

Insul looks over with an offended look, still unable to talk, half-blind with pepper spray, karma in his eyes.

Trianon starts laughing. "You really fucked that one up." His knees shake hysterically. He can finally feel his body again, warm wet spot spreading through the cotton liner of his underwear.

Terribilità

Trianon crawls through the flotsam of the director's purse, tearing open a women's protein bar. He chews it ravenously, free trade cocoa shards crumbling from his lips, then grabs an old water bottle from under a table. He drinks it dry then collapses on his arms, breathing heavily.

A few feet away, Insul laps at the faucet of a paint-spattered sink like a dog. He swallows too much and spits it out, gasping with metallic reverberation into the stainless steel reservoir. He squirts liquid detergent onto his hands and rubs his face, soap suds cascading iridescent down his neck.

The smell of cooked throat is overpowering. Trianon turns off the hot air pencil machine, covering his nose with the pink sleeve of his jacket. In the new silence, he realizes the faucet has turned off too. He looks back to see Insul stiffly pick up the trench knife. Insul's eyes are inflamed, narrow as the tip of the blade.

"You pressed a button."

"What?"

"Which hand did you use? This one?" The edge of the knife presses into Trianon's fingers with a burning chill. "Probably your dominant hand." Insul's grip feels unsteady. Trianon looks at the door. Maybe he can tear away. It isn't far. But the frame Insul threw in front of it looks heavy. He looks up at Insul, his face flushed with fear and anger. "What was I supposed to do? Wait for you to kill me?"

"Why do you assume I was going to kill you?"

"Were you?"

"Well...yeah. But you shouldn't assume things about people." Insul looks vaguely wounded, in addition to being literally wounded. He drops Trianon's hand.

Trianon walks away, fumbling with the zipper to his jacket. He can't get it to work so he pulls the jacket tighter. It's really cold in here.

He hears footsteps and turns reflexively. Insul is over by the alcove, the one Trianon was trying to bargain with. Look, a new shiny thing to destroy...

A clear plastic wall with a door partitions the alcove from the rest of the room. Insul peers into the dark interior. "You said you liked this one."

Trianon can't believe Insul isn't running. But the room is soundproof. So it's like nothing happened. That's how Insul works. He doesn't feel it. He doesn't need to process anything. His heart has probably resumed a normal pulse. But Trianon needs to get out of here. His heart

hurts. He needs open space.

“Relax. We have time.” Insul is trying to fix his shirt but the top button popped off during the struggle. He gives up, leaving the indentation at the base of his neck exposed. Trianon blinks and sees something sharp slide into that jugular notch, or even just his fingers, that would be enough, wouldn’t it, to penetrate that insufferable arrogance?

He shakes his head and the image vanishes. “Okay, but there’s a lot of valuable art here. We could have triggered a failsafe, an auto-dial—”

Insul pulls him inside.

*

The alcove is dominated by a Neoclassical painting laid flat across a table, restoration tools neatly packed to the side as if prepped for surgery. Almost ten feet tall, about seven and a half feet wide. He remembers everything about this piece.

The door clicks shut. The translucent wall separates them from the main room without concealing the violence, as if a horrible experiment had just concluded. Something horrible just happened. Something they can never take back.

Insul wiggles the knife. “Tell me about this.”

Trianon starts talking automatically, the emotionless computer part of his brain taking the wheel. “Dante and Virgil. By Bouguereau. I think they just finished restoring it.”

“How much is it worth?”

The Musée d'Orsay was once a train station. But it could not survive a maritime transition as effectively, when the Seine began to flood regularly. The art that survived was transported across continents as the centers of power shifted. He remembers a period of obsession, wondering if the West Coast would be devastated the same way. He read about all the apocalyptic floods that no one talks about, like the Great Flood of 1862, hitting so hard inland that the capital had to temporarily relocate from the Central Valley to the coast. Rain without end, massive snow melts, relentlessly sweeping the state clean, the worst disaster to hit the state in colonial memory, and that was a small flood compared to the devastation hinted at in sedimentary layers, ARkStorm, but no one wants to hear that hydrodoomer floodfag shit, and maybe he’ll die before it happens, which looks more likely with every minute—

This museum used to be much smaller, more of an “arts center”, but the inland location and the climate migration of rich donors lead to a sudden rush to prove its new pedigree. Maybe that’s why the security is still such a mess.

But if everything weren’t a mess, if the old coast hadn’t started disintegrating, if all those

people hadn't died from the plague, he wouldn't have gotten this job.

"It's worth 50 million now. It was massively reevaluated. One of the only Bouguereau's left. Old stuff is so much harder to get now."

Insul runs his hand across the painting, feeling its texture.

Trianon talks faster, his eyes lighting up. "This one is a lot more intense than his other stuff. He was trying to win a contest. Um. The Prix de Rome. But some boring guy won instead. But no one even remembers him."

Insul scratches the cable-burn around his throat. *Be on the lookout for two suspects with fucked-up necks...*

"When Bouguereau finally won, it was for something really boring."

A bunch of shepherds hauling Zenobia from a river. It was fine, just nothing like this.

"So this is Hell?"

"The Malebolge...the evil ditches...the eighth circle of Hell."

"What happened there?"

"Um. Fraud and corruption. I think. It had all these bulges, chasms, ditches, Dante numbered them, and bad, ironic stuff happened in them..."

"What's after the ditches?"

"The last circle. The frozen lake."

"What kind of people are there?"

"Traitors."

Two naked figures, muscles highly defined, grapple in the center of the painting. One, red-haired and feral, sinks his teeth into the other's throat, pulling his arm back to expose him, knee thrust into his spine, fingers clawing his ribs. The black-haired victim is held in this frame of muscle and bone, staring helplessly upward with agony on his features, his only resistance to clutch a tuft of his attacker's red hair.

Insul gestures his knife at them. "Dante and Virgil?"

Trianon shakes his head and points to the left, at a robed figure wearing a laurel crown and another wearing a prestigiously dyed red cap and dress of the Italian Middle Ages. "Right here..."

but..." His finger drifts back to the center. "...these guys are the focus."

"Who are they?"

"The black-haired guy...I think that's Capocchio? He was an alchemist. They burnt him."

"What about the biter?"

"Gianni...Cavalcanti? He was a knight and he impersonated someone so he could get their inheritance. I guess when he got to hell he just went...bonkers..."

"How do you remember all this? Is this like an autistic thing?"

"What? I don't think so. I don't know. I just really like this painting."

Insul points at the winged demon grinning in the background. "I like this one."

"Yeah, that's the cute anime mascot that follows Dante around for comic relief."

"Comic? I thought it was a book."

"No, like, for being funny...the demon is for being funny."

"I thought it was a serious literature thing."

"Why do you think it's called the Divine Comedy..."

"Oh. Yeah."

The muffled interior of the alcove makes Trianon nervous. "Aren't you worried about people coming?"

"I'll take care of them. I'll stack them to the ceiling." Pupils big, buzzing on adrenaline, dangerously present in his own body.

"Uh...I hope that doesn't happen then..."

Bloodshot eyes contrast with Insul's bored expression. "Why do you like it?"

"Like what?"

"The painting."

"Because it's intense."

“Intense how?”

“They’re pretty exaggerated, especially for the time period...it captures...um...they’re very animal...”

“You’re trying to put that voice on again.”

“Voice?”

“At the desert house. You sounded so stupid.”

Trianon seethes but doesn’t say anything, that familiar lesson of high schoolers and cops, that anything you say will be used against you.

“The first time I saw you, I thought, what a fucking faggot. He really bought into their shit.”

Trianon doesn’t know why that makes his eyes water. After everything he’s been through, it should be nothing. But Insul hasn’t really verbally targeted him like that before. He stares at the painting, losing himself in the rocks and rivulets of Hell.

Conservation requires great sensitivity to temperature and moisture.

“You must really like this painting to know so much about it.”

“Yeah—” He pauses. Insul is waiting. Listening for something. “I mean. It’s okay. You should check out the other—”

Insul leans over Trianon like he isn’t there, placing the tip of the trench knife on the painting.

“This is 50 million dollars?”

“Yes.”

Trianon feels Insul’s ribs expand against his back as the knife scrapes canvas, carving through centuries of oil paint.

Salt may crystallize, glass may weep, paper may disintegrate.

Insul thrusts the knife so hard he pushes Trianon’s face into the painting. Trianon sees the knife whirling around the antique oils as a denizen of a city might see a tornado cutting across a landscape.

Rapid changes in temperature may cause swelling to artistic materials.

Insul slashes faster and faster, mutilating demonic flesh, shaking Trianon with each movement.

The skirt is hiked up, cold air nipping the tears in his tights. He tries to reach around and adjust but the darkness crushing him is too heavy.

Shh. Smell the painting. Maybe the restoration is fresh enough to huff some fumes and blot this out.

The weight lifts from his back. He opens his eyes. The knife drags across the painting, slow and spent.

"It's not enough."

"Looks really wrecked to me...you got it good...really messed it up..." Trianon turns around and smooths his skirt.

"It's already dead. Everything here is dead. I used to think of their faces. How fucked they'd feel losing millions. Then I saw her reaction." He looks through the clear wall at the director's corpse. "And it didn't feel like anything. She didn't mean anything."

Trianon feels danger coming. "You were smiling when, um..." That upside-down grin. Just before a hot air pencil perforated the director's larynx.

"Was I?"

Trianon swallows bile. "You looked right at me and—"

Insul knocks him onto the painting. The edge of the table bangs his spine hard, collapsing him backwards, hair sprawled black across the ruined oils. Insul raises the trench knife, his weight pinning Trianon's legs to the side of the table. The tip of the blade hovers through the air, horribly doubled by desynced retina. He twitches, trying to guess where the tip really is.

"Your purpose is over. Why aren't you begging for your life?" Insul's face is a blur, censored by Trianon's failing vision.

As Trianon writhes, his shirt is pushed up to his armpits, exposed his slender torso to the knife. He imagines his blanched body laid over the painting like an additional subject to be compressed into the scene. Lungs ventilated, tears extracted, mucus siphoned, veins exsanguinated, bladder and intestines squeezed dry, all prepared for vacuum dehydration and industrial crushing.

"You're stronger than me." Hot beads of water tremble in the corners of his eyes. "I can't stop you."

"Okay. Bye."

The knife drops. Condensation fogs the plastic wall of the alcove. Silence, and silence on the

other side, across an exploded purse, sneaker scuffs, orange stains on concrete.

The knife slows, then shakes in place, Trianon's skinny wrists wobbling back and forth as he grips Insul's taut arm.

"Fuck you!" His voice is high and strained, the whites of his eyes shining through ruined mascara. He gets a leg free and kicks at Insul until the sneaker flips off his bony ankle. Insul slams against the table, shocking Trianon's other leg into numbness. The free leg spasms, toes splayed in agony.

Insul's arm is tearing free. Trianon digs his nails in, these final centimeters of traction. I'll have you under my fingernails when they find me. Forensic feast.

Insul's face comes into focus. His red-banded eyes are wide, almost shocked looking. "Tell me to stop."

Trianon fights back a sob. "What the fuck are you talking about."

"You'll feel better about it if you ask me to stop."

"Stop."

The knife disappears into the blind spot below his vision. A single burning laser point, then his chest opens into a molten chasm, exposing the fires below the earth.

He pants at the ceiling. "Stop..."

The knife moves again, changing angles. Tears run black down the sides of his face, adding new pigment to the painting.

Extreme humidity may cause paint to run and bleed.

"Stop..."

He can't tell if the knife is there anymore. Raw red noise burns from his chest. He stares at what he eventually realizes is nothing. Just a point in space.

The darkness collapses, crushing him between two frames. Insul's breathing is ragged from strangulation and capsaicin inhalation. Trianon wonders how much warfarin is left in his system. That invisible number is deciding the time of his death. The room will fill with blood up to the ceiling and he will be empty and maybe he already is, because everything seems much darker than it was before. Despite the fire in his chest, nothing seems to be getting illuminated. Just darker and darker and darker...

Insul props himself up on his arms, eyes heavy and disoriented. His neck stinks of sweat,

copper, bitter spice, a deep bacterial unpleasantness.

As the weight lifts, Trianon rolls over and crawls across the gouged landscape of Hell. He can see the outline of the door, plastic foggy with his hyperventilations, with the humidity of fresh blood.

Something seizes his foot, the one that lost the sneaker. The demons in the painting are breaching the surface, trying to pull him in. His body is so much less defined than theirs, how can he survive the aesthetic decompression?

Insul pulls Trianon off the table, dragging him over his own blood. He hits the floor, air knocked from his lungs. Insul falls back, sinking into a chair. His white dress shirt is soaked red with a cloudy version of the damage on Trianon's chest.

Trianon grabs the edge of the table and pulls himself up. His underwear feels heavy and warm. He looks down. His skirt is raining, crimson spiraling across the holes in his tights, like red lightning glimpsed from cave mouths. His remaining sneaker feels wet and gross.

Have to find the other one. Might step on something sharp.

There it is. Two of them. The sneakers are reproducing. Three of them. Four. This is too many sneakers...

He falls over, the joints suddenly removed from his legs. But the harsh impact never comes. He floats above the ground. Am I dead? Am I trapped here?

Strong hands place him on the chair. He can't believe he sticks to solid objects, he feels like he should be floating through the ceiling. Fingers slide under the edges of his shirt, pulling it down. Each inch of fabric that touches his chest feels jagged and raw, like a net of broken glass. He wipes his eyes, suddenly unable to see. Mascara stains the back of his hand.

"Hurts..." Of course it hurts. You have to work on your material.

Now he's flying again. He can see the painting from up here. A bloody angel of struggle has been added to the scene. They took my blood instead of me. I'm safe for now. They can't take me to Hell.

"Stop squirming." Insul tries to keep Trianon from sliding bonelessly off his shoulder. He scoops his arm under Trianon's thighs and cradles the body against his chest. Trianon feels his face melt downward into Insul's shoulder. His jacket sleeves hang pink and loose down Insul's back, swallowing his hands.

Absolute Pitch

A cramped security office. Slung across a chair like a discarded piece of clothing. Observing through a fisheye lens, the grays and blacks of the office saturated with retina-searingly vibrant colors.

Insul is doing something on a computer. The trench knife is still part of his other hand, tip scratching into the desk. The tarnished metal breathes gold and silver through ghostly smears of Trianon's blood, made vividly crimson by the very fact that it's on the blade and not inside him.

Insul accesses the log-in record. A green thumbprint, given in desperation, eager to remain attached. Trianon's face is next to it, serious and staring straight ahead, shirt buttoned up, hair combed back. No bruises, no cuts. Trapped in time, completely unaware of the present moment.

Insul looks from the photo to the blood-soaked, emaciated guy in a skirt. Does he find it funny?

Click click, logs deleted, cameras off. He grabs Trianon and carries him out of the office.

A glass railing overlooks the lobby, pinatoid sculptures hanging from the ceiling for the museum's anniversary ("Theme: Renewal"). Strong women made of paper, puffy clouds holding monsoon rescue vehicles.

Trianon feels like one of the sculptures, hanging paralyzed above everything. Like a replacement for the cameras. They're gone, so he has to step in. Be a man. Fill the hole in the world. Your mom and I aren't going to be around forever. Do you want to be like grandma? Leeching off the next generation? You need to pay rent. No free rides. Get that emo shit off your face. And while you're at it, morph into a camera, fuse your eyes together into a single monocular orb, retract your bones into a box-like shape, and start remembering EVERYTHING. Now scuttle up the wall. There you go.

In the hallowed silence of the museum, sounds intrude like a troubled heartbeat. The lobby door, banging open. This seems important to record. He makes a clicking sound. Do cameras do that when they see something important? They feel nothing. So he must not be a camera.

Insul looks over the railing, and vertigo punches through Trianon's belly. Just one movement would drop him over the edge. That's a good way to distract people. 100-something pounds of feminized hostage flesh hitting the marble floor. He holds tight, the pink satin sleeves of his jacket whispering as they slide across the back of Insul's rough parka.

Insul laughs and Trianon realizes what he's doing. He loosens his arms and turns his head away from Insul's neck. A cologne of chemicals and violence, recently acquired, but worst of all, his natural odor, something that doesn't go away when Trianon closes his eyes. A normalizing, acclimating smell, not particular offensive, which makes it even more offensive, because it creeps past his filters. Blunt pain is easily recognized and quarantined, but the simple, human

smell of Insul's neck and hands is insidious.

A clang comes from the stairwell. Insul freezes like a dumb animal, exit denied. He whips through the nearest door, pushing through black curtains that sweep over Trianon's face until they emerge in a void.

The Pitch Piano dominates the room, curved and xenoid, lacquered with the same obsidian menace as the pitch drop suspended above it. A bell jar covers the drop, mounted on the case above a sloping hole into the guts of the piano.

The door opens. A cop is in the room, head shaved, cross neck tattoo. A baton hangs from his belt, but his gloved hand drops to the gun holstered on the other side. "Drop the knife." His mask has a clear plastic window on it, mouth covered in a line of bristly hairs, a disorienting close-up like a tiny painting.

Insul tightens his grip on Trianon. "Hostage," he says, raspy from strangulation.

The cop doesn't say anything, just scratches the grip of his gun. Sound from the outside is dampened, leaving them in this alien piano void. Time is measured by capsaicin-raw breathing on one side, and on the other, a soft condensation appearing and fading on the mask's plastic window.

This is a bad place to be. Riding a weapon. Trianon tries to dismount but his movements are slow and anemic, their skin stuck together by drying blood. He slumps back onto Insul's shoulder, his pupil filled with the menacing black seed in the center of the room. The pitch drop moves, the way the earth moves. In ten years it will fall.

The cop's free hand slides up his chest and clicks the body cam. The light turns from green to red.

Insul drops Trianon and lunges.

The gun twists, limbs crushing and locking. Trianon curls up in a ball. Minimize surface area. Compress your lungs another inch against your chest to lower your probability of annihilation by 0.1%.

The trench knife shreds across the cop's reinforced vest, an awkward angle, not deep enough.

The cop rams Insul across the floor, shoes skidding, trying to knock him off his feet. Black holes appear on the ceiling and Trianon covers his ears against the gunshots, eyes clenched tight, a strand of green-stained dark hair caught between his teeth.

The bell jar shatters, glass tinkling into the piano hole. The cop angles for another shot and Insul cracks the brass grip of his knife into the cop's hand. The gun whirls through the air and freezes, motionless and levitating. A beat passes as they stare, then process what they're

seeing, the gun sticking to the tar. Their hands slap for it, a gloved finger almost fucking the trigger guard, then it falls from the pitch strand into the hole below.

It clatters through some kind of internal aleatory mechanism. D, then E, then A, the keys on the piano moving of their own accord. The pitch song gains a few more notes ahead of schedule.

The cop whips out his baton. It extends with a shhk, two metal spikes gleaming at its tip, a rapid clicking sound as they heat the air, nightmare insects gnawing a million miles per hour through satanic circuitry.

Insul steps back, peeling the trench knife from his knuckles, fingers stiff as claws. The cop rotates around him, getting closer with each step. Insul flings the knife. As the cop reflexively smacks it away, Insul grabs the baton by the shaft. His hands snap off, shocked by the silver grab guard strips running along the side. The cop swings and the baton stings Insul's leg and he falls against the piano, keys erupting in the low octaves. The cop wheezes, fogging his mask, and comes in too close, too fast, Insul gets his arm before the baton can come down, they grapple, smashing into the piano together, and as they drop, Insul twists the cop's arm and the metal spikes of the baton jam into the underside of the cop's chin, just under the mask. The cop's mouth bursts open, tongue thrashing with electric current. Saliva spatters the plastic mouth window like rain on a window, turning pink, then red.

Trianon watches as if from inside a glass box. The tour guide voice takes over. As you can see from tonight's exhibits, the human neck is a dangerous vulnerability and not recommended in the current meta. Car windows, hot air pencils, and shock batons dominate the competitive landscape, with no sign of nerfs on the horizon...

The cop kicks Insul hard, knocking him into the piano with a bonging sound. He scrambles up on the case, trying to roll to the other side. The cop gurgles through the blood-flooded mask and grabs Insul's leg, pulling him back across the polished surface, fingers clawing at the lacquer. As he reaches the edge of the piano, he grabs the pitch drop. It stretches, slowing his movement, then snaps from its strand. He slams onto the piano keys, his shoulder blades grinding octaves, the floor looming below his spine. The cop tears his mask off, a handful of blood splatting free, "Time to eat your fucking teeth—"

Insul's hand slaps back, smearing pitch into the cop's face. The cop rips away, exposing nostrils full of tar, lips stuck together, whistling for air through the corner of his mouth, shreds of Insul's palm clinging to the black.

Trianon looks up at the piano. He always wanted to learn. His grandmother had an old Casio keyboard on a little stand. He would play it in her room. But his dad came in one day, headphones around his neck, scratching his beard. *Don't play that shit, you're not Chinese. Your brain only has a limited number of neurons, I'm not letting you spend the pivotal ages of your plasticity with effeminate, obsolete, Oriental soy tech. Once you hit 21 your brain stops learning. I'm not letting you waste your life. Plenty of kids already have an established brand at this age. You could be providing content right now. Fur Elise isn't hot. Zero IP synergy.*

He picks up Trianon's phone. I bought you this nice phone and you don't even make funny videos with it. What is this? 200 pictures of grass? Do you want girls to like you? Hot girls? You don't even post. Well, McDonald's is down the street, and they're hiring.

The piano looms above his head, the gun entombed somewhere inside, junking up the delicate mechanism that derives stochastic information from viscosity. It would be nice to play the piano again, even if it's just fragments of the Casio tutorial songs. He doesn't think his fingers would be very fast though. Insul wouldn't let his fingers be fast.

But if he could play well enough, the gun might fly out of the piano and shoot a hole through Insul's head.

*

Somehow they're in the parking lot, in a shock of cold night air after that suffocating hell. Backseat, dumped like groceries. Insul's tar-stained hand grips the wheel and they peel out.

Siren lights, stars of blood and water, shoot across a parallel road, curving to align with their asphalt. Insul speeds up. A drop of rain falls, streaking across the glass. Soon the constellation of sirens in their rear view is blurred into blue-red liquid noise.

Insul makes a hard left, bounding off the road and onto overgrown grass. The park is dark and underfunded, dead lamp-poles flapping with rotted flags from years of protests, the banner of a defeated army, a homeless camp. Branches snap against the side of the car as they shoot through a grove, plastic debris crackling under the tires. The sirens become indistinct. The rain swallows them.

*

Insul parks in a grimy underpass, discarded hoodies and leggings littering the sidewalk like rapture. He reaches back and pulls Trianon's shirt up, soaked heavy with blood like he just came out of the pool. Trianon tries not to whine but a painful sustained sound grinds in his throat, higher than he would have liked. You did this to me. This is your fault.

Insul spritzes him with the spray bottle, antiseptic burning on the wounds of Hell. He feels like a plant. That's it. You're a plant. Lay back and absorb the pesticide. It hurts, but you're running out of ways to react to pain. What else? Bugs Bunny style ooo ow oo wa EEE OOO AAA?

The spraying stops. His chest feels like it's melting off. A sizzling effervescent field. He pulls on a shirt that only has a few red stains on it. *AFTER THIS WE'RE GETTING TACOS.*

He really does want a taco. And the ability to teleport through walls. Back to Oenone's apartment like this never happened. And he wants to see Insul gunned down. Such agonizing anticipation, waiting for that cruel body to shake, spasm, spurt as it filled with bullets, dropping

to the floor, ending this bad trip. But the bullets went in the ceiling, and he won again.

He catches Insul's eye in the mirror. That lazy look that betrays nothing, even now, skin inflamed with capsaicin, a devil soaking serenely in brimstone. What does he see? A guy in a skirt with runny makeup, pale from blood loss, v-neck shirt with a hilarious slogan, slowly absorbing new continents of blood, one leg resting bruised and fat-sneakered on the back seat, the other fallen to the floor.

He rolls onto his side, vinyl seat smell in his face. His lips move silently, air tapping across his front teeth, alternating E and D sharp until all the white keys on the piano turn black.

X-axis

They collapse inside the beach house, dripping in the cool dark of the foyer. Sand grits into Trianon's shins, kicked from Insul's boots after how many weeks or months.

Eventually the darkness gets up and stumbles down the hall. Look how he needs the wall to stay upright. Leaning hard.

Trianon lingers, a taste of the outside world still on his tongue. Like if he takes one more step back into the house, he'll be trapped forever. He places his hand on the door knob.

Insul looks back, rims so deep under his eyes they look corroded.

A quiet voice, struggling to be heard over the rain machine-gunning against the door. "You don't need me anymore."

"You're right." Insul grabs Trianon's rain-wet hair. "So why don't I bounce your head off the wall?"

"You're hurting me—"

Insul drags him into the kitchen and crushes his face against the window. "You know how you died?"

"What?"

"Swimming. At night." Waves roar in Trianon's ears, but the window is insulated, so it must be blood rushing through his head.

"Nnnnn—"

"Too much trouble. I'll leave you in the car when I burn it. Watch you like an aquarium."

Trianon squirms. "You could have killed me in the museum—" Insul lets go and Trianon falls down, surprised by the sudden release.

"I needed a hostage." The fridge opens, revealing rows of water bottles. The snap of a lid and the throb of water down Insul's throat. "Stop acting like you're important."

"You're the one who kidnapped me."

"I didn't kidnap you. I just didn't kill you."

Trianon edges toward the back door while Insul's back is turned. His shirt is too short to protect the small of his back from the rain-chilled window.

Insul rubs his tar-stripped palm. "You're the one who followed me around trying to impress me. You should have gone home."

"Would you have let me?"

"You saw my face. I didn't have a choice."

"And the easiest solution was killing someone?"

"Easy for me."

Trianon rubs the car window bruise on his throat. "Apparently not." Insane thing to say. But he feels insane.

"If I knew how annoying you'd be, I'd have done the museum by myself."

"Things went pretty fucking bad even with me getting you through two keypads. You'd be a bloodstain on the carpet." Trianon reaches behind himself, feeling for the handle of the back door.

Insul's hands slam against the glass, banging next to Trianon's ears, fast as teleportation through his blurry vision. Hot breath burns on his face. "You think I can let you leave? Live?"

Trianon tries to make his voice slow and reasonable, even as his heart beats madly. "Please. I won't tell anyone. You'll never have to see me again—" Stock hostage language, but there's a reason people say it.

"I bought you a corn dog and you want to turn me in to the police." Insul falls over. "Fuck."

Trianon looks down. Strange to see that guy so weak. He tries the back door. Locked. He could probably find the key in this empty house. But his shirt is so wet and heavy. Another one ruined by the bizarre red stuff that keeps coming out of him. He slides down, joining Insul on the hardwood floor. "We're going to die."

Insul's eyes focus for a second.

Trianon points. "You. Are. Going. To. Die."

"Don't say that."

Trianon giggles. Wind blows every time he moves his head. Wind inside a house.

He's flying again.

*

The bedroom looks like it used to be nice. The floor has dust gaps where furniture rested, the walls are dotted with holes where things were hung.

Trianon lays on the floor, trying to remember how much blood people need. Insul is stripped down to his boxer briefs, doing something with a first aid kit. Cleaning, bandaging.

People do need a pretty good amount of blood. That must be why he feels this horrible, doomed sensation. It was pouring so hard outside, he couldn't have known how much blood was escaping with the rainwater. "I need—" He stops. Who cares what he needs? "We need a doctor, or we'll die."

"Doctors don't know shit. They just want to be rich and look at sluts with medical problems."

"Fair enough..."

His feverish limbs feel like a clock on the floor. Counting down the blood hours. Minutes. Seconds. Eternities. How much time has passed? He sees Insul's bare feet trembling off the edge of the bed. Puke splatters the floor on the other side.

Insul makes a frustrated sound like a sick child. "Water. Get water. Bathroom."

Trianon climbs to his feet and takes an empty glass off the dresser. It looks too thick to break over someone's head. He needs the chaos of broken edges, because he doesn't have confidence in his ability to finish this with a single blow. He hates that Insul has him thinking that way. "When you say you're going to kill me, that isn't very smart. If you were smart, you'd trick me into thinking you were going to let me live."

Insul mumbles, "You didn't really have to go to the bathroom..."

"Huh?"

Insul retches off the side of the bed. Trianon backs up until he feels the bedroom door handle, then carefully turns it. Locked.

He enters the bathroom. The window is too small even for Trianon to crawl through, a vertical pane of frosted glass.

Scissors? Anything? A sliver of soap on the edge of the shower. A frayed tooth brush. A disposable razor, moisturizing strip worn away.

He turns around and looks in the mirror. Who is that? A ruin of eyeliner. Teeth stained pink. Black-green hair slicked to his face by rain. The foundation is washed away, revealing bruises and nicks across his skin.

The AFTER THIS WE'RE GETTING TACOS shirt hangs heavy, trickles of blood drying down his abdomen. He lifts the shirt with trembling fingers.

A vibrant red X is slashed into the pale skin of his chest.

He clutches the edge of the sink. His skin, unmarked by tattoos, piercings, or even childhood scars, now has a huge X on it. For the rest of his life, people will see it when he takes his shirt off. He'll feel it in the shower when he rubs soap across his chest.

He gags, but there's nothing to come up, just rancid bile. He drinks from the faucet. Tap water flows through his mouth, soothing the bacterial irritation in his gums. Such delicious mineral notes. Water steak.

That's better. We can see a little further into the future now.

He opens the cabinet. Anything I can poison you with? Have some dissolved pill with your water, Insul. Bet you can't taste them after all that pepper spray.

The cabinet is empty except for an extra-strength Ibuprofen jar. He checks inside. Only a few left. Nothing he can poison someone with. He swallows two of them, painfully.

He fills the glass from the sink and puts it on the dresser. Insul drinks it quickly, water spilling down his neck. Then he falls back on the bed, eyes shut, completely still.

Trianon moves to the window. A simple latch lock, but a second story drop. He wouldn't be able to tuck or roll or any of that shit, he'd be dropping loose, muscles out of his control.

Even if he survives the drop, Insul might hear the old window opening. Screeeech.

And if Insul doesn't hear the window open, the cold air will wake him. And even with a head start, it doesn't seem like a crippled guy with fall damage on a desolate beach will find help in time. Even if he somehow crawls to another house, and even if someone lives in that house, he feels sick thinking about what Insul would do. Effete beach dwelling elites and their weak-ass survival instincts.

Burning dots sear through his eyes and he sinks to the floor, chest pounding. His toes feel so cold.

"Fuck it," Insul says. "I'm ordering pizza."

You Know What a Love Letter Is?

Insul throws a slice of pizza on the floor. It slaps onto the hardwood, grease spattering. But it fell cheese side up.

Trianon shoves it in his mouth. Glistening pepperoni, salty cheese, precious protein. Not the part that touched the floor. Okay, maybe that part too.

The chain is back on his ankle. His sneakers and jacket are scattered by the door. The light from the window seems overcast. Morning, maybe noon. He tried to stay awake for the pizza delivery but he kept blacking out. Not like he could have done anything. Hey, minimum wage pizza person. Shoot this man to death for me with your Dominoes-issued service revolver.

Insul is up on the bed chewing ravenously, his pizza annihilated from the center outwards, a gory crater of tomato sauce. He wipes his hands on the bed and goes to the bathroom. When Trianon hears pissing, he starts foraging. The chain is knotted tight around the leg of the bed, so he can't move very far. He touches greasy cardboard and feels around for loose globs of cheese and meat, popping them into his mouth just before the bathroom door opens.

Insul limps back to the bed, his baton-smacked leg moving stiffly. The bruise on his ribs surrounds the bandage like a poisoned pond with a raft drifting on it. He pulls a laptop out of the dresser. Desktop blue lights his face up. Click click type type. The screen turns white. Browser?

Insul turns the laptop to face Trianon. He can barely read the bright screen through his blurred vision.

One dead...one in a coma...critical condition...authorities are scouring the area but rains impede the investigation...some question the delayed response...horrific massacre...claim a breakdown in communication...social media hits back at the local council, saying this is exactly why police need additional funds...

Insul pushes the laptop closer.

...be on the lookout...tall male...petite female...female might be in her teens...

"I told you it would work. They really thought you were a girl."

"Cool. Give me some real clothes now."

"My clothes won't fit you."

Trianon tries to pull the pink jacket off and gets stuck. "Fuck! I'm a real human being with fucking feelings!"

“Cringe.”

“Fuck!”

“You’re tiring yourself out. Go to sleep.”

*

A house, not very large, but everything is in there. He tries to avoid his dad. Mom is waiting outside to take him to an audition but he’s not sure how to get to her. But it’s also his grandmother, waiting behind the smoked glass of her car windows. She drove all the way up until the end. Everyone was surprised she died peacefully at home and not in a car crash, a funny thing to joke about as long as you don’t run over a child. At least Oenone is here. Her room is in the house too. He doesn’t want her to meet his dad though.

Didn’t know you had it in you, dad says when he sees this normal looking human female. He makes a joke about Trianon, a little too sarcastic and misjudged. It’s too late to stop them from meeting. Can’t even see them anymore. The hallways are confusing. Keep dropping things. Pick up your phone, Trianon.

The phone isn’t nice. That’s where he broke up with Oenone. Someone made him but he didn’t want to. What a terrible mistake. He tries to type into his phone and explain exactly what happened but he keeps misspelling words and having to delete them. Now he’s in a different app. It’s frozen. He tries to switch back. He just needs to type a few tiny words and everything will be okay. But it’s someone else’s phone now. And he doesn’t remember her number. If he loved her he’d remember a specific set of numbers.

Oenone gives him back rubs until he falls asleep. She reminds him to take his medicine. She saves the letters, actual letters, they wrote each other when they were still long-distance. Her parents take them to nice restaurants and he feels like a real person. She got him out of that house. This house. Into her nice apartment. So why is he back here? Did they have to move? Did everyone get sick again? Then where’s his mask? He needs to get outside. The sun will kill the germs.

There’s just so much shit. When he gets to the door it’s evening. His mom’s been waiting for six hours. It must be extra dark inside the car with its smoked glass. He doesn’t know how to pay for this mistake. Six hours is such a long time to spend in the dark.

*

He wakes up feeling unusually calm. The pizza calories must be working.

It’s dark again. He looks up at the bed. Insul’s back drips with sweat, rising and falling slow as sleep.

Trianon slowly slides open the dresser drawer. Where did you put that delightful historical knife, Insul? And if not a knife, you probably have some other crude instrument of violence in here.

No laptop. It must still be up on the bed.

A scuffed wallet. 40 bucks and a driver's license. Insul is the same age as him. Ridiculous.

The bottom of the drawer holds a yellowed plastic ring-binder. Lined paper covered in crude drawings but extremely dense annotations. A lot of the pages are loose, their holes worn away. He pulls some out and flips through them.

People in black armor wielding AKs. A flat, long building with many windows, some exploding with red and orange colored pencil. Decapitated bodies sit in rows of chairs, their heads placed on their desks with the uniform spacing of hieroglyphics, a name attached to each one.

The papers burst from his hands, slicing through the air. Insul's arm swings back down, hanging from the edge of the bed. Tomato sauce sticks to his chin. "Don't touch that."

"I thought you hated art."

"Not art. It's a plan."

"What plan?"

Insul picks a page off the floor. His expression turns strange, paper warping from the subtle tension in his grip. "You really want to know?"

Better talking than hurting. "Sure."

Insul talks.

*

He's in the high school cafeteria, standing in front of a trash can, holding a graded assignment. An F in painting class. Essay covered in red X's. *Inappropriate subject matter*. He crumples it up and shoves it in the trash.

By the time he walks back to his tray of pizza and applesauce, loud sounds are happening.

Everyone runs except him. Spilled soda washes green and fizzy past his feet, sneakers slapping to the exits. Crunchy emo pop plays from a cheap Bluetooth speaker abandoned on a table.

Blake comes in. He points his rifle at Insul, then grins with recognition. "Hey."

"Hey," Insul says, staring down the barrel.

“What’s up?”

“Just getting some pizza.”

“Nice.” His friend drops the rifle on a table and pulls a handgun from his waistband. “Want to try?”

“Sure.” Insul takes the handgun. The heavy black piece feels huge in his hand. He needs to grow faster.

“Who you thinking?”

Insul looks around the room at the three other students hiding under tables or backed against the wall. “Is this really happening?”

“Yeah. I just couldn’t wait. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

He doesn’t really know that one girl under the table. A senior, too intimidating to get near in everyday life, just another tall, developed, stuck-up bitch he wants to jerk off to, fragments of exposed bra strap, lip gloss, bare thighs burning in the quad under a flash of skirt. But the two boys by the wall were on the list. He remembers what the high school counselor said. *Divide tasks into smaller chunks. This is called chunking.*

He moves closer to the boys. One looks ready to run. Isn’t he in a band? Lead vocalist? The other has 200,000 followers on something and makes funny videos at lunch every day. But not this day. He has his tray held in front of him, a HealthyChoice salad littering the floor at his feet. The tray might repel a bullet. But with how bidding works for high school suppliers, probably not.

Insul looks back at Blake. The senior’s long blond hair is gone, shaved down to a buzz. It’s like looking at a totally different person. But the smile is the same, the one that encouraged Insul to make those shitty drawings that Blake says aren’t shitty. Roblox-looking mass murderers. His heartbeat speeds up, bobbing the gun, sweat slippery on the grip.

“Can I do both?”

“If you think you can.”

Insul looks down the sight at the boy tensed to run, definitely going to run. The other one is pressed against the wall, shirt riding up, exposing the band of his boxers. Running their names like a mantra through his text-only brain is very different from these actual bodies, glistening and desperate and full of pores, mouths that won’t shut up, physically locking his muscles

down, he has to fight it.

Please don't kill me please let me say goodbye to my girlfriend please please please.

They're so afraid. The air of their words is barely strong enough to fit inside quotation marks.

Insul, right?

I always liked you.

Please. Let us go.

All he wanted was for them to look at him. To acknowledge he existed. But now he doesn't feel anything. Then Blake's shaved head rubs into him, whispering something that warms his grip.

The gun jumps in his hand. The wall is red where the boy's head was. The bullet was faster than the boy's idea of running. It's not like a movie. You can't wait for the bullet to come out. If the gun even enters the room, you're already dead. You have to be in a different room or a different life.

A tray bangs on the floor. The other boy runs across the cafeteria, his arms slamming into the crossbar double doors. Insul squeezes the trigger. Two shots in the back feels about right, but the boy drops after one shot and it's over, faster than fantasy.

"Wow, you really did both of them."

Insul blushes. The gun feels like the exact temperature of his hand.

Blake runs a hand across his shaved scalp. "Like it?"

"Uh. Yeah. You look great." Insul wishes he hadn't cut it. Telling faces apart is hard, especially if you never look people in the eye. But he always knew his friend, that big blond mane whipping as he headbanged to a secret song. Girls had hair like that, but none of them moved the way he did, or maybe some of them did but Insul couldn't get close to them the same way he could follow guys around for the excruciating time it took for him to learn by rote a handhold onto the precipice of another human being. The most he could do for a girl like that was keep her off the list, which he fantasized about telling them, as the first words he ever spoke to them, cool and confident. But when he saw that leonine blur, he felt like he was standing in the exact part of the universe where he was supposed to be.

"Thanks, man. I need that look, you know. Straight to the satellites."

"Yeah."

Muffled crying comes from the table next to them.

“You should give that back though. I don’t want you getting in trouble.”

Insul returns the gun grip-first, muzzle pointed at his belly. Blake wipes it down and slides it into his waistband. “I hope you learned a lot about life and stuff from this.”

Thump thump. Thump thump. Insul licks his gun-dry lips and stares at Blake, trying to open his mouth, trying to say something as the molten core of the earth glows under the linoleum, violently warm, melting the fat along the tendons of his thighs. Then they hear a shuffling, sticky noise, like skin on cafeteria floor. Blake shoulders his rifle and looks under the table. The girl isn’t there anymore.

“Hey baby,” he says, walking down the row of tables. “Wanna repopulate the earth?”

She bolts from a table close to the doors, hair like his before he buzzed it, so to Insul’s eye, it almost seems like Blake is hunting a feminized clone of himself. The soft flesh of her calf erupts and she skids across the floor, blood squirting from a hole in her leg.

Blake walks over and they stare at each other, each agonized breath seeming to suck the air out of the room and back again, almost lulling in its harsh rhythm. She reaches inside her blouse and pulls out a thin gold chain with a cross on it, arranging it neatly on her chest. In a strangely clear voice, she says, “I forgive you.”

“Seriously? You’re going out like that? Kissing the ass of the person who killed you?”

“I—”

A flower of hamburger bursts from the magazine-perfect femininity of her face, instant as magic.

Insul stares at the volcano of teen gore on the floor. He was supposed to cut their heads off. That’s what the machete is for. Is there something wrong with him? Some weakness he didn’t see?

Blake looks around the room and gives a thumbs up. “Perfect clear.” His body is shaking but his face is empty.

Insul says, “I don’t count?”

The black hole of the rifle swings toward him. Blake’s eyes are like something frozen in outer space. Insul’s throat itches, propellant fumes mixed with artificial pizza flavor. His stomach is so tight it feels like he’s going to snap in half.

The rifle pulls back. “Nah. It would be like shooting myself. See you soon, brother.”

Then he's gone, crossbar doors clanging shut.

It's a Bullet From a Fucking Gun, Fucker

Insul gets on his hands and knees and waits for something to come out of him. But nothing does. People are supposed to feel bad when other people die. But he doesn't feel sick at all. This was the best day of his life.

A bloody pool spreads from under the table, impossibly huge and bright, spurting through a ruin of teeth and windpipe that belonged to Daniella. It's like he's seeing color for the first time.

He puts his hand in the blood. It seems to sink forever. He still feels Blake's hand on his shoulder, relaxing his aim, making it easy to pull the trigger. Ocean warmth explodes in his chest, metallic tang melting into sugar water.

He closes his eyes and tries to visualize Blake's face. Still dark and empty inside his head. The great sacrifices of this day were supposed to flick on a light and show him what everyone else can see. But now his friend isn't here.

The hard floor hits his palm. He lifts his hand and a white print of emptiness stares back. The blood swallows it, once more placid and undisturbed. He needs to find Blake. He needs to find his face.

Gunshot. Big reverb. The gym? Nice open area. In the plans, he wrote down exactly how many feet wide and long it was. *A true test of long-range competency*, Blake scrawled next to Insul's cramped numbers.

Red and blue lights flash through the high windows, almost invisible by the bright sun of midday.

Insul feels a sense of urgency. He puts his blood-soaked finger inside his mouth. It tastes real, makes his organs squirm, it isn't a fake projection like everything else they beam at his brain. Night without dreams, meat-faced actors, food that doesn't taste like anything. Everyone reacting to something that isn't there.

No more gunshots. Everything is silent. Not even the sound of running. He sucks desperately on another finger, trying to lose himself in the taste. But the flavor is fading rapidly.

The rifle rattles outside, pecking naked at the sky. A chorus of gunfire comes from every corner of the world. Insul clutches his heart, head sinking to the floor. The tile burns cold on his scalp. Maybe he can freeze his brain at this moment in time, before the simulation realigns itself.

Heavy boots stomp through the halls. He slides under a table, assuming the position of a victim. He's still trying to remember the face of his friend when the doors burst open.

*

The room is stale with the smell of pizza. Wind rattles the pane, then is silent for a long time, til the house itself is heard.

Insul stares at a point on the ceiling, as if the entire memory is contained there. "I don't understand why he didn't take me with him. We did all those drawings and flowcharts together."

Trianon remembers that shooting. It wasn't that far from where he went to high school. "You killed two kids and got away with it?"

"I was a kid too."

"So it's fair?"

"They would have grown up and killed me slower. That's how the world works."

"How did you not get caught? You had all this documentation—"

"He wiped his computer and burned everything else in the backyard. Except the binder at my house. No one knew about that."

Insul flips through the drawings. "They knew we were friends though. Had to change schools. I thought I would do it there. Be like him."

"But you didn't."

"You have to wait for the right feeling."

"Can't believe you passed up your life's calling."

"Shut up. I could have. You know that. But they were nothing. It was about us. He was supposed to take me with him."

It's weird hearing Insul talk so much. Trianon keeps quiet, gnawing on a fat chunk of crust that fell off the bed.

"It was the only creative thing I ever did. I memorized the entire school. The museum felt like that. Thinking of different ways to get inside."

Trianon laughs hysterically, cheeks puffy with chewed dough. "No wonder the museum went to shit." He holds up a page. "School shooters write a bible counting every bullet you're going to shoot but your exit plan is just," He mimes a gun pointing at his head. "Pfffsh."

"We had a plan."

"Yeah?" Trianon reads from the page. "To create the perfect world, a rigid caste system must be

developed. The world will be divided into Shooters, Bullet Wives, and Meat. Each high school will be fortified and turned into a hostage harem. The optics of teenagers will tie the cops hands, creating the impossible paradox that applies critical pressure to society's hypocrisies." Insul reaches for the page but Trianon scoots back with a clink of his chain.

"The Bullet Wife loads the Shooter's Guns so he can fire without stopping. The Bullet Wife is the Soul to someone who has no Soul—"

Insul grabs the page and it tears in half. He stares at Trianon intensely, almost vibrating.

Trianon stares back as best he can through his drooped eyes. "Your brain is fucked."

"Maybe. But it's my brain. No one offered me a different one."

"Is your brain going to kill me?"

Insul doesn't answer.

"You don't know, do you."

"Shut up." Insul takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. His face relaxes, going blank again.

Trianon laughs. "Which Insul is it now? The one who pretends to be a human being? The one who makes weird little jokes to fuck with me? The one who treats me like an insect? The one who orders fucking pizza? You're not very good. Just enough for people to give you the benefit of the doubt. Barely enough. Not enough. No wonder you kill people. How many is it now? Not counting the kids in the cafeteria."

Emotionless voice. "The old woman hit on me. At a tourist seafood place around here. I needed a place. It was fine for a few days. Then she wanted me to fuck her in front of some old guy. I said, let's go swimming, and left her in the water."

Trianon pauses. "And the desert house?"

"He sent an invitation to her. I went instead. Free food. Saw him talking about how much the painting was worth. I cut it when everyone was out by the pool. Hid in the wine cellar. Fell asleep. Stayed there until people left. Went upstairs and put him in the pool. Thought about living there instead."

"Then I showed up. But you didn't kill me."

"I tried."

"Why'd you stop?"

“The museum—”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I was bored. You kept making those stupid little faces. Your eyes kept doing this thing—”

“What thing?”

Insul reaches for Trianon’s neck, stopping just short of touching it. Trianon jerks back, the manacle cutting into his ankle. Insul laughs, that high laugh that startled Trianon by the pool. Then his face goes blank again. “That thing.”

“Fuck you. No wonder you don’t have any friends.”

Only Insul’s purple-rimmed eyes are visible over the side of the bed, narrowed almost to slits. “He was my friend.”

“And he shot himself. You must have been a great friend.”

Insul’s hand shoots off the bed and grabs Trianon’s throat, for real this time, rough with black pitch. “It’s what you do after a school shooting. You wouldn’t understand, you just take it, you probably never even touched a gun.”

Trianon digs his fingers into Insul’s hand. “Have to say, this feels like pussy shit compared to the car window.”

Insul’s voice has an adolescent timbre, his neck burnt from strangulation. “If I had a gun I’d blow your face off, emo faggot—”

Trianon laughs, but in Insul’s grip it’s mostly broken air stuttering from his mouth. “Yeah, I was, and my dad hit me for it. You think you’re edgy? Shocking? You’re fucking boring—”

Insul’s hand slips an inch up Trianon’s slender neck, forcing his chin up. Trianon stares him in the face, blinking away shards of black eyeliner. “Is your mask off now?”

No response, just a tighter grip, squeezing tears down Trianon’s cheeks. He strains to speak, rage pushing the syllables through Insul’s iron fingers. “Or maybe there’s nothing there at all.”

Suddenly he can’t breathe, but not because of the strangulation. Something is pressed against his face, wet and suffocating. Insul’s mouth covers his, the grip around his neck loosening.

Trianon tries to shut his mouth but his jaw is too weak. His tongue resists Insul’s, twisting under the crushing muscle, then Insul grabs his chin and pulls it open like a little door, forcing his tongue down Trianon’s throat.

Trianon kicks wildly, skirt flapping, chain rattling from his skinny ankle. Insul slides off the bed and pins him to the floor. Mucus trickles from Trianon's nose, salty and gross on his lips. Insul kisses through it, invading his face like an animal.

Trianon slowly and agonizingly gathers his fingers into a fist. One, two, three, four, five.

He punches Insul in the throat. Insul gags, his back arching as he strains for air. Wet spots of eyeliner stain his face like black mold, mouth smeared with Trianon's pink lipstick. Trianon stretches with his toes and pulls Insul's jeans off the bed. He shakes them until a keychain falls out. He reaches around the bed leg where the chain is coiled and feels a padlock behind it.

He looks back. Insul stares at him with anaerobic intensity, then brings two fingers up to his mouth and shoves them back hard. He pukes pizza sludge across the hardwood, warm chunks hitting Trianon's bare feet.

Insul tries to say something immediately after, but his lungs are still sucking in air. He points at Trianon with the same two saliva-wet fingers and cocks them with his thumb, shooting silently as his arm arcs back and drops to the floor.

Batsu

Rain comes down hard, shattering into white noise on the roof.

He's surprised Insul hasn't retaliated. He jumps every time the dark ocean wind rattles the windowpanes. It's crazy to live on a beach, flash floods and hurricanes, riprap funding cut nearly to zero, erosion eating your investment. He's paranoid this isn't an ordinary storm, that the sea is swallowing them.

Finally he manages to speak. "Are you gay?"

Insul finishes scrubbing the floor and tosses the towel aside. "There's no such thing as gay or straight. There's only who gives the pain and who has to take it."

"I'm tired of taking it."

"You got beat up a lot, didn't you."

"Apparently I still do." Trianon rubs his face, eyeliner staining his fingers.

"I bet you wore shit like that in high school."

Trianon turns red. "I couldn't see any difference between me and the other guys but I was the only one people called a faggot."

Insul sits a few feet away, head resting on his knees. That watchful pose, only his eyes visible, tired or angry or surveillant, impossible to say. Trianon keeps talking.

"It's so stupid. I even played an emo in those high school movies..." Well, some vaguely goth eboy Halloween store corporate cartoon amalgam of an alt kid, just a few lines, all played for laughs. Who the fuck was even still watching those Disneycore movies, relics of an age when the internet was too young to provide every kid even a twisted alternative to what their parents showed them. Gated community parent-cults trying to surround their kids with images of a world that never existed, classrooms spacious and sunny, untouched by viruses and flooding.

He thought his dad would be proud of him at least, after yelling at him for so long about getting a job. *"That's not real acting. Do you even have a familiarity with the historic greats of cinema? Taxi Driver? Boondock Saints? Probably never even heard of them. Doing your Disney shit, mom dragging you around to those trash gigs saying you could be a model. You're not a model, you're a man."*

"Did he hit you?"

"You know he did."

"He shouldn't have done that."

Trianon laughs incredulously. "Are you serious? After everything you did to me?"

"It's not the same."

"It feels the same."

"I'm not your fucking dad."

"Then why do you keep hurting me?"

"I was trying to make it easier to kill you." His thumb brushes Trianon's lip, tender against the unbrushed gums. "I kept trying to work myself up. Erase your face. Beat it in with a tennis racket. Pepper spray. But it keeps coming back."

Trianon is silent, cheeks throbbing. Then he says, "What now?"

No answer.

"What is this, your hostage harem? Why won't you let me go?"

Insul curls up tighter, his eyes barely visible under chunks of sweat-sculpted brown hair. "The first night you were here, I had a hallucination of you in the bathroom. That's why I fell off the bed. I felt the house under me."

"I thought you couldn't see pictures."

"It wasn't pictures. It was a feeling. You know. When you're in a dark room and remember where a table is so you don't hit it."

"Okay."

"You were down in the bathroom and I felt strong. Like you were inside my body. No one else knew about you. You were alone. And I made you that way."

Trianon fights back tears of rage. "Like you made me this way?" He pulls his shirt up, exposing the red X.

Insul's legs unwind to the side, his hand propping him against the hardwood. "I tried not to go deeper."

"Wow, thanks." Trianon pulls the shirt down, exhaling sharply as the fabric rubs his diagonal wounds. "I'm just another painting for you to mutilate."

"You're not a painting."

Trianon stares at the wall, his voice flat and numb. "Doesn't matter. You'll kill me when you're bored."

"Don't tell me what to do."

Trianon scratches his arm, flakes of dried blood getting under his fingernails. Need a shower so bad. Need to re-draw the map of his body, distorted by annexed incisions and balkanized bruises.

"I don't understand. You can do whatever you want and I can't stop you." Trianon swallows as he admits it. "So why are you talking to me about it?"

"...because you should like me."

"An emo guy and a school shooter. Romance of the century."

"You're making fun of me."

"It's the only thing I can do. You're stronger than me."

"You keep defending yourself with this rational, superior voice, but you were on the outside like me. You just did a better job pretending." Insul slides closer.

Trianon tries to filter out Insul's voice, that low, calm drone insinuating itself into his temporal lobe. But the throat damage gives it just enough of a rough edge to catch like clinging burrs.

"I'm not pretending."

"Either way. You're wasting your time. They'll project whatever they want on you anyway. That's why I can show up anywhere and shit like this happens." Insul gestures at the house. "I was her fantasy. She let me into her life. Wrinkled bitch." His eyes are dark in the low lighting. "You tried so hard to look like them. But you never felt like them. That's why they beat you up. You were just a shitty copy of them."

Trianon's eyelids flutter against the pull of his muscular disease. "I had a real life. Then you show up and beat the shit out of me and use me to break into the museum where I thought I was going to be the youngest art conservator in forever and have a real job and friends and be a normal fucking person and now I'm chained up covered in blood eating pizza off the floor."

The wall lamp goes out, and the slit of orange light under the door goes dark.

Trianon has the surreal feeling that his emotions somehow overloaded the electrical grid. No. You know the truth. A SWAT team killed the power and they're about to storm the house in IR

goggles. It was inevitable. Money buys for rectification. Remember when your dad got swatted after he picked a fight with some guy in chat? They smashed through the front door of your suburban house and didn't leave for hours even after they realized. What extinction awaits after three murders and millions of dollars in ruined paintings? You know they'd fire indiscriminately, living out their bloodsport LARP fantasies. Who can survive all those abbreviations? The room that Insul stripped of all aesthetic would be decorated with your guts.

He listens to the floorboards. But the creaking is rhythmic, suckled by the low pressure system building on the sea, beautiful in its neutrality.

Insul's voice carries in the dark, its natural medium. "The house is solar powered." How many overcast days has it been? It feels like one long, endless gloom, a hole torn sideways in time by his kidnapping.

Trianon tries to breathe slower. He knows what a panic attack feels like. He can't be that way around Insul. He'd go psychotic. And if he keeps breathing this loud, he'll lose track of where Insul is. The dark feels full of airborne particles, Insul atomized and tingling on his vellus hairs.

The mattress sags next to him. Trianon crosses his arms, trying to protect as much of his body as possible. The X radiates on his chest, reinforcing the pattern.

In The Cut

The room fills with a cold glow. Insul flipped the laptop screen up. Now he's typing. Trianon's eyes are too unsynchronized to see what it is.

Now that Insul's paralyzing attention is off him, he realizes the background thing that's been irritating him under the blunter stressors. Even after Insul's scrubbing, a putrid, acidic odor lingers in the air. He covers his nose, trying not to gag. His hands stink of blood but it's a cleaner smell than regurgitated pizza.

Insul looks up. "Why are you doing that?"

"Smells bad."

Insul goes to the window. He pauses, staring at his reflection, then pushes it up. Rain spatters the hardwood floor, cold and violent on Trianon's exposed skin. He hides behind the bed and looks at the floor, absurdly thinking of the water damage. But it doesn't matter because we aren't really here. This is a dead person's house. Dead people.

Insul slides across the bed, landing next to him. Trianon jerks away, into the path of the storm rushing from the open window. His teeth chatter, rainwater striking his skin in irregular, unanticipated patterns. "I don't understand why you chose to be this way. You obviously could have made friends or got a girlfriend or something."

"Obviously?"

"Like, you're not deformed."

Insul leans closer, his body shielding Trianon from the rain. "Are you saying I look good?"

"That's not what I said."

"If this face didn't belong to me. Would you think it looked good?" The blue light of the laptop screen falls across Insul's cheekbones.

"If it weren't the face of a psycho, maybe."

"Describe it."

"No."

"Pretend I'm a painting."

Keep him talking. Tire him out. "This arrogant, soulless mask, uh, infuses the viewer with visceral disgust, like a bug, um, an insect, butterfly wing spots mimicking a human face."

“That was pretty good.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Do more.”

“The cruel features of a school shooter allowed to thrive beyond his natural lifespan. Marinated in a toxic, pollution-curdled womb, this elongated homunculus personifies the total emptiness of late capitalism.”

“Okay. But do you think I’m hot?”

“Fuck off.”

“You would have said no if you meant no.”

“No one will ever care about you. No matter what you look like.”

Insul flinches, then finds his usual blank expression. But something keeps his head back a little, lip twisted uncomfortably. A drop of rain gets past, slapping Trianon just below the eye, cold and startling. He trembles, suddenly unable to control himself. Insul stays frozen for a few seconds, then puts his hand on Trianon’s face.

“Don’t touch me—”

Bruises flare as Insul traces down his neck, connecting the constellation of this week’s violence.

“It hurts my fucking soul when you touch me, I know you’re just going to hurt me—”

“I’ll go slower. I won’t scare you.”

Trianon’s voice drops to a whisper, the only way to keep from stuttering. “You do scare me. You really, really do...”

Insul sniffs his neck, sour with sweat, then drops to his chest, inhaling the reek of his crimson-stained shirt. Trianon flushes and tries to push him away, but Insul takes his hand and licks the dried blood off his inner wrist.

Trianon looks away, afraid Insul will see something in his face. This softness is like poison, a betrayal of endorphins. He tenses his body against the sensation, trying to disappear inside himself. Oenone is soft. Imagine her instead. Her arms around you, tucking you against her chest, her soft fancy shampoo-smelling hair...

He sees the room he grew up in. Trying to masturbate but his dad is yelling on the other side of

the wall. It's hard to tell if he's hamming for the stream or got tilted at some random commenter. That's why you pulled a blanket over your head. Trying to finish before you lost momentum, soaked in intrusive thoughts like a bird in an oil slick, overheating, the blanket is too hot, you're suffocating.

He returns to the present moment. Insul is above him, a warm shield of sinew and bone, rain pounding against that tall back. He's watching Trianon's face like he was waiting for him to open his eyes.

"Stop," Trianon whispers.

Insul touches the moist shirt clinging to Trianon's bony body. He's crawling inside, all the way down to the heart, but that doesn't mean anything. That's the first thing anyone can break, that blind chunk of squirting meat, anyone who makes you feel bad, chipping away at your mortality, whether you interact for a few seconds or a lifetime. But his head under Trianon's shirt, that's painfully specific, more than a mere shock to his heart or lungs, more than a parental slap or a spritz of water to the face, swept into the subconscious of classical conditioning. It's the invasion of memory. It's bestiality.

Trianon gasps as Insul licks the X, starting at the tiniest slit where the knife began its first slash. The cut leaks into Insul's taste buds, wound-nipples oozing a milk of water, salt, protein. Trianon falls back on the floor, rain spattering his face helplessly. His nerves are supposed to be contiguous, humming hidden and well-behaved, not divided and exposed along artificial diagonals. Delicate strands of collagen snap under Insul's tongue, keeping the skin raw and unhealed, forcing the scar.

Insul licks faster and faster, rough and rasping with repetition. A new wetness spreads across Trianon's chest, thicker and hotter than the feeble bacterial slick of saliva. Insul laps along the upper tip of the X, face flushed from being under Trianon's shirt, chin smeared with lipstick and blood.

Trianon grabs Insul's head, too weak to push it away. His hand rests there, clinging to the wild brown hair. "I think you're really going to hurt me."

Insul's muscles tense around Trianon, tight enough to vibrate. He rolls off and bites down on his own hand. Wind fills the silence, rainwater slithering in clear tendrils around them.

He releases his hand, blood welling in the bite mark. His tongue hangs from his mouth, painted red. "I tried."

Trianon's feet skid across the floor, struggling for traction. He crawls on his back toward the window, curtains rippling like tethered ghosts. Rainwater hits his chest, running through the cuts, washing away Insul's itchy saliva.

The night beyond the sill is ancient and wet as a million years ago, above a beach dark as a

distant moon. It feels like the X on his chest, naked and unprophecized, unbearable to contain.

Somehow he's on the bed, Insul kneeling next to him. He whines at the sting of antiseptic wipes. They seem soaked in some essential extract of Insul, the purifying venom of an insect whose enzymes kill or cure depending on the dose.

Here come the bandages, secure and tight on Trianon's chest, the X slowly wrapped away. With the heart removed, embalming can commence. Dub dub. Dub dub. He can still hear it beating in a jar somewhere, unable to receive the signal from his brain telling it to stop.

"You're not going to die," Insul says.

Trianon starts breathing again, then feels ashamed of taking comfort. He hides under the black cloud of his hair, heavy with rain, teeth clenched against the tears building behind his eyes, chest still burning under the bandages.

Neap Tide

He can't trick himself into thinking he's asleep anymore. Morning has painted too much of the room into existence. He lays in bed, eyes dead and staring at the wall, compulsively tracing the cuts on his chest. Their true texture is blunted by the bandages, but fire follows his fingertips.

The chain hangs over the side of the bed, his ankle pulled toward the edge. It doesn't seem to belong to him anymore, his foot a punitive weight, ownership ending at the manacle.

Insul woke up sometime in the last hour and gathered the loose pages of his school shooter bible together. He's been reading them silently on the other side of the bed.

Trianon finally speaks. "You hurt it."

Insul turns toward him, the bed creaking with his shifted weight.

"It needs to heal, if you keep hurting it, it'll leave a scar..."

Insul rests his head on Trianon's shoulder. "I'm not going to let it heal right."

Trianon's lip trembles, his chest suddenly cold. "Please don't change me," he whispers, barely aware he's saying it.

Insul tilts Trianon's head back so they're close enough to breathe on each other. He studies the guy's drooping features intently. Something between horror and excitement grows on his face. "I did change you." Trianon feels something hard growing in the back of his skirt.

He lays there, paralyzed. He'd assumed Insul didn't function down there, his urges sublimated into vandalistic fetishism. This is too personal. This is—

"Even if your cuts heal perfectly, you won't be the same. Every day you'll make mistakes because of me. You won't be as confident."

Trianon can't hold the tears back any longer, his lips tearing open with the poison air he was holding inside, shaking with incoherent throat sounds. He tries to pull free, willing to fall off the bed if he has to, but Insul holds him tight. Their bodies twitch together in jagged humidity, until Insul finally rolls back, panting.

Trianon stares at the wall, reciting silently to himself: *My name is Trianon. I am a person. I am 26 years old. I am smart. I am capable. I have a job. I have a girlfriend who—I have—*

He locks up, thinking of that night on the bathroom floor. The entire world deleted, only his phone glowing in the darkness, Insul grappling him like a sleep terror. And he was with her, in the aquarium. Trying to explain. Trying to get away. What did he say? He can barely remember. Insul's presence was too loud. He has nightmares of Oenone dying in the aquarium, over and

over. Sometimes in the museum, paintings full of water, aquariums dirty with oil paint. No wonder the shark died.

It always ends with a conversation where no words are audible so he can't pick the right ones, inevitably disgorging a mistake that sickens the air, and then it's too late, she's dead. Sometimes Trianon dies too. Sometimes not. Sometimes the blood ends up in the aquarium. Pressed through the glass. But there are never any fish. The tanks are always empty.

He feels something crawling on his skin. All over his arms and legs, up his nose, inside his ears. He spasms and flips over. Insul is still on the other side of the bed, laying on the crumpled pages from the binder.

Trianon laughs hysterically. He grabs himself, nails digging into his arms.

Insul cocks his head. "What are you doing?"

"I thought your hands were on me, I keep feeling it like ants."

Insul is silent for a moment. "After everything I did to you on the drive up, I was surprised how long you kept it together." He tucks a loose strand of green hair behind Trianon's ear. "But you're different now."

"I thought, I thought I could get away, and everything would be the same again."

"What changed?"

"You k-killed her, you killed them all, you—" He can't say it, the thing less than death, the thing he has to live with. His chest throbs, raw under the bandages.

"People die all the time. Cops kill random people and go back to their families and have barbecues and movie nights and go to restaurants and the waitress smiles at them and takes their order and it's normal. It just freaked you out because it happened in a nice building."

"It was like a movie. A nightmare."

Insul looks at one of his drawings. An essay by his friend descends in a dense, inky pillar, flanked by uniformed teens with AKs. "When you live in a failed state, anything is possible."

"Inspirational."

Something was adhered to the wall once, leaving a rectangular stain. Trianon watches it for a long time. Fuck Netflix.

*

When he stops zoning out, he realizes a weight has left the bed. He hears the shower running.

Warmth grows on his tailbone, the shirt too short to cover it. Daylight radiates through the curtains. He can't believe the sun still exists.

Insul emerges naked from the bathroom, drops of water trickling down his bruised ribs. Running out of dead people clothes? But the sarcastic, rational voice is so thin and distant now, a wheedling worm at the bottom of a well.

Insul limps over to the window and spreads the curtains, leaning against the frame and letting the sun dry him. It glows around the edges of his legs, catching on light vellus hairs. The cord burn around his neck almost looks like a necklace.

Molten droplets roll down the slender, taut arms (iron rods, you know this). Trianon rolls back to face the wall again. Sun toasts his bare thighs. He isn't used to light hitting that part of his body, sensitive and pale. He pulls his skirt down. This will be dead person clothing soon.

*

"When will you stop looking at the wall?"

Insul hovers over him, corroded by haze. He's wearing the orange parka again, a bare leg kneeling on the side of the bed. He looks almost uncomfortable. Trianon stares up at him blankly.

Why are we switching, Insul? Your face used to be the empty one. Did you chew something living out of me and put it into you?

"Come on." Insul picks Trianon up and carries him down the stairs. Flying again. The ceiling is unusually close to his head. Like when adults would lift him as a small child, spinning him around the room. He always hated that. Adults never realize how big they are.

This is the theme park version of the house, traveling on rails, locked in by Insul's arms. They arrive at the kitchen and Insul places him on the table so his legs are hanging off it.

Blood smears the floor from last night. There's a trail along the wall, where Trianon tried to get out the back door. The glass no longer looks out on rainy black void. He sees the ocean behind the house for the first time. It doesn't seem real, or if it is, doesn't seem like he could be allowed to access it.

Insul looks through the cupboards. Bottles of artisanal vinegar and oil owned by the dead lady. Nothing that looks like food, except for a carton of oatmeal. Insul makes a bowl in the microwave and places it on the table.

"You eat oatmeal every day? You don't put anything in it?"

"It all tastes the same."

Trianon thinks back to the broken CD shards on his car floor. Your sensory cage. Music and meat, lossy and leached. Without satisfaction.

Insul eats, feeding Trianon every third spoonful. His throat is weak but the slimy mush is easier to swallow than most foods would be. Until his mouth starts drying up.

"Spit it out," Insul says. Trianon gives up, allowing the soggy mass to fall into the bowl.

*

Trianon slides down the back of the parka. Insul hooks his arms under Trianon's knees and lifts him up again. Bony arms hang over his shoulders, too feeble or repulsed to form a grip.

The door slams and they're outside. Trianon blinks, the sun shockingly bright. He looks around for people or other houses but he's trapped in a blur of beach and sky and Insul, the only things big enough to register to his fatigued eyes.

Insul puts him down. His bare feet sink into the warm sand. It feels so good. He falls on all fours, digging his fingers in. Saltwater grows in the corners of his eyes, clamoring to be reunited with the tidal field roaring in front of him.

He finally stands up, surprised his legs still work. His skirt flutters in the salt breeze. The flimsy fabric of his shirt undulates, gently nuzzling his wounded chest.

"I never saw the beach until I moved into that lady's house." Insul stands in the orange parka, naked legs covered in bruises.

"Like, ever?"

"Never."

"How is that possible?"

Insul shrugs. "I saw pictures of it. That seemed fine. And you can only go to the beach if someone takes you to the beach. Or if you go to it."

"Can't argue with that."

They walk along the shore. Insul throws rocks that seem to disappear as soon as they leave his hand, too small and fast for Trianon's broken eyes. Ocean foam rushes past his bare feet, turning clear and flowing back. He stares down, hypnotized. It seems like such a small amount of water, but it doesn't behave like it should. Something about the time it takes to flow back, a

pause that catches him by surprise. This fragile film is connected to an unimaginably vast body of water, steeped in leviathans of gravity.

They come to a lengthy tangle of seaweed and plastic and something died or a million things died, smells bad enough to make him reel, he can't believe his legs are dropping away so easily, he keeps crumbling at the slightest thing. But nothing in his other life is here. No games, no phone, no job, no girlfriend. He's had to experience this nightmare in real time, which feels completely unreal, this unfiltered sensation of his brain and body cannibalizing itself.

Insul catches him before he falls. Foam bubbles in the wet sand around his twisted feet. He tries to straighten them but he just slides down more, dead weight in those arms. Insul cups his face, tilting it to catch the light. Trianon's eyes water against the brightness, drifting loose in their sockets.

"I've never seen your face in the sun."

Trianon's skin shines like bleached bone, unwashed black hair fluttering.

"Your eyes look gray. Dirty gray."

Oenone always called them blue. He feels confused.

"It's nice. Like glass."

Insul is illuminated as well. Far too much. It was easier in the dark, the dim lighting, the haze of his atrophied vision. But in the sun, Insul's cheekbones and messy brown hair and sullen eyes can assemble themselves into a single image. His irises are stagnant water tinted warm with minerals.

This feels too much like it's becoming a memory.

Trianon tears away, stumbling across the sand until he falls. This heat, like his pale skin is drinking too much of the sun.

He hears footsteps crunch on the sand behind him.

"Please don't hurt me," Trianon says, voice cracking.

Insul's arms slide tight across Trianon's bandaged chest. He rests his head on Trianon's shoulder.

"Relax. I'm not going to hurt you. Today."

Trianon feels a surge of relief, followed by shame. He tries to shift away, but the sand absorbs his weak movement. He gives up, slumping against the chest behind him, solid as smoothed

stone.

Insul says, "I didn't think we'd make it. At the museum."

"You didn't seem worried."

"My face doesn't work very well. It's the opposite of yours. You can't hide how you feel about me. That's why it hurts to look."

The sun no longer comforts Trianon. He feels feverish. Bacterial and unwashed and sticky with violence. Maybe he has an infection.

"But I keep looking for it."

"For what? Fear? Pain?" Trianon spits the words out.

"To see if you like me yet."

Silence.

Insul's arms are wrapped around Trianon's waist, so he feels the stomach clenching. He sighs into Trianon's hair. "Exactly. I know I disgust you."

Trianon's heart pulses directly into Insul's wrist. He tries to slow it down, to disentangle his circulatory system from Insul's.

"But after everything I've done to you, if you could ever feel that about me. It would mean I'm not ugly. So I'll keep trying."

Saltwater seeps from Trianon's eyes. That must be where all the color is going. The blue is being diluted.

Waves crash to shore, blurry as static.

Season Pass

He feeds me from his hand like a bird, nuts or other efficient, tasteless things, watching carefully as if measuring exactly how many calories are going into me, keeping me from growing too strong, nurturing my muscle disease.

Sometimes in the haze of hunger my lips graze his hand and I feel sick and the food almost comes back up. His hand is rough where the tar stripped it, feeling like his hand should feel, rough and cruel and bad, but there are soft parts where the skin wasn't torn away and those parts feel the worst.

Sometimes there's a bowl of oatmeal. Sometimes he just drops nuts or seeds on the floor. A lot of people want pets until they have one. In those cases, they donate them to shelters, but that's when your pet isn't a witness to murder.

I got to brush my teeth today. I liked that. I like being clean.

*

Trianon pays attention to how fast Insul can limp with the baton injury, listens to the timbre warm back into that strangled throat. Every morning he tries to psyche himself into running away. But Insul is stronger than him, even in a reduced state, so he lays there like a demoralized animal, itching in the sweaty, bloodstained clothes, smelling worse by the day. But the shower is off-limits. When Insul wakes up, he sniffs Trianon all over like an animal, then rests his head on Trianon's chest, pressing into the center of the X. Sometimes he falls back asleep, Trianon's lungs struggling to inflate under the dead weight, atrophied muscles soft and pathetic under Insul's more real and correct feeling density.

Insul sleeps a lot, still stiff from the museum. When he's not sleeping, he plays emulated Perfect Dark on his laptop.

"These could have been real people," Insul says, blowing away a masked shock trooper.

"What?"

"Game Boy camera. You were supposed to be able to use the Transfer Pak to put them on the N64 and put them on character's faces. But you can't do that."

"Why?"

"Columbine."

"Oh yeah."

"I wonder if anything like that happened after what my friend did."

“People were pretty upset.”

“It wasn’t the same though. People don’t care about school shootings anymore. The moms and dads cry but it’s just another weekend for everyone else. It wasn’t enough.”

“Are you complaining about the school shooting not being violent enough?”

“One day,” Insul says.

Trianon doesn’t ask him what he means. He’s reading the water-damaged pages on the floor. School shooter manifestos aren’t his ideal reading material, but he needs to make that civilized part of his brain light up again. Because he’s starting not to feel human anymore.

Insul puts the controller down. “What are you doing?”

“Isn’t this that one game?” Trianon studies a logo sketched on the page in crayon.

“It was better than Counter-Strike.”

“Yeah. I played it too.”

“I probably killed you in it.”

“Probably.”

“Were you good?”

“I was okay.”

Trianon brings the page closer so he can see. Familiar guns. AK-47. Shotgun. The ultra-expensive \$10k Manifest Destiny. Small capacity, but 100% penetration through multiple surfaces. He remembers a lucky shot where he killed someone across the map just by firing from spawn to test it out.

“Want to play?”

“Huh?”

“There’s a desktop in the other room. I can use my laptop.”

“Okay.”

A computer. And if they’re going to play a multiplayer game, it’ll have an internet connection.

*

The old lady's desktop has icons for Solitaire, eBay, and Facebook. The background is a beach. Not this beach. A different beach.

"Are you sure this can run it?"

"It's an old game." Insul clicks around and starts the download. They made the game free at some point, ahead of the sequel that everyone hated.

Trianon slumps in the swivel office chair in front of the computer. "If you don't feed me, my fingers won't work."

"I'll make oatmeal."

"Can we have pizza?"

Insul stares at him, then takes out his phone. "You can have pizza. Trianon."

"...thank you."

Insul's smile is pathetic. It's so hopeful. Never seen him wanting something like that before. It was always preemptive disappointment and boredom, as if desiring something would make him weak.

He's just going to hurt you again. Don't get comfortable.

*

A glass of toxic green soda fizzes on the desk. Trianon is stuffed. It's nice to eat pizza that wasn't on the floor.

The game loads, displaying a series of now-defunct company logos. Trianon looks back at Insul. "What do I get if I win?"

"Get?"

"I'm not doing this for fun. What do I get if I win?"

"You're so brave when the calories reach your brain."

"Will you let me go?"

"No."

“Afraid you’ll lose?”

“I’m not going to lose.”

“Then bet on it.”

“Name something else.”

Menu music plays, dark and industrial. “I want to go outside. Like outside, outside. A restaurant or something.”

It’s not escape. But it’s the only thing that could lead to escape. Outside of playing Russian Roulette.

“Like a date?”

“...sure.”

“What happens if I win?”

“Uh.” Shit.

Insul’s lips part as he thinks, a sliver of teeth exposed. “If I win, I want to do something permanent to you.” He presses a finger into Trianon’s chest, igniting the X. “Maybe with your hand.”

“That’s not fair, a restaurant isn’t permanent, it’s not the same—”

“Going outside puts me in danger. I could get caught. That would be permanent.”

“It’s still not—”

“And I think it would permanently change me if you went on a date with me.”

The title of the game appears, in bullet-scarred 3D metal font.

HARD POWER

The last time Trianon played this, he was in an awkward adolescent body, barely aware of himself. Now he’s hyper-aware, playing for his life, or his fingers, or worse. This feels like a second adolescence, a puberty of terror.

“How do I win?”

“Best two out of three.”

Insul leaves the room to look for his laptop. Trianon alt-tabs and opens a browser. His fingers shake as he types the URL to his email service, misspelling it a few times.

A screen pops up with a friendly animal waving its finger. *Hey! This page is for grown-ups. Try asking your parents for help using the computer.*

Fuck you, Insul.

He tries the old lady's Facebook desktop app but the password isn't saved. He hears Insul coming down the hall. His fingers hover over the Alt-Tab keys.

Silence, then thumping down the stairs.

Trianon tries every site he can think of, all blocked under parental controls. He clicks through the icons on the desktop, looking for anything that will connect him to an online service with a message function, or even a single field he can put text into. String in a bottle.

The stairs creak. Trianon fumbles with the mouse, trying to close all the windows. He's not used to this old OS, everything a few pixels away from where he thinks it is.

As Insul enters the room, laptop cord slithering behind him, Trianon alt-tabs back into the game. He didn't manage to close everything, but the desktop is concealed by the main menu of *HARD POWER*, a blocky mercenary running through polygonal jungle grass. He opens the option menu and looks at the controls.

"Don't forget to rebind melee."

"Why?"

"The default sucks."

"I'll do Q."

Insul puts his laptop on the floor and hunches over it, legs steepled to either side. "Put your headphones on."

Trianon slides on the cheap pair of Walmart headphones, so flimsy compared to his heavy noise-canceling muffs. But it feels good to have some privacy, however small. He browses the server list. This game is old enough to have servers instead of a monolithic matchmaking algorithm. It came out way before he was born, but the low specs, abundant mods, and smooth gunplay kept it popular for a long time.

A message appears in the global chat. *asdjhksdajdf: join the green ping server with players*

They join mid-match and wait to spawn in on opposite teams. Trianon flips through the player cams in spectator mode. This level looks familiar: vaguely Middle Eastern stone buildings, sand, an oasis with a permanently smoking helicopter crashed into it. Most servers probably run the same map over and over. Competitive, joyless as sports, he never liked that, he wanted to play on the fun colorful levels no one ever hosted.

The weapon select screen pops up. Round start in 10, 9...

He picks the assault rifle. Good balance of range and firepower. He remembers feeling safe with it, even if it wasn't particularly fun.

He scrolls through the tier 1 gadgets. He likes traps. His hands used to tire out fast, aim drifting, so he would look for different ways to kill. He picks the claymore.

The round starts. It feels incredible to move around in this frictionless body incapable of muscle fatigue, after so many days of struggling just to walk across the room. He whirls around, gun pointing dorkily in every direction until someone makes a sarcastic comment over mic.

These are other people. He can talk to them on team chat and Insul can't read it. He types softly on the membrane keyboard.

*default player (3): some guys trying to kill me. this isnt a joke. im literally trapped in a house.
call 911. its on a beach 1 or2 hours from pacific linda
williamXgod: bruh
default player (3): my name is trianon im missing person please call cops this is real
CitizenAhaego: copypasta = pedo
danglerrrs69: get a mic faggot*

One of them points a revolver at him. He freezes. That would be a free kill on him, before he even finds Insul. He backs up, crab walking in a conciliatory fashion.

The black-visored player rotates back and forth, then turns away.

Trianon follows him. They reach the end of an alley. He stays back and watches his teammate cross open space. Have to play conservative. Figure out where the enemy is pushing from.

The player drops dead, pixels of blood streaming into the ground. Trianon goes a different way until he finds a shadowy choke point. He sets his claymore in the darkness.

Is this the remastered version? That trick used to be more effective when the graphics were worse and the claymore laser could disappear under certain shadow effects. This one is super bright and red, regardless of lighting. Fuck.

He aims down the 1.5x scope and crouch-walks around the corner. Bodies litter the plaza. Is Insul one of them?

Someone on his team comes over to him, jerkily reloading their AK.

danglerrrs69: what the fuck u doin bro

Their head explodes, rag doll knocked across the sand. Trianon runs behind a wall and strafes into a patch of tall yellow grass. He can't see outside but no one can see inside. He wants to stay there but the round timer is counting down. Once it hits 0:00, everyone's positions will be revealed. And he feels like that would benefit Insul more than him.

He presses Tab. Only two other players left on his team, versus five of the enemy.

Gunfire crackles across the map. He struggles to triangulate it, not sure if he should move.

Bullet tracers rip through the grass, knocking a jag of blood from his avatar. His fingers tense on the keys but he manages to stay still. Maybe it was a random spray. Don't panic.

The round timer is at 0:09. Need to find a defensible position. Back near the claymore. Fewer directions to watch. Even if someone sees it they'll have to shoot it and make some noise.

He leaves the tall grass and does a quick 360. No one around, as far as he can see. He enters a stone tunnel, crouch-walking to dampen his footsteps.

A line appears in all chat.

asdhjksdajdf: you look like a retarded crab

Clutch

Trianon spins rapidly, looking at both ends of the tunnel. Nothing. A bullet slams into him and he jumps, almost falling off the chair.

Insul laughs, high enough to pierce the headphones.

HEADSHOT

Trianon watches the killcam.

asdhjksdajdf killed you with the sniper rifle

Insul shot him through one of the tiny gaps in the tunnel window tracery, it was like a 1-pixel shot. Fucking camper. Trianon opens the options menu and turns up the mouse sensitivity. Have to compensate for the slow movements of his lethargic hand.

Next round he selects the Adrenaline gadget. He keeps to the edge of the map until he hits the halfway point, then activates it, sprinting into the back of the enemy spawn. Empty. He used to rush spawn to pick up easy kills on AFKers. He listens and only hears distant pops in the usual contested zones near the center of the map.

He crouch-walks toward the minaret where snipers usually camp. The killcam showed Insul there last round. The Adrenaline still has a few more seconds, so his crouch-walk moves at the speed of normal walking while still muffling his noise. He swings his assault rifle back and forth, checking every angle.

Something barks like the sound of screeching metal sped up to fit into a single second. His avatar gets knocked back, bubbling with bloody pixels. Pellet weapon?

He spins and fires without thinking. Insul's avatar topples against a mortar-scarred wall, his shotgun rolling across the sand.

Trianon checks his health. He has exactly 2 HP left. He looks down at the stupid mercenary body and realizes he's shaking. Fuck you, Insul. Fuck you, fuck you, FUCK—

Okay. Insul doesn't play the same way each round. But he likes definitive, high-damage weapons.

Round 3. Tiebreaker. Trianon wipes his sweaty palm so he can hold the mouse and tries to stop shaking. He follows his team closely. If Insul dies in the chaos of a teamfight, that'll be less risky than trying to hunt him down again. Can't risk another 2 HP margin.

He hears a menacing beep. He almost forgot this was Bomb Mode, because everyone's been playing it like deathmatch. Someone actually planted the bomb and now his team has to defuse

it. Which means everyone is being pulled toward the center. He follows reluctantly, watching the minaret for the sparkle of a sniper scope.

His team trades a few times, bodies twitching and flopping as they contest the bridge where the bomb was planted. Two down on both sides.

Someone flings smoke grenades and a guy says *FUCKING GO* over mic. Trianon follows automatically. He's on the bridge now and the smoke is fading, no retreat. He hides behind a crate.

A frag grenade explodes, whistling in his ears. A teammate flies through the air, spinning goofily.

The brown-green of an enemy uniform appears from the smoke. Trianon fires, recoil jumping into the sky. But one of those bullets somehow got a headshot, or maybe the enemy was already lit.

Was that Insul? He doesn't dare take a second to check the scoreboard. Bullets thud into the crate, lazily penetrating through the other side. One hits, bringing him to 80/100.

He reloads his rifle. The fading smoke reveals the motionless dead, except for one corpse vibrating rapidly in the level geometry. Most of the corpses wear enemy colors.

A teammate kneels down and starts defusing the bomb. Another points his gun up and spams crouch-walk, dancing in a circle. The rest are over by the dead bodies picking up better weapons, the ones you buy with kill currency. Someone is swinging a katana and playing deep fried vocaloid songs over mic. He doesn't remember katanas. Is this a modded server? The parameters of reality are constantly changing on him, inside and outside this screen.

The crouch-dancer gets in his face, talking in a weird voice over what sounds like a 5 dollar mic. "FAGOOOOT? FAGEEEET? FAGGOTO?"

Trianon glances at the bomb. The beeping sound is growing urgent but the defuse animation looks almost complete, he just has to hold out. He peeks around the crate, still wary. Statistically, one of those bodies is probably Insul. But he's not taking any chances.

The guy who was dancing next to him explodes, the map echoing with a resonant, apocalyptic gunshot. An enemy jumps from a window and crouch-drops on a crate to avoid fall damage. His silhouette juts with the spear-like profile of the sniper rifle, then he drops it and picks up a discarded SMG. The teammate defusing the bomb cancels the defuse, but the animation takes too long. The SMG sprays and his ragdoll tumbles off the bridge, into the dry riverbed.

The rest of Trianon's team runs over, three guys firing from the hip. The enemy player strafes behind a well and shoots back with an assault rifle, body shotting someone who was low, crumpling them instantly.

Bullet decals cover the wall, but a few shots get past, popping red on the enemy player. He breaks cover, flick shots a guy, then disappears behind some crates.

The last teammate reloads his assault rifle and aims at the crates. Penetration damage is 30%. Enough to kill someone who already took a few shots like that. Just as the rifle begins to fire, the enemy player strafes from behind the crate, prefiring. Trianon's teammate slides across the ground, blood spattering across fake Middle Eastern mosaic.

Trianon runs backwards, emptying his assault rifle. His crosshair goes wide (movement penalty) but he can't stop shooting. He knows this is Insul, it has to be. His gun clicks and he hits the reload button. Dust kicks up around him, bullets tingling at the edge of his hitbox. He jumps off the bridge, sliding diagonally down the slope to avoid taking fall damage. He's surprised he remembers that trick, but he probably played this for 500 hours when he was depressed. Plus the other boys refused to play the shooters he actually thought looked more colorful and fun, with xenodemons and scifi elements and toxic goo, so this is what he ended up playing at people's houses.

He goes under the bridge and listens for Insul. The bomb beeps steadily overhead. Maybe Insul is playing it safe. Forcing Trianon to go up and defuse the bomb. Which means he'll have to push fast. If he doesn't kill Insul now, it's zugzwang, forced to defuse the bomb with so little time left that if he stops, it will explode. Which means Insul could dance around and kill him at leisure, with no possibility of retaliation.

Something drops over the edge and explodes instantly. Insul cooked the fucking grenade.

But Trianon isn't dead. He's on the ground, staring up at the sky. A 3D bird of prey rotates in an endless loop. That's a nice touch.

Stun grenade. DBNO. He taps spacebar to stand up again. His character grunts and a circle fills in the middle of his screen. He hears the sandy sound of someone sliding down the slope, and the shk-chk-chkchk of a reload. Higher pitch than the assault rifle reload sound, so Insul probably grabbed another SMG off the ground. Which means he'll be able to shoot in the next second. But he doesn't. Probably because the recoil is terrible when moving, or he's preserving the ammo of a dead person's partially spent clip.

Which buys another second. Trianon's heart pounds as his character stands up and he can move again. He immediately strafes without even looking. SMG bullets whine past his ear.

He runs back under the bridge, rifle spewing incontinently at the slope. But Insul isn't there. Is he flanking? Or is it a fake-out? His eyes water, not daring to blink. Tan riverbed framed by the shady pillars of the bridge. Nothing happens.

He turns. Insul is right behind him, green eyes staring through a balaclava. No gun, just the default knife. Trianon gasps and hits fire. His gun sputters a few shots, missing Insul at point

blank range, then clicks, empty. He grabs his headphones, compelled by a sudden adolescent dread. They get stuck in his hair, pulling at the roots, he struggles but can't get them off.

The knife sound slices in his ears, grotesque and crunchy and way too loud, just like he remembered it. The screen flashes red.

Fuck!

The bomb beeps faster, accelerating until the beeps are almost fused together. But it wouldn't be doing that if the round were over.

30/100 HP. The knife isn't an insta-kill from the front.

He hammers the Q button. His rifle disappears and his knife slides into view.

He hears Insul's keyboard clacking now that his headphones are half off, tangled painfully in his hair. 50 damage is the strong stab where you hold the melee button down, not the fast stab (20 damage). The strong stab has a long tail to the animation and slows you down, giving Trianon time to slash, fast and panicked, knocking jets of blood from Insul's avatar.

His screen flashes red, Insul is fast stabbing too, racing him, he goes down to 10 HP. The next cut from Trianon folds Insul's avatar in half. The sand around them is completely red with blood decals.

The room is silent, except for the tinny sound of industrial beats through Trianon's headphones. The music cuts to gunfire and micspam as the next round starts.

Insul stands behind him. Trianon's fingers shake as they slide off the keyboard. His hair hurts, twisted into the headphones. Bullets drum in his ears.

Insul drapes his arm over Trianon's shoulder. "You did good."

"What?" Sweat trickles down Trianon's face.

Insul rotates the office chair so Trianon is facing him. "Did you think I'd be mad?"

"Why wouldn't you be?" Trianon tries to get off the chair but the headphones grip him like a claw.

"If I hurt you, it isn't because I'm mad. It's because I like doing it."

Insul turns the chair again. The headphone cord pulls taut, yanking Trianon's head back. Insul sniffs his neck. "You were really scared, weren't you?"

Insul turns the chair another degree, tearing a strand of hair from Trianon's head, making him

cry out. He can barely breathe with his neck bent like that, exposed to the ceiling.

“I could tell you put everything into it.” Insul grips the arm of the chair, keeping it locked in place as Trianon’s feet skid on the carpet. He listens to him gasp for air.

“That’s why I had to make it scary for you. So I’d know you were trying your best. It isn’t fun to fight someone if their heart isn’t into it.” Insul kisses him on the twitching cartilage of his neck and spins the chair in the other direction. Trianon slides off, banging against the desk.

He sinks his fingers into the carpet, propping himself up on all fours. Black and green hair curtains his face, headphones still pulling like a leash.

Insul sits on the floor next to him, carefully untwisting the caught strands. “It’s okay. You won. Are you happy?”

The white carpet darkens in two spots under Trianon’s face. “Sure. Whatever.”

Insul leaves the room and comes back with a blanket. He puts the glass of green soda next to Trianon along with a slice of pizza. “I heated it up in the microwave.”

Trianon resists the pizza for about 40 seconds before breaking. He eats it as hatefully as possible.

“When can I go outside?”

“We. It’s a date, remember?”

“When?”

“Hmm.”

Trianon knew it. It was a trick. Mind games—

“Three days.”

Shark Day

Dismal evening filters through the blinds. Trianon replays a game in his head, robot girl jumping around a Chernobyl death lab avoiding electric orbs. He hears Insul shaving in the bathroom and thinks: Insul can't do this, can't visualize a little shelter inside his head. He has to keep swimming like a shark sieving oxygen from the water.

Robot girls trying to solve infinite SHMUP sequences, parts knocked loose and bouncing off the bottom of the stage, flashing and disappearing.

The bathroom door opens. Insul wipes shaving cream off his face and zips up his orange parka. He's wearing torn jeans and those beat-up boots.

"Let's go."

Has it been three days already?

"I need something to wear."

"Looks fine to me."

Trianon looks down. Blood-spattered girl clothes cling to his bony frame, unwashed and practically rotting. He looks like he was murdered. Insul is crazy.

The pink bomber jacket rustles as Insul pulls it over Trianon's stiff arms. He sees the eyeliner and lipstick on the bed.

"Is that necessary?"

"It's a date. We're supposed to look nice."

"You don't look nice."

"What would you change?"

Insul kneels on the floor in front of him, looking straight at Trianon, not cocking his head to the side or looking out the corners of his eyes. His face is excruciatingly real.

Trianon breaks eye contact. "I don't care what you look like."

Silence. Then Insul rubs the pink lipstick onto Trianon's mouth, followed by black lines around the blue or dirty glass eyes. Now dark socks are being pulled onto Trianon's feet, followed by the salmon-seafoam sneakers. Trianon grabs one. "I can do it."

He pulls but the sneaker gets stuck. Insul pulls the tongue out and pushes it over his heel. Then

he does the other one as Trianon fumbles with the laces.

He doesn't realize it's a different car until he's inside it. No interior design magazines on the floor. Someone else's Pepsi bottles littering the back seat. No blood.

Another car to burn by the sea.

*

The car splashes along the edge of a flooded park, water black in the night. Dead leaves clot into pools of tannin sludge. Car lights reflect off floating plastic.

A few minutes later, Insul pulls into a parking lot. Trianon's vision is blurry but it feels like a strip mall. Part of it is much brighter, still glowing while the other shopfronts are dark. The restaurant?

Insul opens the passenger door, looming expectantly. A dry wind whips at Trianon's skirt and he pushes it between his legs, sinking into the seat.

Don't be crazy. This is your chance. You're covered in blood. Dried to brown, but blood nonetheless. People will see what he did to you.

Insul extends his hand. Trianon takes it, hating how weak his grip is, how he needs to hold tight so he doesn't fall down. The night sky is so open and wide after so many days indoors, sucking cold at his exposed legs. But he can barely feel it, flushed and scared, the moment of his escape rushing at him faster than he expected. People walk past him, hazy and doubling.

Why don't they look at him? Why won't they help? This is a parking lot. This is civilization.

He glances at Insul in shock. The orange parka is gone. He's wearing the white dress shirt from the museum, blood smeared to watercolor by the rain. He's walking around with a cop's blood on his shirt. And the mess that came from Trianon's chest.

Something is wrong with these people. Garish colors, tumorous growths. Bright floodlights shine at the building, illuminating the banner stretched across the front. Now that they're closer, even he can read the huge yellow letters fringed with orange.

SPIRIT HALLOWEEN

His stomach drops through the pavement. You stupid fucking idiot.

The strip mall is an island of artificial light surrounded by dark blocks of closed businesses. Nowhere to run. He'd be crying or laughing or something if he weren't so hungry.

"You said we could go to a restaurant."

“Soon.”

As they walk through the crowd, he has a strange, lonely thought, the feeling that he can't rely on anyone else for this. His hand aches, the one that punched Insul in the neck. The strangulation burn is faded but visible, and is that a little bruise from Trianon's knuckles? If he was holding a sharp object next time...

Something hard smacks into the toe of his sneaker and he trips over the curb. Insul grabs his arm, keeping him from faceplanting on the concrete. The door slides open automatically as a family walks past in coordinated Minecraft costumes, a small child pointing his foam diamond pick at Trianon and laughing.

*

Costumes scattered across the floor, trampled by roving teens and exhausted parents. Flimsy changing stalls erected in the back, red curtains hanging from the ceiling across black wooden enclosures, like stables for tall goth aliens. Animatronics cackle and glow, completely ignored except for drunk college students poking at red-eyed reapers and Silent Hill nurse tits.

This is the heart of America.

“Yeah it fucking is.” Insul rolls up his sleeves.

“What?”

“You said, this is the heart of America.”

Have to stop leaking. Before he hears something that gets you in trouble.

Insul grabs Trianon's shoulder, casual like they're two bros fucking around on Halloween.

“Literally nothing matters here. You're covered in your own blood in the middle of a store and no one even knows.”

They wade down an empty aisle, through the flayed skin of edgy cartoons for adults. Insul runs his hand along the rack, packaging slapping to the floor behind them. He says, “Did you ever dress up for this shit before?”

“Sometimes.” Halloween was embarrassing. It was when he realized he was an acquaintance, not a friend. Scared of wearing the wrong costume, never sure what the difference was between funny and ironic. He would end up wearing something safe and stupid and sit around all night as everyone got drunk and ignored him.

“I liked wearing a mask. Me and my friend would—” Insul bites his lip. Not a good silence.

“Um. What kind of masks?”

“Whatever I guess. Slipknot shit. We’d ride in his truck and scream at faggots.”

“Like...gay people?”

“Everyone is a faggot when you’re in a truck.”

Someone says, “Excuse me?”

Their heads jerk back. A young woman in a Totoro kigurumi says, “Sorry, just, your costume looks amazing.”

Trianon looks down at his blood-spattered skirt. “Thanks,” he mumbles.

The girl’s friends surge past the aisle, grabbing at her and giggling. She smiles awkwardly, then goes with them.

“She wants to fuck you.”

“I think she just liked my clothes or something...because they’re girl clothes...and she’s a girl...”

Insul’s gaze follows her through the store.

“Um...” Trianon tugs on Insul’s parka, suddenly sweaty. “Were you buying anything, or, uh...”

“For me?”

“Sure. Don’t you want to, participate in society or whatever...”

*

Insul adjusts the white headband, looking up at the wire halo above his head with a dead stare.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s the most appropriate thing you could possibly wear.”

“I think you’re making fun of me but whatever. Turn around.”

Trianon rotates, dizzy from hunger. Insul lifts his arms and pulls straps over them like a backpack, then pushes him in front of a mirror.

Cheap white angel wings spread from Trianon’s back. Insul grips it, vibration trembling through the wire. “This is fun. I think I could get into holidays.”

They walk along the back. Trianon isn't sure what this area is even supposed to be, aisles shattered into fragments, inventory piled in a chaos of genres. Underpaid employees push costume dregs here, too busy or tired to organize them, like uniforms piled up next to a mass grave where everyone was stripped before being shot in the back of the head.

Insul picks a lumpy teal balaclava off the floor and pulls it over Trianon's head. Chemical-stinking fabric stretches over his face, panicky, dark, overstimulating, then he can see again. He looks in a mirror. Puffy dinosaur spikes ridge the top of the balaclava. His black hair fringes the face hole, green tendrils slithering along his cheeks, pink lipstick smeared from the corner of his mouth.

"This is ridiculous."

"I like it."

Trianon picks at the fabric teeth enclosing his face. "Dinosaur angel aesthetic."

"A lot of them died."

"That's what I heard."

Insul digs through a pile of costumes. "There's a whole costume here. Dino Romper SML."

"Small."

"I think I'm into dinosaurs now."

"Are you doing this because no one went anywhere with you as a kid? Trying to relive something?"

Insul turns slightly, a small movement that pushes Trianon back like a hand on his chest. But Insul's voice is calm, like he heard nothing. "Let's just be dinosaurs."

Trianon laughs, but the only thing he feels is the relief he felt when his dad was in a good mood instead of a bad one.

*

Insul swings the giant barbarian axe. "So cool." He flings it over his shoulder, moving on to other weapons. The axe breaks, plastic shards spinning across the floor.

Trianon shifts back and forth, stomach hurting for most of the reasons a stomach can hurt. Then something touches him just under the chin. Insul holds the sword against his neck like he's an executioner gauging the right spot to slice through.

Trianon puts his hand on the foam blade and bends it back. Insul laughs and drops it, already distracted by something else.

The center of the building has a fabricated structure covered in old-timey cardboard storefronts, some kind of haunted maritime aesthetic. Big bloody teeth surround a black curtain. Insul touches Trianon lightly on his exposed tailbone, guiding him inside.

Scary music plays through busted speakers. Scraggly plastic seaweed hangs from the ceiling at depressingly sparse intervals. They go down a zig-zagging hallway covered in video screens. Underwater scenes play out, rendered in the cheapest possible CGI: fish swimming through sunken ships, kraken tentacles groping the non-existent camera lens. It reminds Trianon of the aquarium. A parodic, cursed version, the kind they'll use to replay his life in Hell.

Insul pushes him against a screen, 3D sharks swimming just behind his head.

Trianon says, "Come on, I'm hungry."

"Me too." Insul tucks a lock of green hair under Trianon's dino balaclava, his face close enough for Trianon to see the reflections of the shark video in his eyes.

Children run inside the tunnel, screaming and smashing into each other. As one of the kids stumbles by, breathless with laughter, Insul grabs something from his hand. The kid says, heyyyyyyy.

Insul points his fingers at the kid like a gun. The kid steps back, looking confused. At the other end of the tunnel, his parents call him encouragingly. He trudges in their direction.

Insul tears open the wrapper and empties the candy into Trianon's palm. A few drop out, M&M's clicking on the floor.

"This isn't real food."

Insul leans over Trianon, halo tapping the video screen. "But it tastes good."

Shark teeth loom, grotesque and blood-stained. Trianon looks at the candy and thinks of pomegranate seeds. The black-sprayed wooden walls never disappearing no matter how far he walks, costumes trampled to brown rags under his feet, the smell of ocean-killing plastic and unwashed invisible kids.

He hears adult voices, questioning and concerned, getting louder behind the curtain. The candy is sticky in his grip. "We should probably go."

"Fine." Insul shepherds him out of the tunnel, straight toward the store exit.

"Shouldn't we pay for these?"

“I told you nothing matters here.”

They pass the detector gates. Nothing happens. The cold night air cycles the chemical atmosphere from Trianon’s lungs, angel wings flapping in the breeze.

“What kind of food do you like?”

XO

They walk through the darkness behind Spirit Halloween, toward the outdoor shopping center.

Candy melts through Trianon's fingers, dripping brown rainbow. His eyelids flutter, overstimulated.

"Why is your face like that?"

"It's sticky."

Insul takes his hand and licks the candy off, tongue electric on Trianon's palm. He grins, teeth shitty with chocolate.

Trianon almost trips on another curb. He wishes he'd eaten some of that candy. He can't remember what blood sugar feels like.

"Pick a place."

Trianon tries to focus his eyes. Chipotle, Panda Express...the idea of something warm and reconstituted makes him nauseous. He points at the last store on the row.

*

A teen girl dressed up like a dolphin says, "Hi!" from behind the counter.

Trianon looks up, his eyes haggard and purple. "You have, uh...protein here?"

"Yes, in addition to bubble tea we also serve poke bowls."

He squints at the menu above her, feeling slow and idiotic. She turns to Insul and says, "Anything I can get you?"

"Ice water."

Trianon smirks for a fraction of a second, but Insul notices. "What?"

"Nothing."

Insul furrows his brow and studies the menu. "Actually, I want a large...black...milk...tea. With the little balls in it."

"Ice amount?"

"75%."

“Sugar?”

“Z...” Insul looks at Trianon. “100%.”

“You got it.” She looks at Trianon. “What can I get you, miss?”

Trianon flushes. Is she making a joke? The blood and grime must be really thick on his face. “Small green milk tea with tapioca, 25% ice 50% sugar. Um. And grass jelly balls. And salted cheese.”

Wait a fucking second. “And, uh, a large poke bowl.”

*

They sit at the back of an outdoor food court, narrow and otherwise abandoned. Trianon’s poke bowl is almost empty, but he picks carefully at the last shreds of ahi tuna and imitation crab, jewels of protein, future thoughts of escape.

The black bubble tea is in Insul’s eyes, pupils swelling with caffeine. Light glints off his halo, gnats swimming through the beam of, something. A light source. A photon-generating architectural requirement. “I don’t think I’m a killer.”

Trianon snorts. He stabs a straw into the lid of his green tea, enjoying the snap of plastic under the sharpened tip. In this simple pleasure, nothing else has to be considered, within the time it takes to pierce a resistant surface. A hot pen slides inside a throat a knife separates the skin on a naked chest. He sucks on the sweet liquid, trying to drown the images.

“Don’t laugh. If it weren’t for you, I don’t think anyone would have died at the museum.”

The milk in Trianon’s straw subsides back into the cup. “How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Can’t you take a compliment?”

“It doesn’t make me feel good, Insul.”

Insul smiles at the sound of his name. “I would have gone somewhere safer. But this was like school. With my friend. I wanted to do something together.”

“You killed before. Alone. This wasn’t my fault—”

“Watching an old woman sink because she swam too far isn’t the same. That was only 1 or 2% of a murder. Max.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to appropriate murder culture.”

“Funny,” Insul says instead of laughing.

“What about the desert house guy?”

“He surprised me.”

Trianon gets it now. They were all spontaneous acts, the kind of thing where a guy does something stupid and violent and his soul is entombed in the chumbox for all eternity, another clickbait mugshot mummy and you think for maybe a microsecond, what an idiot, why would anyone do that? But Insul got lucky, more times than anyone should, at the edge of the world, with the very young and the very old, in dark, sad, pitiful places, and in these places there occurred a quick, dumb action, unimpaired by some crucial limiter of the frontal lobe. Trianon converged with one of those actions but he didn’t die, and at some point he stopped becoming a necessity and became a luxury.

Insul picks at a blackened scrap of gum stuck to the table. “I wish I could take it back.”

“You feel bad about it?”

“They didn’t deserve to die.”

“What?” Did he get brain damage? Reverse Phineas Gaged? Strangulations for Algernon...

“They were nothing. None of them meant anything to me. They didn’t deserve my attention.” A hint of the virginal obsessive hoarse high schooler in Insul’s voice, twinging the steady monotone like a vocal wound.

“Okay.” The attention feels weird, anxious, like he needs to turn it into something that can save him, a maximal version of how he felt when his dad was in a good mood.

Insul tears a feather from Trianon’s wing, the delicate frame rustling at his touch. “I don’t want to hurt anyone but you.”

Trianon’s ears burn under the dino balaclava. “So you’re gay?” The impulse to dig into Insul’s weakness, his need, to expose some ordinary and pathetic desire, the only opening into this deadly wall.

“I’m whatever I was in that school.”

“You’re a school shooter?”

“Sure.”

“Your expansion of the sex-gender binary is inspiring.”

"Keep making fun of me."

"I don't know why you didn't just, try to be my friend."

"You said you had a girlfriend."

"So?"

"I won't be second." Anger in those eyes, or sharpened fear.

"What do you even like about me? What made me so special?"

Insul looks away, chewing his lip.

"Whatever."

"I like that you're a cripple and can't fight back."

"Myasthenia is a manageable condition—"

"I like that you try anyways." He rubs a smear of milk from Trianon's chin like the final stroke in a painting. "I like that your eyes are fucked up. I like how your mouth hangs open and I can see everything inside. I like that you need my help."

The world grows soft and porous around Trianon, the feeling he gets when escape seems possible, but muddier and suctioning. The anxiety of this small freedom that requires too many decisions on his part. The fear that if he tested it, even this would be taken away. "I don't need your help. I have pills."

"You don't have pills."

"Fuck off."

"I like that you're retarded."

"I'm not retarded!"

"Did your parents know?"

A flock of teens in Fortnite masks roll past on bicycles. One of them whistles at Trianon then speeds up.

"That's why your dad hit you."

Trianon breathes heavily.

“Does Oenone know?”

“There’s nothing *to* know.”

“Don’t be mad. I like seeing the shit you feel. Knowing I can change the channel any time I want. Knowing you can’t filter me out.”

“Violence against the disabled isn’t a personality trait, Insul.”

“Guess we’ll find out.”

Someone screams across the parking lot. A firework bursts into green and purple glitchflame. Laughter from a crowd of ghouls and rave sluts.

“I’m doing my best with the list in my head.” Insul taps the spiky ridge of the dino balaclava. “I don’t get movies in there like you. Just words. *Aquarium. Sleeves.*”

“Sleeves?”

“At the aquarium. With your. With that person. When you pulled your sleeves down to hide your bruises. I pressed myself into the glass to hide how hard I was.”

“You’re disgusting.”

Insul picks a chunk of imitation crab from the poke bowl. Trianon flinches.

“I like that too. I’ll make a little movement, doing whatever, and you freak out. Did you think I was going to hit you?”

Every day you’ll make mistakes because of me.

Trianon peels the lid off his tea and puts a piece of ice in his mouth, sucking on it until his breathing slows down. His voice burns, cold and caustic. “You just listed what makes *you* happy. But you don’t see me.”

“I see you. Telling me about your favorite paintings, zoned out, looking at the ceiling. Did you know you move your fingers when you do that? Like you’re scrolling around inside your brain?”

Trianon sucks at the shrinking shard of ice, trying to keep his face hard, unpenetrated.

“You’re like an autistic little brother I can put my tongue inside.”

The ice cracks between Trianon’s teeth. “I get it. I’m retarded—”

“You’re funny, too. Your hair smells good. I like taking you to fucking Spirit Halloween. I’d kill someone for making you cry.”

Blood rushes to Trianon’s cheeks. “Then why haven’t you killed yourself?”

Insul slams his face on the table. Trianon almost drops his bubble tea, the flimsy plastic cup bending under his fingers and squirting milk from the straw.

Insul lifts his head, face red from the impact, hair skewed across his eyes. Blood drips from his nose, oozing down toward his mouth.

Trianon realizes he hasn’t swallowed, a wad of tapioca disintegrating in his gums, the milk getting warm and weird. He hides behind his bangs, Insul’s blood too bright and red under the harsh electric light.

“Let me see your face,” Insul says.

“You’ve seen it every day. Aren’t you sick of it?”

“I can’t see people inside my head. You know that.”

“I know.”

Insul cups his cheek, cold fingers sheltering under the edges of the dino balaclava face hole. “This is the only place you are. Nowhere else.”

Trianon’s cheeks are wet.

“Why are you crying?”

“Because you’re not hurting me—”

Insul leans into Trianon, arms straight down and gripping the table from both sides, dress shirt sleeves rolled up past taut tendons. His lips taste like bloody milk, like cheap candy.

A flame cloud moves up through Trianon’s chest, blinding him and burning the roots of his hair. He’s hazily aware of his bubble tea flowing across the metal table and spattering on the ground. Insul’s face crushes hungrily into his, tongue staining the inside of his mouth sweet and metallic. His chair squeaks and falls over. Insul grabs him by the collar and pulls him back, the chair wobbling on one leg then settling.

A white feather drifts from Trianon’s wing, riding the autumn wind across the shopping center, through sideshow smoke, cars screaming donuts in the parking lot.

He hates how fragile, how weak, how warm he feels in Insul's grip. His face is melting off, call it crippled or retarded, he can't control it anymore, jaw hanging open and eyes spinning off in random directions. Insul's tongue fills his empty skull, overflowing and slithering down into his soul.

Insul says something, the word swallowed by Trianon's throat, then his tongue slips out and he gasps for air. "I want you to like me."

"Stop." Rough kisses scrape down Trianon's neck, shocking tiny gasps from him until they reach the bruise lining his throat, tensing him up. "Don't use so much teeth."

"Does that mean you like me?"

"It means don't use your fucking teeth." He slaps Insul. The guy looks at him, startled, face burning.

Trianon trembles but doesn't break eye contact.

Insul bows his head. "Sorry." He nuzzles onto Trianon's chest, kissing weakly down the exposed skin of the V-neck collar. Trianon looks at the triangle of unblemished milky flesh. It would be easy to pretend that the rest of his body looks that way. But he knows that V fits perfectly between the slashes of the X hidden under his pastel shirt. The X this guy cut into him with a knife. The X that will scar his chest forever.

His fingers tighten in Insul's messy brown hair, pushing his head back when his kisses get too violent. "I fucking hate you," he whispers as Insul sinks between his legs, the halo bending in half against Trianon's burning chest.

Undine Noodling

Trianon is in his old high school library. His clothes don't fit and he fucked up his eyeliner.

The library was small and shitty, resented by the school board like all prisons resent their libraries, a blemish on the slaughterhouse environment, smelling of overheated carpet and faded YA paperbacks. He sees the 18 year old emo he looked up to. Someone said he joined the military, so Trianon is relieved to see him still here. It never seemed possible, the military is the opposite of—

Oh yeah? If the military was the opposite of his purpose, then what is that purpose? The purpose of these clothes, this eyeliner?

But it really happened. He really went away.

He was the reason you started dressing like that. But you felt like a clown next to the perfect eyeliner and cheekbones and insouciant hair and fashion that wasn't ordered from the Amazon bought-with bundle, but had actual, real holes and stains from house parties and quarantine-dodging shows. But most of all, the absolute confidence, the sense that he knew something and you were just a child. Worse than a child.

The one time you talked to him, he said something sarcastic that went completely over your head. A transmission of jaded energy, and you were too uneasy, too stupid, too (retarded) to understand, to grab hold of any fragile commonality you shared.

But it wasn't in the school library. And he didn't grab you roughly by the arm, either. In real life he walked off with his other senior friends and you went home and wiped the makeup off your face before your dad finished streaming and you sat in your room and played retro PC games or made mixes you never sent to anyone.

He grabs Trianon in the back of the library, which is much larger than it actually was. Whatever is happening, it hurts, flowing silent as electricity, pure dream hurt. Stop! No, there are no words here. Not even in a library. The closest thing is live wires tangling in a pile of dry leaves.

The senior pushes him into the books. They deform around him like they've been soaked in water, mushy and pulped. He grabs the senior's lip ring.

Pull it like a grenade. I dare you. Laughter without sound.

Trianon can't believe he's so close to him. The bottom of a grown-up face: bones fully inflated, black stubble, the smell of hair product.

He worries about getting sick. Pollution, viruses, bacteria, carcinogens, there's something in the makeup, something in boys. But eyeliner stings when you're just sitting in bed.

He tries to pull away but the senior is too strong for him. Something breaks. These brittle clown-bones, failing to grow. You'll always be shorter than him. Shorter than most of the girls. All that soy milk, soy boy, and your bones still didn't grow.

And then Oenone was there. And it didn't matter. His old friends (acquaintances) were like damn she's hot. He knew he was doing something right. That he'd finally gotten lucky. Escaping his broken, stunted, (retarded) adolescent fixations, these immature obsessions with drug store eyeliner and edgy bands and retro games. Finally where he was supposed to be.

Gunshots. Not as sound or vibration. As fact.

This was supposed to happen at the other high school. Not this one. The long rows of books are a shooting gallery, patrolled by an itching hitscan presence. He hugs his knees on the floor and says, please don't kill me. If I'm hot enough, can I live? He looks at his phone cam to see if he's hot enough, adjusting his hair. It's extremely long and all green now. And his eyes are black. Is this hot?

It must be. Because you're not dead. Because you're really, really beautiful.

He wakes up gasping. He feels like he's trapped inside a camera's flash.

Something warm and wet flows out of him. Bleeding. Opened up again. Even through the bandages? The warfarin has to be out of his system by now. Unless it fucked up his coagulation permanently. Is that possible?

Where is it coming from? He reaches under his shirt. His chest is sweaty, but the bandages don't seem to be leaking. His hand slides down and finds hot wetness between his legs. His eyes widen.

Insul yawns and stretches, his rangy frame pushing the blankets around. Trianon turns over, trying to conceal—

Insul touches his own leg. "Did you piss on me?"

"S-sorry."

Shrug. "Used to happen to me all the time."

"I don't understand how, I'm sorry—"

"It's normal, right? All the time when I was a freshman."

"That's not normal—"

Insul pulls the sheet off the bed and uses the dry part of it to wipe his leg off. Then he brings a

clean sheet and blanket from the hallway closet, trampling last night's angel wings underfoot.

"When I went to burn the car, I could smell your blood on the backseat. You really rubbed it in there."

Trianon crawls to the edge of the bed so the sheet can go on, feeling sticky and gross with each movement.

"Other stuff, too."

Trianon touches his neck, just below where the car window hit his throat. The hard, killing pressure that made his knees shake on the backseat as he spurt piss in limbic meltdown. "Your point?"

"I don't care. You'll never be disgusting to me."

Insul reaches under Trianon's skirt and drags his underwear off, heavy with piss. He holds up the skid-marked, urochromic panties, expression veiled. Trianon knows he's baiting him. Looking for a reaction. But he can't help the blood rushing to his cheeks, the way his mouth twists in embarrassment. He pulls his skirt tight, suddenly aware of how naked he is under the thin, soft fabric, a familiar feeling.

Legs crossing, skirt crushed between pale thighs, sneakers floating big on his skinny ankles, trying to keep Insul from burrowing inside him. Pushed into the bushes of the food court, the neat, castrated foliage that barely concealed them.

And then what? Not that. He didn't let Insul do that. He kept him under control. That hungry tongue trapped in his mouth. Until the sirens blared and cleared out the sideshow, cops walking around the parking lot with megaphones, and Insul decided it was better to get out of there. Because even he must have known it looked a lot like rape. Attempted rape.

It's the thought that counts.

*

Trianon sits on the living room couch, light from the window falling on his naked back. An overcast day, but a little warmth bleeds through the clouds. It feels like the touch of a kind hand, making him close his eyes to drink it in.

Insul sits next to him and Trianon pulls the blanket up, covering his bandaged chest. His clothes are in the laundry room. Not sure if they're actually being cleaned or not. But it's a relief to be free of the filthy, encrusted garments. Rash indentations from the dirty panties still line his thighs and waist.

"I cleaned it up."

Silence.

“Why aren’t you talking?”

Trianon turns his exhausted, purple-rimmed eyes on Insul. “I know you’re manipulating me.”

“What?”

“All that crazy shit last night. Trying to get me to think I’m special.” Tweaked out on caffeine, telling me you like my hair, the way I twitch when I nerd out about shit, that you’d kill for me. What the fuck was that? And your eyes, I can’t stand that look from you. Too alive for someone so dead.

“You are special.”

“You’re trying to get in my head. But—” Trianon has a horrible sense of clarity. “—if you really thought I was under your control, you’d kill me instantly.”

Insul traces Trianon’s bare shoulder. “You don’t know that.”

“That’s even scarier.”

The house creaks faintly under a strong wind. Insul sighs and rests his head on Trianon’s blanketed lap. “You were talking in your sleep.”

“I was?”

Insul plays with the black hair hanging above him, a green strand twirling in his finger. “What did you see in there?”

Trianon feels the urge to keep Insul on the surface, to offer up his dumb, mindless skin instead. Because after last night, his brain feels exposed, full of rusty hooks that Insul keeps tugging on.

But for some reason it hurts to keep inside.

“I had a bad dream.”

“High school again?”

“Yeah. Actually.”

“The explosions?”

“No. I was just in the library and talking to some guy. I kind of looked up to him back then. He

was older. I thought his makeup was cool. Just stupid stuff. I didn't really know anything about him."

"What made it a bad dream?"

"Well. He was attacking me. But I don't think that was why. It was just, kind of sad. I hadn't thought about it forever." Trianon goes silent. Seagulls keen in the distance, muted through the window glass.

Insul says, "I wish I could see him again."

"Huh?"

"My friend. Even if it was just a dream."

"You'd probably feel even worse. It hurts when you wake up. It hurts really bad."

Insul doesn't respond, his face hidden in the blanket.

"Anyways. I understand why he wouldn't talk to me. I was just an empty kid."

Insul looks up. His face is dead, but his eyes burn. "If you were empty, I'd have blown straight through you. You'd just be gone."

Trianon feels his face grow heavy with blood. He looks away, trying to drain the confused heat. He thinks of the ocean rolling into the gray horizon. The desert house, luxurious and empty. A high school cafeteria, demolished and replaced with a memorial.

"Because I'm just so unique and magical and special," he says, voice bleached with sarcasm.

Insul rubs his head into Trianon, pushing him on his back, the couch sinking under their weight. "You're really special, Tria. Want to feel how special you are?"

Trianon tries to crawl out from under Insul but the blanket pulls tight around his legs. He grabs the flaps of Insul's unbuttoned dress shirt, his uncut nails scratching skin. Insul takes his wrists and holds them down. The shirt hangs open, showing Trianon how Insul's torso shifts in response to his struggle. Abdomen tensed, ribs rippling, clavicles open like cups.

"You like it. Tell me you like it."

"Get out of my fucking head—"

A fist fills Trianon's mouth, deep enough to stretch it out. His eyes bulge, free hand slapping wildly. Insul crushes it into the couch with his knee. "Don't worry. You don't have to think of anything mean to say to me."

Trianon bites down but Insul laughs, the atrophied jaw too weak to break his skin. Drool foams around the fist, choking sounds vibrating across his knuckles. "Am I in your head yet?" Insul pushes down, feeling a hot cry of pain shoot up Trianon's throat directly into his fist. He puts his weight on Trianon, pinning both arms with his knees. Then he puts his other hand over Trianon's nose.

Something bangs on the door.

Insul freezes. Everything is silent except for Trianon's tortured attempts to breathe: a cold whistle of inhalation on Insul's fist, followed by warm, damp air escaping the lungs.

Insul peeks through the curtains, but he can't see the top of the wooden stairs from here.

Knock.

Knock.

He pulls his hand out, saliva dripping in ropes onto Trianon's face. Trianon coughs, then screams.

Table The Motion

The door opens. Insul has a black shirt on. The dead woman's top is tight around his stomach, collar wide enough to expose his clavicles. His fist is pushed deep in his pocket, knuckles riddled with tooth marks, boy saliva drying on his fingers.

Oenone's blond hair whips in the rough wind. Yellow beachgrass rustles on the dunes behind her, the sky an overcast, metallic sheet. "Sorry if this is weird. Do you know someone named Trianon?"

Gallons of forum venom spit from his eyes, dissolving her body. He cuts her face to pieces, he punishes her bones, but he's forced to admit, that little faggot did good for himself. He'd hoped Trianon was a private fixation, insufficient to capture a higher tier of competition. He hadn't been sure, that day at the aquarium, it was dark, after all, and he'd been caught off guard, but she really does look like a real person, like the selfies on the phone he stole, and the images he stalked on her socials. Bullets fill his lungs.

"Wait. Don't I know you?"

He blinks and for a second she doesn't exist. It'll take work to make it permanent.

"Oh my god, you were at the aquarium. I had no idea you knew each other."

Insul forces the corners of his mouth to turn up.

"I—it all makes sense now. I'm sorry, that must have been so awkward for you. I must have seemed like his crazy girlfriend."

"Never."

"Thanks." A fractured smile, almost a laugh. "How do you know Trianon?"

"High school. He called and said he was having those. Mental health problems. I've been letting him crash here."

"I don't even know what to say. Thank you so much. Trianon is the world to me."

"He's a nice kid."

"It's funny, but you know, he kind of is in some ways. You just want to protect him, you know?"

Insul's mouth hurts from smiling. "I do."

Oenone pulls her scarf tight against the wind. "I thought I heard him a minute ago? Yelling?"

“He’s been really. Depressed.”

“Shit. I don’t know if I should, you know. Go or stay. Sometimes I feel like I’m suffocating him.”

“I know what you mean.”

“But I really, really need to talk to him.”

*

Trianon lays on the cold tile of the upstairs bathroom, trying not to hyperventilate. His jaw aches, flavored with fist.

Insul slips inside the bathroom, shutting the door and turning the fan on. “Oenone is here.”

Dizzy, rapid heartbeat, overwhelmed. “Can I go home now?”

Insul ruffles his hair. “You know the drill. If you fuck this up, she dies.”

“Please. Don’t hurt her.” As he says this, he knows he’s only reinforcing Insul’s leverage.

“That’s a decision you get to make.” Insul turns the shower on. “Get clean. You can use my towel.” He runs his hand along Trianon’s cheek. “I don’t think you’ll need a razor.”

“Clothes. You have to give me clothes.” A simple, stupid glee at this realization.

Insul walks quickly into the dead lady’s bedroom and rummages through her drawers. Almost completely empty by now, just a few pieces of chic middle-age woman clothing left. He tosses them into the bathroom and shuts the door.

*

Trianon gasps as the shower water hits his face and cascades down his battered body, flowing dirty pink into the drain. Hot water, clean water, blasting away layers of hypersensory, animal filth. He’d almost forgotten what it felt like, after only being allowed the heat of his own blood pouring out of him, or the contaminated, nauseating warmth of Insul’s body, that hard frame lacking the softness of every girl Trianon ever dated, evil boy smell permeating rank and wrong.

The bathroom tile is littered with stained bandages. The X carved on his chest throbs under the water pressure. He crosses his arms, gripping his shoulders, shaking. He didn’t realize how long he was holding that tension. Never at rest, always waiting for the next horrible thing to happen. His world shrunk to each passing second.

But he can’t afford to think that way. Oenone is in the house. His best friend. His girlfriend. If she doesn’t hate him by now.

*

Oenone sits at the kitchen table, listening to the shower run through the ceiling. "Is he...?"

"He said he wanted to get ready." Insul discreetly picks a small white feather from his knuckles.

"He's a very clean person. He hates getting dirty."

"He really does."

Insul slides his chair over a smear of blood, talking to her with his mouth as the rest of him scans the room. He scrubbed the wall and back door at some point, although he wasn't very neat. Little streaks of dried blood are everywhere if you know what you're looking for. Burning the whole thing down will be easier, in the end.

*

Trianon limps downstairs, black-and-green hair plastered wet across his face. He wears a buttoned-up cardigan, hands lost inside the sleeves. The denim capris fit snugly, pinching at his bruises.

He can't believe Oenone is here. It feels like an illusion that could vanish in a single cruel second. "How did you find me?"

"I'm really sorry, but I was so worried about you. Remember that AR app you were really into and we played it together so you could get the friend bonus or whatever?"

"AR. App." He feels like he's speaking in tongues.

"The one where you walk around in real life and fight anime girls? I completely forgot about it until I was cleaning my phone, I opened it and saw your little dot on the map and I had to know you were okay."

"Oh yeah."

"Technology is amazing," Insul says. He places a pitcher of water and three glasses on the table.

"I know it's a huge invasion of privacy. But I was so worried about you. And I felt so bad about how we left things. I mean, we lived together for almost a year. And then you're just, gone."

Trianon feels like he's going to cry. "It's okay. I'm glad you found me." He sits down, Insul facing him across the table, Oenone to his right.

“Oh my god, baby. Your face. Have you been taking your pills?”

“Um. I ran out.”

“Don’t worry.” She reaches into her purse and takes out a medication vial. “I brought you some pyramid whatever it’s called. You had an old one in the bathroom.”

Trianon unscrews the vial with his gelatinous fingers. A few pills of pyridostigmine remain. He puts one in his mouth and tries to swallow. But he can’t. He drinks the glass of water until the pill slides down his throat, managing not to spill most of it.

Oenone looks at his weak mouth and drooping eye with pity. “I had no idea how bad it could get. It really is like a disease.”

Trianon’s face tightens, or it would if the pill was working yet. He never wanted her to see him like this.

Insul leans forward on his elbow, thumb rubbing circles in the condensation of the glass pitcher. “Are you staying nearby?”

“Yeah, my uncle is with coastal security. When I was little, my family would bring me here all the time for ‘beach day’.” She makes quotation marks with her fingers. “It wasn’t as dirty back then, of course.”

Insul grips the pitcher by the handle, knuckles white. Trianon feels like he’s going to throw up. But something else needs to come out of his mouth besides digested food and bile. As if any configuration of words could possibly change a thing.

“I should actually check the time.” Oenone gets her phone out. “He dropped me off and I promised I’d only be an hour. The lobster roll place closes soon apparently.”

Insul sits back in his chair, hand sliding off the pitcher. As it returns to his lap, it leaves a translucent wet trail only visible from just the right angle of light.

Oenone notices the agonized expression on Trianon’s face. “Shit. No. This is the only thing I care about right now. I just, honestly thought you wouldn’t even want to see me. I can tell him I need more time?”

“Sure,” Trianon says, small and tight, not looking at Insul.

Oenone taps at her phone. “There.”

She places her hand on Trianon’s. It feels like an electric shock. That simple, tender touch, unmarred by thorns. But here, in this kitchen, feeling Insul’s eyes burn into their linked hands, he wishes there was a little more violence in her.

Insul stands up and Trianon pulls his hand away. He pretends like he needed to scratch his chest, which does itch, really bad, in paths carved by two bishops.

He hears the fridge open. The rustle and splash of oats and milk, the beep of microwave buttons. In a low, casual voice, he says, "Do you still go to that martial arts class?"

"No, it was a little intense for me. I think I was just doing it because the director recommended it." She rolls her eyes as if to say, how shallow of me, right? "But there was this great class in the same building. VR Yoga. You can actually see the yoga tree."

"Cool."

Insul sits down with a bowl of oatmeal and picks at it, a little too loudly. Trianon feels a terrible desire for Insul to lose control, for Oenone to see what he is. But knowing is only half the battle. And the other half is literally a battle.

Oenone says, "I thought maybe you got scared away, with everything happening at the museum."

Trianon tries to sound casual, despite the cold feeling growing in his stomach. "Something happened?"

"You don't know?" Oenone composes herself. "There was a break-in. And the director was, attacked."

"Oh no. Is she okay."

"I'm afraid not."

As much as it feels like a hallucination, that really happened. He let Insul inside. And two people died. And if Insul is caught, he'll have something on Trianon. But it was coercion. They'd have to believe that. Right? He picks up his glass and drinks, jaw still aching with the shape of Insul's fist.

Insul says, "I applied for a job there."

Oenone glances at him. "Oh? Did you talk to the director before she, um."

"I penciled her in for that night."

Trianon spits water into his cup.

"But she never called me back." Insul's face switches a little too suddenly to sadness.

"That's so tragic. I'm so sorry I had to break the news to you."

Trianon grips a leg of the table, trying to keep his breathing under control. This mask again. If it were someone else, he might call it preening or smug. Villainous. But Insul just comes off as a teen who thinks he's smarter than all the adults.

Still, you've grown so much. Almost proud of you. The mask was barely there at the beach house. Looking back, I can see the holes in it. The awkward pauses, the dead gaze, the thinly veiled aggression. But now, it's like my presence calms you. Fuels you. A borrowed veneer of life. Cutting, crushing, choking, kissing it out of me.

Oenone says, "Honestly, you might have dodged a bullet." She lowers her voice. "It's just a rumor, but some people think the director might have been in on it. Apparently she had a drug problem."

Trianon says, "Apparently?"

"Okay, we all knew she did a little blow. But this is crazy. The Dante and Virgil was covered in *blood*."

Insul experiments with his surprised face. "It sounds like...some kind of..." He trails off deliberately.

"I know, right? Another art world drug-fueled embezzlement fiasco."

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

"And it had to be an inside job. Because the locks are biometric. Maybe she hired criminals to do, something, and got in over her head."

"Crime is a real problem in society."

Oenone sighs. "So I guess it doesn't even matter anymore. All the things I was bitching at you about." She reaches for Trianon's hand and he can't resist feeling her touch again, no matter how Insul looks at him. "Everything is on hold. The museum is going to declare bankruptcy. They've been dodging it for years but this was the last straw. There's going to be a trustee, audit, all that stuff. Everyone is being reshuffled. I'm a little worried."

Trianon says, "You're good at your job. It would be insane if they cut you."

"I think it'll be okay. I know the new director. Stafford. His son's streamer studio was flooded last year and I restored all these water-damaged waifu prints that were hanging in the camera backdrop." She smiles sadly. "I might even get promoted. But it's a horrible way for it to happen."

"I'm really glad, Oenone." Trianon squeezes her hand, trying to keep his voice from cracking. "You really deserve it."

"There's actually a party happening soon. And, uh, funerals. There's a fundraiser, I could send you the link—"

Insul says, "I'd love to contribute."

"That means a lot."

The wind dies down, leaving the house brutally silent. Trianon feels his sweat fill Oenone's palm.

Insul takes Trianon's empty glass and fills it. "You mentioned a party."

"Oh yeah. It's at Stafford's place." Oenone looks at Trianon. "I don't know what you need right now. If you want quiet time, privacy, your own space, I'll respect that. But if you need to get out of your shell and be around people, I swear you'll have an amazing time. It's literally a penthouse."

"I'd really like to go," Trianon says, feeling paralyzed under Insul's gaze. "I just. Um."

"Are you still worried about job stuff? I promise, no one even remembers the silly paperwork now."

"I was pretty worried about that."

"So you still want to work in the arts?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"Then I'll go bitch mode again, just long enough to say, this could be really good for you with the upcoming reshuffle. I want them to remember your face."

"I understand. Thanks for looking out for me."

The silence drags. He tries to think of something else to say, but he just hears screaming in the back of his head, like he's at the dinner table between his parents, waiting for a tranquil meal to somehow turn ugly, it always does, adults always find something to fixate on—

Oenone says, "I feel really bad, Insul. I've been processing all this emotional shit in your house and you don't even know me."

Insul says, "It's fine."

"You're sweet. Okay. Help me feel less guilty. What's your world like, what do you do for a living?"

"Art critic."

"Wow. I can't believe I haven't heard of you."

"I decided to change careers."

"To?"

"Art."

Oenone gestures at Insul's jeans. "That was my first guess."

"I like red paint."

Oenone's phone vibrates. "Sorry, I think that's my uncle."

Trianon licks his lips to talk, then something hits him under the table. He covers his mouth, trying not to cry out. Insul's sock foot is between his legs, the tight denim of the capris grinding into his balls. He looks at Oenone. She's still texting. He tries to push Insul's foot off his lap without making noise.

Oenone taps Insul's shoulder without looking up. "Insul, you should come to the party. It's the least I can do after how kind you've been."

"Sounds fun. Can I get the address?"

It really doesn't become you, Insul. Talking like an adult. Like you're one of us. When I know you'd rather be jamming that oatmeal spoon into—

Fever, this feels like fever. Those simple, fake words that no one could possibly take offense at. That's how I talked to you, at the desert house. Am I being punished? What circle is this?

"I don't know it off the top of my head. Just meet at our apartment and we'll cab the rest of the way?"

Insul says, "I get to see your apartment, Trianon."

"I can't believe he never invited you over. He's shy like that." Oenone swats playfully at the air next to Trianon's ear and he flinches. Her phone vibrates at the same moment. "My uncle is having hardcore lobster roll withdrawal, I guess. Are you coming with me or, should we just meet at the...yeah. You look really tired."

*

They walk Oenone to the front door. "Thanks again for your hospitality. I'm so glad Trianon has a friend like you."

Another smile from Insul, taut as a rubber band.

Oenone finishes putting her shoes on and takes Trianon's sleeve-engulfed hand, petting the fabric nervously. "I just wanted to say..." She glances at Insul and there's a pause, almost long enough to become something, then he walks away, the only thing he can do that wouldn't be suspicious. But Trianon can feel him, just out of sight.

"I really miss you." Her voice breaks. "I feel like I pushed you too hard. Fixating on our careers, not even seeing how much pain you were in."

"Oenone. It. It's not like that." Trianon looks through the tiny window of the door. No vehicles outside, except for Insul's stolen car. Is her uncle parked further away? Is he even here yet?

It doesn't matter. She's already loosening her grip on him. No. Please.

She sees something in his face. "Are you sure you don't want to come back with me?"

Her words break him open again. Blood rushes to his head, jaw tingling, just on the edge of screaming everything out. But every time he tries to open his mouth, he hears Insul's footsteps, really fast across the hardwood floor. "It's okay. I need some time to get ready."

"I'm just trying to understand what we are now. From my perspective, it was working and then suddenly it wasn't working and I'm trying to understand the part where it stopped working." She waits to see if he says something. "I keep hoping it's the craziness with the museum, something fixable. Not something about us."

"It's not your fault."

Her face is working through a feeling his words can't touch. "Did I become a boring person?"

What's wrong with her? Can't she see what a joke he is? Whatever trick he played on her must have been monumental to have her treating him like his feelings matter and he deserves someone as hot and talented and stable as she is, after how dirty and broken he's become, too weak to fight back, too stupid to escape—

"Oenone, I fucking love you." Tears run down his face. "I don't know how things got this bad. I'll fix it. I promise."

She holds him tight and the cuts on his chest throb like they were sliced directly across his naked heart, a red-hot barrier between them that only he can feel. She whispers reassuringly

and he's lost in her like this never happened, like they're back at their apartment and it's all over. Then her phone vibrates and she's gone, leaving a wisp of salt air from the outside.

As he stands there, the light drains from the windows and the darkness is heavy on his shoulders, breathing with him until he can't hear himself anymore.

Insula

Trianon limps up the carpeted stairs, wearing the sandals of a dead lady. He prefers to think of her that way. A lady. She owned a seaside house, and putting aside the foolishness of that investment during the Anthropocene, had something of the mansion mistress to her, inviting a gothic fate. Whatever he can do to make his feet feel less guilty.

The apartment door opens and Oenone embraces him tightly. He tries to feel her tenderness over the red screech of his raw chest, over the hum of fresh bruises mysteriously acquired overnight.

You couldn't touch my face. Not with Oenone waiting for us. But thanks to the civilized practice of 'wearing clothing', it's possible to conceal most of the information someone might store on your skin.

Oenone seems to notice the cardigan and capris for the first time. "You're trying out a new look?"

"Um. My clothes got dirty. These were laying around."

"It's cute."

Insul looks around with a surgical gaze. "This is a nice apartment."

"Thanks. We were really lucky."

Trianon goes to the fridge and drinks chocolate milk from the carton. He finds leftovers in a Styrofoam container, some kind of cold eggplant and tamarind noodle thing. He forks it into his mouth, sinking to the kitchen floor. When he finishes, he's nauseous but still hungry. He checks the snack cabinet, crunching potato chips by the handful. They get stuck in his throat and he chugs more chocolate milk, swallowing a blaze of sweetened dairy and sodium diacetate.

The murmur of small talk in the other room dies down, flowing into the kitchen. Why are you smiling, Insul? Is it funny how hungry I am?

Oenone says, "So you met in high school?"

"Tennis class," Insul says.

*

Uncertain drops of rain tap the window of Trianon's bedroom, stragglers from the black clouds on the horizon. Cozily messy, not a lot of space but exactly what he needed, the first room he ever felt safe in. Falling asleep knowing his dad wouldn't be yelling through the walls.

Oenone says, "It's silly, but I'd sit on this bed and smell your clothing. God, I sound like a mom in a movie whose kid died. Or some kind of creepy stalker."

"You're not a stalker." Oenone tries to put her arms around him and he ducks past, hugging her around the waist so his chest won't rub against her. "I'm just glad someone missed me," he says, not daring to go above a whisper.

Silence. A single drop of rain hits the pane like a mistake from the sky. Then she says, "I still don't know why you were so sad. I feel like I failed you somehow if I wasn't the first person you called."

"Oenone—"

"Sorry. I'm not trying to make this about me."

"It's not like that. It's the opposite. You're the most important person in my life. If anything happened to you—"

"To me?"

"I just mean. I was ashamed. I care a lot about your opinion."

"Like. It was easier talking to someone you're not as close to?"

"Right."

"I get that." She rests her head on his shoulder. "Thanks for explaining it to me."

Trianon wishes this could last forever. That soft, angel-smelling head perched on a miraculously unbruised patch of shoulder.

She looks up. "I don't want to pressure you. But we really do need to sit down and talk about this. Just the two of us."

"I know."

"I feel stupid for inviting you and Insul to the party. Maybe my brain was trying to avoid having a real conversation. That's how I always handled my problems. Going somewhere unfamiliar, hoping I'd be a different person, a better person, if I wasn't stuck looking at the same walls. You know?"

"Yeah. I thought everything would be okay when I moved out of my parents."

She looks at him sadly, apprehensively.

“Oenone. It’s not you. I just, didn’t realize how weak I am. I—”

Don’t cry. Don’t cry.

She puts her hand on his knee. “You’re not weak, sweetie. You survived your dad, and your disability stuff, and, so much.”

“Thank you.”

“And. About the party. I know you’re an introvert and what helps me won’t help you, so if you don’t want to go. It’s really okay.”

He wants to stay on the bed, it seems like a fantasy that he’s even touching it again. But the apartment is isolated. The party is where they’ll break free. “No. I need to get out.”

“Okay, Tri. Then I’ll allow myself to be excited.” She drum rolls on her legs.

Trianon’s desperate urge to hug her snaps and fizzles, overridden by the bruises waiting to blossom under his clothes. He puts his arm around her instead.

Insul drifts down the hallway. Oenone looks up and says, “Hey, the bathroom free?”

“Mhm.”

She stands up. “Okay, boys, I’m hitting the showers. Insul, don’t be afraid to help yourself to anything in the apartment.”

“Thanks.”

*

Trianon’s face twitches each time Insul touches something. The dusty desktop PC, the noise-canceling headphones, a Dungeon Star poster, and sticky note deadlines, all blown past. Insul plucks them from the wall, littering the carpet with crushed futures.

Trianon tries to lose himself in the soothing cascade of Oenone’s shower running on the other side of the wall. Like a glitch in the distant storm clouds, sound arriving before the rain.

Insul picks at the push pin of a Dungeon Star poster. “I remember this album.”

“You don’t listen to music.”

“My friend played their songs in high school.”

Trianon vaguely remembers the controversy over Dungeon Star when the shooting with Insul’s

friend happened. A weird little connection between their lives. Blood on the cafeteria floor. A transgressive thrill through 15-year old Trianon's headphones.

"He had weed. It sounded better that way."

Shards of broken CD. A song playing from a stolen phone in a dark bathroom.

"They're pretty underrated," Trianon says. "They started kind of witch housey nu metal emo sad boy, I dunno, it was hard to pin it down because their members kept switching out, but it's been the same guys ever since they came out with Adult High School which is a masterpiece of lo-fi neo-horrorcore but was unfortunately linked to the shooting..." He trails off. Talking about mundane things with Insul feels wrong, dirty, somehow worse than when that tongue invaded his mouth. It's too normal.

Insul opens the closet and flips through Trianon's clothes, plastic hangers clacking. He moves on to the heap of laundry on the floor. "I had a shirt like this." He pulls out a black band shirt, hem torn, the screen-printed Dungeon Star logo cracked and disintegrating. "You should wear this. To the party."

At least it's something familiar, even if he hasn't worn it since high school. Trianon pulls it on. A little tight, flush against the healing cuts, but it still fits. He opens his dresser, hoping to complete the outfit before any more decisions are made for him, but Insul says, "Keep the pants."

"Come on."

Insul moves faster than Trianon expected. Did you think this apartment would have a different atmosphere than the beach house? A gravity foreign to the specialized bones of school shooters?

Trianon slams into the wall, his arms crossed in panic. Insul still hasn't touched him. Just standing kind of close to him, an innocent distance in a small room.

This isn't the denim hill to die on. "Fine."

Oenone's singing comes from the shower in sweet, porcelain-reverbed echoes. Insul hunches over a pair of dark work shoes with a raised heel.

"Because she's taller than you." A mocking look. He probes the closet floor, finding some beat-up black and white Converse. "I like these."

Trianon pulls them on, then realizes how tight they are. "It hurts."

Insul caresses the canvas wrapped around Trianon's heels. "Then you won't run." He ties the narrow laces into triple knots, then tangles the rest into Gordian noise.

Now Insul is going through his bookshelf. Vintage strategy guides, manhwa, litrpg, vestiges from adolescence. It would be embarrassing, except the last thing Insul read was a school shooter manifesto.

Trianon quietly unscrews the lid of the pyridostigmine vial on his dresser. The vial is still almost full, so his fingers can fit inside and pluck a pill out without having to shake them free. He swallows one and tries to look casual. It sticks in his throat, he feels like he's going to cough it up on the bedroom floor in front of Insul. Then it slides down, leaving a grainy trail.

Insul clacks at the mechanical keyboard, trying to guess Trianon's password.

Trianon pinches a few more pills out and slips them into the tiny pockets of the capris. As he screws the cap back on, Insul looks back. Trianon's hands drop to his sides.

Insul opens the window and cold air rushes in, swaying the clothes in the closet. He grabs the vial and brings it to the window.

"Don't."

He holds it outside.

"Insul, please."

The vial drops.

"Why?"

"I guess I'm just a mean person, Trianon." Insul's voice is calm, contrasting with the speed of his movements.

"What happened to how special I am? All that stupid shit you said about me."

"It's not stupid."

"It does seem pretty stupid, to kidnap and torture someone and think they'll like you."

Insul leans over the window sill, staring sullenly at the bleak skyline.

"You don't get it, do you? Anyone stupid enough to do what you did in high school, in the museum, shouldn't have survived. But you kept on living, when you should have a bullet in your head."

A hundred by now. Does it itch? Your skull not exploding?

Insul turns, fists clenched, then kneels on the bed with a disoriented look.

“It’s really fucking sad. You’re forced to keep using that brain made for torture and killing, way past its expiration date, in normal, everyday situations. Hello, thank you, goodbye. That must drive you crazy. Knowing you’ll spend the rest of your life hiding what you are, because if anyone figures it out, you’re fucked. The last person who understood you died in high school. What does that say about you?”

Insul curls up on the bed, facing away. He almost looks small that way, his height folded. He’d look a lot nicer if someone shaved a few inches off. Maybe trimmed those arms back a bit. Kept them from hurting anyone ever again.

Trianon blinks rapidly, forcing the imagery from his head. “Do you even understand how scared I was? Hasn’t anyone ever made you feel that way?”

Insul’s shoulder blades twitch.

The shower turns off.

Trianon says, more quietly, “If you care about someone, you don’t hurt them.”

Trickle splat drip drip, the shower head draining.

“But that would mean changing yourself instead of everything around you.”

Insul’s breathing is snotty. He rubs his face with the back of his hand.

“For a few seconds you almost seemed nice on Halloween. That’s kind of funny. The one night you’re not being a total monster.”

Insul rolls over, red-eyed. “I thought it was a good date.”

“It was kind of hard to enjoy myself, waiting for the next horrible thing to happen. Because I know you. I know being nice doesn’t cut it for you.”

“It’s not my fault I’m switched around. You’re just like those fucking teachers. All this stupid shit everyone talks about, I don’t see it, I don’t get it, this is all I have, this is what makes me feel something, and I’m not going to starve.”

Trianon’s never heard that whine in Insul’s voice before. He stays silent.

Insul reaches over the side of the bed and touches the floor. He laughs without color. “I can still feel their blood.”

Pop music thumps from Oenone’s wireless speaker. She must be doing her makeup.

“You were a kid. You don’t know how much that affected you. What if—”

Insul looks up, pupils stark, lost within a sea of white. “I’m not weak. You can’t control me.”

Trianon returns the gaze, something animal creeping into him. “And I’m weak?”

“Exactly. That’s why you’re fun to be around.”

“I’m not having fun.”

Insul slides off the bed, getting closer. “That’s not what it felt like on Halloween. When I kissed you. I could feel under your skirt—”

“You fucking child. You stupid fucking—”

Insul picks something off the floor and holds it to Trianon’s abdomen, so quick and casual there’s no time to react. “What’s stupid, Tria?” Insul clicks the pen and the point jabs into the soft flesh of Trianon’s stomach. Trianon backs away and trips over clutter, falling against the dresser. His brain flashes with all the pain Insul’s ever caused him, a kaleidoscope of broken skin and crushing hands. Insul follows, keeping the pen pressed hard. “What’s stupid?”

Trianon laughs hysterically and says, “Absolutely nothing at alllllll,” eyes jiggling as the pen sinks another centimeter into his skin.

“Why are you laughing?” A hair dryer howls through the walls.

“What do you expect? It’s a pen stabbing into my intestines. I’ll say anything you want me to. Don’t you get it? Isn’t that fucking funny?”

Insul looks at him with a blank expression, then laughs with him. Trianon tries to stop but he’s crazy with giggling, fear and absurdity strobing so fast his brain is glitching out. Insul collapses against him, laughing in a stuttery, throat-scraping way, his vibrating torso pinning Trianon against the dresser.

The hair dryer turns off and the bathroom door opens. Insul is suddenly on the bed. Trianon stares down at the erratic line of ink on his belly, terminating in a bright bead of blood. At least fountain pens were never a special interest.

Oenone flits past the open doorway, brushing her hair out. “Ready in 15!”

Insul says, “I’ve decided something.”

“Huh?”

"I'm glad you love your girlfriend. I can see you really care about her."

"You're okay with it?"

"Of course I am."

Trianon waits, sick of that smile.

"It wouldn't count if you hated her. So when you choose me, it'll mean something."

Trianon squeezes past Insul and flops onto the bed, head full of snakes and helium. As he lays in this familiar room, the details of his life returning to him, he understands how much he's lost with his cowardice. Can you call it that? He has all these great excuses. Not wanting to be punished. Not wanting to watch someone else die. Call it an act of god. Call it a human-shaped disease. You ignore it, hoping it will pass through you like a horrible fever, but it keeps eating away, amoral and cellular, and then it kills someone in front of you.

But it wasn't just knowing Insul could end someone's existence without hesitation. It was the growing understanding that Insul is interested in him, specifically. That he wouldn't just let him go. It was no longer pragmatic. Not about abducting an employee with sensitive information. If it were, he might even have let such a person get away if they freaked out in an aquarium or begged a cashier for help. Wrote it off as a nuisance and slunk back into the void. But not Trianon.

You make him feel too good.

And you knew that, somewhere in that cringing frame of yours. But admitting it felt disgusting. Knowing he'd kill just to—what? Play vintage shooter games with you? Smell you? Taste the back of your throat?

And when you admit that, you can enter the final realization. What you already knew, written in bruises and scars and terror, at the museum, at Spirit Halloween. In your own room, where you sit a stranger.

This thing that changed you even more than the mutilating cuts on your chest. Deep inside. Brain, heart, gut, and soul. And not just the flinching or the bedwetting. Deeper.

A configuration you would never have found yourself in, no matter how much you hated your dad or how much shit you went through in high school. Not from anything ever.

Except for the guy standing a few feet away, going through your underwear drawer.

Nero di Seppia

They pass the kitchen on the way out. That's where knives live. They reside in four places: the knife holder, the utensil drawer, the sink, or the dishwasher. Knives. The mainstay of any domestic murder.

No. You were emotional. Think. Self-defense. That's better. Maim. Disable. That would be enough. Humans are so delicate, after all. He taught you that. And if you kill him, that could be really bad for you. Ironically, being this close to safety makes you suspicious. Chained up in a dead woman's beach home? Open shut case. But walking around with your girlfriend and you stab this guy after pretending nothing is wrong?

The cab pulls up and Trianon grips the pyridostigmine in his pocket. Pale seeds of courage. The three of them squeeze into the back seat, Trianon crushed between the hard frame on his left, soft skin on his right. The horizon is heavy and weeping.

*

Oenone fixes her lipstick in the reflective metal surface of the elevator. She wears a black dress with black flats. The others are silent, shadows trapped in the mirror box. Insul has a look, almost claustrophobic, like he's tensing until the ride is over. Out of pressure depth. Now leaving the abyssopelagic.

The elevator finally stops, docking in a kind of waiting room, not inside the penthouse, not for public use either, softly antique. Recycled palaces, strained through the centuries into this anodyne veneer.

Music booms behind a door. A servant or intern or slave comes out and checks their names on a list. Welcome to the penthouse suite.

It's way more crowded than he thought. Like a genuine, sweaty party, even if clusters of normie museum people hide in the brightly lit kitchen, not wined enough to surrender their inhibitions. He recognizes Stafford's son from streams, up on the mezzanine. Probably invited friends, that's why the party has energy, despite the maid-scoured stock image interior of the penthouse.

Stafford's son is what Trianon's dad wanted to be. That angry voice running through Trianon's head, yelling at screens to please a dwindling audience. But it's been quieter lately, dampened by the crushing reality of Insul. As if all the masculine voices he's heard in his life are mere pitch distortions of an original sample pack: that calm, psychopathic drone, that awkward laugh, that hungry adolescent edge.

The music gets louder. Cold beats hissing as they sink into molten brass. This sound system is insane. It's like being inside the song. Hyperreal. He catches Insul studying a swordwave painting in the foyer. Thinking of vandalizing that one? Bet you could get away with it, when the evening twists tight.

Trianon's abdomen stings where the pen pricked him. He rubs it and sees a dot of ink tattooed into the skin. No, Trianon thinks with a chill. Insul won't be returning to that painting. It can't feel pain. It can't make faces.

*

Insul pours drinks from a spectacularly laden self-serve bar, bottles like organ pipes. Oenone downs a shot of Goldschläger, flakes of gold leaf swirling down her throat. At the same moment, Insul tips his shot into a potted cluster of rhododendrons.

A vaporizer bag crinkles as it inflates with weed fumes. Someone else set it but they haven't returned for it. Insul plucks the balloon and sucks on it, hard. The omnipresent loud music must be really fucking with him.

So you don't drink, but you smoke. Your friend did, after all.

Insul offers Trianon the balloon. His fingers accept it before he realizes, battered body yearning for painkillers. He takes a hit and coughs immediately. Oenone rubs his back and laughs. Did he even get any?

A minute later he's at the hors d'oeuvres table, gorging himself on shrimp, nice soft shrimp, easy to chew, although his mouth feels a little stronger than before. It aches, but he can keep it closed. How long has it been since he could control his own face?

Floating in this warm high, it's easy to forget his deranged thoughts back at the apartment. Of course it will be taken care of, by others more skilled than Trianon, who are responsible for matters of life and death. It's his right as a citizen.

He retreats to a dark corner and takes another hit of the balloon. The next track kicks in, trap beats with horrorcore vocals. He didn't expect to hear something as grimy and unproduced as Dungeon Star in this pristine penthouse, but maybe a Halloween playlist algorithm decided it was 'spooky'. He sways and sings along, warmed by the weed.

worming n grubbing
worming n grubbing
i don't feel like anything
i just feel like nothing

"You have a nice voice."

He jumps, not realizing Insul was near. "Maybe if you let me have my pills you'd have realized that by now."

bleeding out in front of the adult high school

*when i die put the red on me
ms paint line tool*

Insul's lips move like he's silently remembering the lyrics. His eyes are even heavier than usual, relaxed with weed. He heads toward a platter of glistening black chicken wings, dyed with squid ink.

The lights dim. More people are dancing now, the crowd coagulating into drugged geometries. Oenone slips through and hugs Trianon drunkenly, kissing him on the cheek. The cuts on his chest don't hurt so bad in the weed haze. He sinks into her embrace, squeezing tight like Oenone's going to get sucked through the ceiling.

"What's wrong, Tri?"

"I'm just, so happy to see you," he says, voice cracking.

"I'm happy to see you too. You really scared me."

"I know. Listen—" Confession catches in his throat. The music is too loud to explain quickly. And Insul would see it on his face.

But maybe it's okay. He didn't want the cashier to die. She was just doing her job, working alone at night for shit pay. But does it matter if some of these people die? If Insul goes crazy around them? They're rich. They had a good life. Their children will be taken care of.

Insul returns, black ink staining his lip, a shredded wing bone perched in his fingers. He stands closer than at the aquarium. It's easy to be close to people at a party. Stafford invited a lot of people. And speak of the devil, although that title may be claimed, considering the present company. Call the approaching man a mere imp, a Malacoda at most.

*

Stafford looks to be nearing 60, but money is a great exfoliant. His art world coterie surrounds them, smiling in the absence of any exterior stimuli.

"Trianon, I hear you're quite the expert on the digital stuff coming out of Semi-Nova."

A caterer passes and Trianon grabs a mint agave mocktail, wetting his throat. "Mostly the old games, but they're a spiritual inspiration for what's happening now except with uh, the new devices, you can do a lot more, it's kind of like AR LARPing, which is a reductive way to put it, like in Northern Ireland they have a really interesting variant called Semi-UK that's extremely competitive—"

"Fantastic. Brain man. Talk to me about monetization. Wrong word, crass word, but that's why they brought me on, because I ask the hard questions, God rest my predecessor's soul but she

didn't have a background in finance and certain vices—" Stafford taps the side of his nose. "—lead to bad decisions, that's why they nominated me, because I have the ideas of someone who does coke without actually doing coke. Which is a rare combination, because you get, what did the French call it? When you do coke? I get coke ideas without actually being impaired by coke, so they're actually extremely good ideas. Anyways, how do you create scarcity, what makes it precious, what makes it art?"

Trianon tries to remember what he was talking about. "Oh yeah, well, the Semi-Novan stuff is kind of idol-driven—"

"So, influencers."

"Sure. Yeah. I guess it's selling an experience more than a product—"

Insul's voice intrudes. "So it makes more sense to vandalize people than art now."

Stafford smiles. "I like that. Are you a new face? Please say yes. If we've met before I'll be excruciatingly embarrassed."

"I'm Insul. I'm Trianon's. Friend."

"Oh, really!" He looks at Insul's height and build alongside Trianon. "Do you work in art?"

"Yeah."

"Fantastic. Anything recent?"

"A small piece."

"Restraint is everything."

"I completely agree."

"Where can I see it?" Stafford spreads his hands contritely. "I know what you'll say. A website. Showing my age again."

"It's actually a collaboration with Trianon."

"What medium?"

"...engraving."

"Can I take a peek?"

"No."

Stafford swings a conciliatory smile around the circle. "You're a straight shooter, Insul."

Trianon chokes on his mocktail. Oenone rubs his back. "You okay?" Pale green liquid drips from Trianon's nose. He wipes it with his sleeve and says something in a congested voice.

"That's the spirit, Trianon." Stafford aims a manicured finger at him. "I want you to hear it loud and clear when I say the following words: I think you're just the man for the job. To coin a phrase."

"Excuse me?"

"We need a young face, someone the scions from China can relate to. The old guard needs young spears. Art had to evolve for crypto and now it's evolving again. You understand. You're hooked into this stuff from birth. It's in your blood."

"What job is this exactly?"

"What we have here, Trianon, is an omnimorphous financial thoughtform. And we're asking you to rise from the financial subconscious into a non-hierarchal possibility realization engine. Fiat currency means fiat reality. 'Let it be done.'"

"Sounds good."

"We need an ambassador. A diplomat. A fetus of the post-digital age."

"Wow. I'm really flattered. Do I still have a job doing, uh, conservation, or is it the same thing, or different—" It was calming to feel the paintings come back together under his hands. Restoring an old landscape that exists nowhere else, burnt, flooded, urbanized in the present day. But now the soothing smell of oils is mixed with steamed membrane and bloody paint chips.

"Conservation? That's a great history to have. You know how to talk about art, you got your hands dirty, I don't know, we'll figure the details out later. All I know is, there's a money hose shooting full blast and we just have to open our mouths."

Oenone makes a face like, see? These idiots are just looking for an excuse to spend money.

Trianon finishes the mocktail, wishing it were a real one. This is insane. Trying to land a job with his kidnapper breathing over his shoulder. The circle disintegrates, Stafford's son yelling for his dad from the mezzanine. Oenone whispers, "I can't believe you didn't tell me about the collab. That's so exciting. I always thought you'd be an amazing artist."

Painful grin. If only you knew. I'm a walking canvas, and because there was nothing on me, someone else put something there.

No. That isn't fair. There was something there. But whatever it was, he's painting over me. Or maybe stripping layers away, finding the parts I erased, pentimento, the weak and crazy sentiments of adolescence. But skin can't be restored as easily as paint. Not even by your tender touch, Oenone. I'm really broken now, you didn't ask for this in your life, didn't ask to fix me twice, I fucked up—

The patio doors slide open. He gets a horrible hit of déjà vu, seeing the swimming pool under the night sky. Water bursts like artillery fire as people tear their shirts off and leap in. And he's getting closer, because Oenone is dragging him along like he's light as air.

Hybrid Strain

Trianon freezes at the familiar sight of the turquoise water. Chlorine burns in his throat. The dark forms swarming through the pool seem too familiar.

“Tri?”

“Sorry. Just feeling the weed.” The sky is too close.

Oenone tugs at him, laughing. Trianon crosses his arms, terrified the shirt will pull up and show her what his chest looks like.

“I d-don’t feel like it.”

“Babe! Are you cold?”

“Yeah. It’s too cold out here.”

“It’s a heated pool, don’t be a wimp, you’ll feel great once you’re inside.”

“Sorry, I’m just a little...”

She puts her hand on his forehead. “Are you sick?”

“Just a little nauseous. I...I should probably go to the bathroom.”

She makes a playful grossed out face. “Okay.”

Insul has that look again, the almost shocked look of dread and pleasure. *I made you this way.* He strips down to his underwear, as if taunting Trianon with his unmutated skin, then dives into the pool.

Trianon walks to the edge of the roof, where a glass wall separates the penthouse lawn from a dizzying drop. The clear glass does nothing for his vertigo, sucking his eyes over the edge. The wind must get really crazy up here. Pluck you up and toss you off.

He could probably run now. But Oenone is in the same body of water as Insul. How would you react if I ran, Insul? Freak out and tear her apart like a shark? Or drag her down and wait until her lungs fill with water? Everyone is so drunk they probably wouldn’t notice. And look at that. They’re squirting suds into the pool. All that thick foam would conceal everything.

A man comes over with a Tajín-rimmed glass of michelada. He’s wearing a sporty suit, shirt unbuttoned a few notches. He has a neatly cropped mustache and bright blue eyes, definitely blue, not gray, or any kind of detritus. “You seem all alone.”

Trianon watches fog swallow the streets below. "Guess I must be."

The man sticks his hand out. "I'm Nexusa."

Trianon laughs. He can't stop laughing.

Nexusa's smile widens with confusion. "Did I say something hilarious? I didn't know I was that funny."

"Sorry, I just. Nothing."

"Well, I'm glad you think I'm funny. I think you're funny too."

"You don't know me."

"Can I get to know you?"

"Um. It's a bad night."

"Sorry to hear that." Nexusa holds his drink out. "But you know what they say." He pauses, then laughs. "Something about alcohol. Life. Happiness!"

Trianon's head droops until it touches the cold glass wall. "You wouldn't know martial arts, by any chance?"

Nexusa does a fake karate chop. "I don't. Why?"

"Do you have a gun?"

"Haha. You *are* funny."

"Haha..." Trianon really has to piss. But it feels like there's something he could be doing to advance his situation.

The lawn lights go out, leaving the DJ set as a focal point, LEDs pulsating as lolicore segues into Russian drill. A silhouette climbs from the pool. Most people would find it difficult to recognize even a loved one in that visibility, but Trianon feels him like a wild animal separates the shadows into threat and non-threat. Approaching them, converging on another glass wall, even if the water is more evaporated than the aquarium, drifting through the sky. The kind of wall you talk about bashing people's skulls into. You can't get away with that here, surrounded by a whirlwind of witnesses.

But you're not exactly logical where I'm concerned. Is that your weakness? If you did something to Nexusa, I bet he'd scream really loud. He looks like a screamer. In front of all these people, so far from the ground, I don't think you'd get away with it. But if it happened to Nexusa, it

wouldn't happen to me, I'd still be here, I'd be okay...

Trianon jerks his head, retinas stabbed with intrusive imagery. He feels vaporous. Like he could drift through the wall into open air. Like a red mist.

Insul emerges into the porch light, naked skin wet and shining, black boxer briefs clinging tightly, brown hair hanging soaked over his face, just a feral mouth.

Nexusa says, "Sorry, man, we're talking here."

Insul comes closer. Nexusa's stance shifts, like, are we really doing this?

Trianon stares at the tension in Insul's arms with fascination. He usually sees them working from the first person perspective. Nexusa backs up, bumping into a lawn chair. He says, "Do we have a problem?" Red liquid sways in his cup.

Young women in swimsuits glide toward the pool, trailing chemtrails and insane laughter. One of them glances over, phone in hand. Insul swallows the cold night air and holds it in his chest.

Nexusa fidgets, his drink hovering like he's not sure whether he needs to set it down or not. "Look, my guy. I'm not into this macho bullshit."

Insul's dead features shift to disgust. "This is my little brother."

"Oh shit." Nexusa looks at Trianon. "How old are you? Sorry, I had no idea, I'm not that kind of guy—"

"Get the fuck out, faggot."

How young do I look, Trianon thinks. He watches Nexusa flee through the darkness, into the electric island of the pool party. A perfect missile of another life, intersecting perpendicular to this one, dull and safe and incapable of imagining what it brushed against.

Insul cups Trianon's jaw. "When I see you with someone else—" He chokes on the words. "It makes me want to cut your face until no one else wants you. Only me."

Trianon swallows, panicking for a response. The sky explodes, startling Insul's hand away. Burning colors stain the fog. People cheer from the pool as fireworks fall back to fake-earth in bright sparks, like hallucinations of the coming rain. Strobe lights catch splashing water in freeze frame, synced to the mix. Stafford's son is probably streaming live to hundreds of thousands of people, wish you were here, but I am here, but not really. This is the heart of the world but it feels cold.

There is a little heat, but I don't want it. Sick heat, dead heat, radioactive heat, burning from the psycho guy talking about cutting my face. The only thing I can't anticipate. Is this how he feels?

Look at him. His mask is so fragile now. Nexusa would have sussed it for sure if it weren't for that underage ploy. We're both the same at parties, in a way. Surviving on sheer willpower, never comfortable.

"You see me, don't you."

"You're standing right there."

"I mean inside. I'm in there. Aren't I? Even if you hate me, you're thinking about me."

Trianon's bladder feels like a sac of poison. Weed stretches the already unbearable seconds. Shouldn't have kept hitting it with the compulsion of a former burnout, or a current hostage victim.

"Insul. Walk out the front door and go down the elevator. Please."

"Wasn't I well-behaved?"

"If there was ever a time you've been well-behaved, it would be interesting to hear exactly what you thought it was."

"For the party. With your, with Oenone."

"Like you'd ever let me be with her."

"See? You do see me. And I—"

"See you? Is that what you were going to say?" It cuts both ways, I don't disagree. Criss cross, across my chest.

Trianon picks at the crumbling ink on his screen-printed shirt. Fuck. This is really paranoid weed, although there's a lot to be paranoid about. It just feels really bad. You can't trip your way out of a hostage crisis, there's no painkillers for this disease, just pain and killers.

Insul shivers as the water cools on his skin, high winds howling.

"You look cold," Trianon says.

What a reversal. Me wearing clothes, and you exposed. How long are you going to freeze like that?

"Are you enjoying this?"

"Not everyone is a sadist, Insul."

A pathetic smile flashes through the chattering teeth. Happy to hear your name again?

Trianon squirms, crushed between his bladder and the extremely potent sativa and something he can't describe. "This is stupid. I need to find a bathroom."

Insul doesn't move, except for the involuntary twitching of his muscles under the chill of the open sky.

Trianon says, "I know Oenone is there, I'm not going anywhere. Like you said, I know you."

"Kings were always taking hostages. They'd raise kids from other houses and everyone was connected, they made people part of them so attacking the king was like attacking yourself. And that was normal."

"Normal."

"Yeah. And this can be normal."

"Sure."

"So this is us trying to be normal."

"What a fascinating thought."

*

Abandoned vape balloons drift everywhere like cannabinoid tumbleweeds. Trianon grabs one and sucks on it. If this is a hostage crisis let's make it Moscow theater. He sinks into a sofa next to plates of abandoned appetizers, their owners tweaking on appetite-canceling uppers. He eats, decadently unrestricted, until he passes out.

Badly mixed bass wakes him up. Fuck. He looks around. Can't have been asleep that long if he's still this high and hasn't pissed himself. He stands up, the waistband of the capris cutting into his taut bladder.

He flows past two busy bathrooms, hallways lined with people looking at their phones, chatting, or grinding their teeth. The second floor has a room full of young men, LAN party, high school flashback. They're playing the same old games, Dota and Counter-Strike on grungy laptops and glowing Alienware desktops.

"Trash. Trash. Clutch or kick."

"You gay?"

"Yeah get your dick in my mouth."

"Eco."

"Care heaven claymore claymore."

"Traps are gay."

"Rotate rotate. Sniper mid."

A few of them get quiet when they see Trianon. Why are they staring?

Someone says "Faggot" in a fake deep voice behind a cupped hand. A few guys laugh, but most don't even notice, intent on their screens. Others just look embarrassed, like if a girl walked in.

The body high from this weed is strong enough to ignore them. He looks for a bathroom, there has to be a bathroom with all the energy drinks they're chugging, no, this is just a closet big as his bedroom. He turns around and sees something that makes his stomach roil. At this altitude, time must fold into wormholes, especially under the influence of vaporized plants. It's like he just saw Insul heading to the pool and now he's here, clacking furiously at a keyboard.

Trianon collapses into a truly epic xeno-throne of a gamer chair, trying not to puke. The monitor in front of him cycles through spectator cams, jumping to a new body each time one is torn apart by bullets, grenades, missiles, fire, poison, bombs.

"Sorry, that computer doesn't have any games about AIDS." The guy sitting next to him wears a track jacket and a light dusting of powder around the nostrils.

Trianon almost spits back an atavistic *shut up faggot*, a defensive mantra from high school LAN parties or maybe something the hostage gaming session activated in him, but if he opens his mouth it feels like all those stuffed olives he ate earlier are going to shoot out.

"What did you say?" Suddenly Insul is here, wireless headphones around his neck.

The gamer looks up. "I didn't say shit."

Insul grips the arms of the guy's chair and rolls it back into the hallway.

No one reacts. Classic hanging with the guys, nothing off limits, talk about each other's dicks and holes, get physical, just don't break the flow, don't be vulnerable. It all looks like a game until it isn't.

"The fuck?" The gamer tries to get up but he seems unwilling to touch Insul, who leans into the chair, pushing it like a wheelbarrow. It reaches the edge of the stairs and the gamer panics, finally trying to push Insul off. But those arms are locked in like roller coaster restraints. "Hey. I was just kidding. Okay?"

Insul spins the chair around so the gamer is facing Trianon, who watches from the LAN party doorway. "Say it so he can hear you."

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Insul pushes hard and the guy thrashes to the ground to avoid going with the chair. It crashes down the steps and hits the quarter-turn railing.

Trianon goes to the back of the LAN room and throws up behind a couch. It's okay. No one got hurt. At least not forever. But his body doesn't know that, panged and clammy. Another thing that reminds him of high school, throwing up in a trash can behind the cafeteria because pizza really does have a lot of calories, which you knew, you memorized the nutrient facts of every item on the menu, but you just wanted to feel good, you miserable pussy, so you ate that cheesy cardboard, and then you had to get it out again.

How many calories do you burn begging for your life? How does strangulation factor into a diet? He really is half-curious about that. Even after being starved, part of him keeps counting. He used to suspect he had anorexic leanings, anorexic sympathies, if you will, except guys don't get anorexia, so he wasn't anorexic, except in every other way it was applicable.

Insul leans over the couch, headphones blinking red from low battery. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You wanna play?"

"I'm too high."

Someone yells for Insul to get back to the game, next round is starting. He disappears. Trianon waits next to his puddle of puke, paralyzed with shame, until he hears edgy banter and terse callouts and realizes no one noticed.

*

He discovers that the penthouse has at least three stories. This one is dim and quiet. Domestic debris litters the expensive furnishings, he probably shouldn't be up here. But he needs to piss, and navigating the body language maze of a downstairs bathroom in slow mo sounds nightmarish.

It hurts to walk. The weed must be wearing off. Blisters blossom on his heels, Converse canvas scraping his skin. He tries to undo the laces but Insul pulled them garrote-tight. Locked into emo hell.

He wanders through a dark bedroom. Falls onto the bed. It smells like another world, cleaner and with different chemicals than this one. The slightest wrinkle in olfactory causality, dancing around the land mines of his temporal lobe.

A knife of urine stabs between his legs and he wakes up in a panic, thinking he's already pissed someone's immaculate bed. But it's still inside him. He sees the glow of a nightlight and

staggers into a spacious bathroom smelling of sweet herbs. He flicks the light and fan on, the classic two-flick routine of a shy gastrointestinal system haver, revealing an autumnal bouquet stuffed into a vase on a plinth next to the toilet.

He lifts the extremely clean lid of the toilet and peels his jeans down, gasping as his bladder empties. As he pisses, he reads the label on the vase, matching names to the flowers.

Yellow hyacinth like pillars of butter shavings, pink-suffused begonia, the mustard-yellow field pungency of brassica napus, and a bell of red columbine hanging withered over them.

He leans back and closes his eyes, lost in the hum of the ceiling fan. Was the job offer serious? Oenone seemed to think so. It would be nice to have a little slurp of the money hose. Never have to talk to his dad again. Cut out the world, leave only the parts he cares about. Cut, cut, cut—

The door opens and his piss stream stutters.

Triangle of U

"Someone's in here," he says, trying to tuck himself back in, but he's still dribbling.

Vapor trails from the corner of Insul's mouth. "Why did you stop?"

"I can't when people are watching."

"Didn't we disprove that already?" Insul sets a vape pen on the toilet tank, crowding Trianon's knees against the cold porcelain.

Trianon's bladder is a ball of ice. A bassline beats through the floor, itching in his Converse, gnawing at his blistered heels. "Just give me a second—"

Insul reaches around, the tips of his fingers lightly touching Trianon's balls, and Trianon spurts uncontrollably, spraying the toilet bowl until he's emptied out.

"All done?"

Trianon quickly tucks himself back in, too scared to shake his cock clean. A bloom of warm urine spreads across the crotch of the capris.

Insul leans against the sink, chugging a Monster energy drink. Trianon isn't used to seeing those eyes so wide, lazy lids peeled back to expose searing brown irises, bloodshot veins thorning the white.

Insul spits amber saliva into the toilet, where it fizzes and foams in Trianon's urine. "I killed them all."

"Insul?"

"In the game. Wasn't hard to learn. Floaty physics, but those guys were trash. And they gave me a bunch of cool shit." Insul holds the Monster can out. "You should try this stuff."

"I don't like the taste."

"Come on. Bro out with me." Insul thrusts the can in his face. Cold metal burns Trianon's lips and he pushes it away. Insul pinches his nose and forces the can into his mouth, cutting his lip on the sharp edge of the hole. Trianon tastes blood and bitter taurine, chilled chemicals flooding down his throat.

"Okay okay that's enoughhbbblhbbghf—" Monster fills his mouth again, foaming down his chin.

"Why'd you go away? We could have played games together."

Trianon spits into the toilet, thick and tainted saliva sticking to his teeth. “Blaugh. You were acting crazy.”

“You mean that guy I beat up for you?”

“Yeah, and picking a fight with Nexusa, calling me your little brother—were you trying to impress me?”

“No. Were you impressed?”

“I think you should stop drinking so much Monster—”

“You’re my monster.” Insul goes for a kiss but Trianon jerks away.

“You called that guy a faggot and you’re kissing me.”

“It’s not gay, it’s incest.”

Trianon studies the distance to the door, guts churning.

Insul says, “What’re you thinking about?”

“I thought you could see it on my face.”

“Okay.” Insul studies him seriously. “You want to escape.”

“Obviously.”

“You’re thinking how much you hate me.”

“Genius.”

“You’re thinking about that job. You don’t want me to fuck it up for you.”

Silence.

“It won’t make you happy.”

“Like you care about my happiness.”

Trianon moves toward the door and Insul slides across it, muscles slow and molten with weed. Another stupid adolescent smile. “You make me want to kill you less than anyone I ever met.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Shhh. Shhhut up. You tiny little retard.” Insul’s fingers trace the air like he’s trying to make a point. “You must be really fucked if you think a job will save you. Waking up pissing yourself. You think Oenone would understand?”

“She loves me.”

“As long as you act like a normie and cut your hair and all that stupid shit you don’t care about. You’re so fucking beautiful but you waste it trying to tune out of your own fucking life. You called me fake but you’re not even here.”

Trianon wants to talk back, can feel his tongue coiling to strike, but he freezes, nerves short-circuiting with sudden flashes of dread, supercharged caffeine hitting his bloodstream.

“You’re not here.” Insul pokes the tip of Trianon’s nose, pushing it back like a pig. “You’re—” Insul’s voice catches in his throat, a stifled whine. Trianon has the finger between his teeth, eyes electric.

Insul tries to pull it out but Trianon bites down harder. Insul’s mouth drops, then curls with pride. “You had a pill?”

Blood wells from his finger, bright on Trianon’s lips.

“Are you going to bite it off? Even I haven’t done that to you yet.” He rests his other hand on Trianon’s shoulder, trembling slightly. “Do you really want to go there?”

Trianon releases the finger and spits Insul’s blood into the toilet.

“Fuck.” Insul finds a bandage behind the mirror, wrapping it around the deep bite mark.

“Sorry...” Happened so fast. Wasn’t trying to. Felt like a tortured dog—

Insul glances back. “My turn now?” He licks his lips.

Trianon cringes against the wall, hands concealed behind his back. Insul drifts toward him, a slit of red tongue visible through parted teeth. Trianon shakes his head back and forth, paralyzed and subverbal.

Someone knocks on the door. Insul stares at it like an animal trying to figure out human noises.

“Hello?”

Trianon recognizes his girlfriend’s voice. He edges toward the door but Insul lifts him effortlessly into the shower and draws the curtain over them. The enclosed space smells sweet and humid, almost nostalgic. But when he turns around, his knees quiver, because the wall is glass and looks down on almost a thousand feet of fog, delirious with neon, the miasmic depths of a

yawing underworld, chunks not loaded in, the earth's crust stripped away to reveal the desolate mists of Niflheim. Long dark hair is smeared across the wall, and this mundane detail brings him back to reality. A metal rack hangs from the shower head, into which Insul places the Monster can next to floral female liquids and a bottle of Coconut Oil Hair & Scalp Resurrection™.

The door opens, leaking distant music, then closes.

"Eww." The toilet flushes, swallowing the soup of piss, blood, and energy drink. Fabric rustles as layers are pulled up and down, skirt and leggings. Urine dribbles like a grotto fountain, close and concave, diuretic with booze, muffled by the seal of thighs against toilet seat.

Trianon takes the smallest breaths possible. The shower acoustics feel delicate, easily tripped. At least she's drunk and the fan is on and the bass pulsing through the floor could maybe occupy the same audio spectrum as the foley of the human body, but perhaps not the folie, à deux, adieu, or will it be tiens? Tiens! Tense? Sure. Tenser said the Tensor, tension, apprehension, and dissension have begun. Futari no denpa, you fucking weeb.

Such a flow of absurdity, Trianon, irresistible as urinary contractions, and so useless now, all this random knowledge you've retained, like old world antiques in a house abandoned to the floods, the flood of those idiot muscles rubbing against you, immune to the hundred thousand tiny skills you manually learned at painstaking length, retard, I mean, socially inept, shy, quiet, sure, any of those plastic butter knives should suffice for open heart surgery. But it's not just your usual neurosis, or the hypervigilance he's trained into you; your veins are surging with tweaky gamer chemicals and your heart is pounding fit to break your ribs, although we shouldn't waste anatomical metaphors when their literalization is so close and so plausible.

A new song comes on. Oenone hums along, then drunkenly sings a few bars as she tears a sheet of toilet paper. So nice to hear her voice—

Insul bites Trianon's ear, wet and hard. Trianon covers his mouth with both hands, a tortured statue. The perfume of their first meeting invades his nostrils, mixed with Monster. Eau de chlorine, de taurine, chemical warfare.

Insul stops biting, as if he can sense Trianon's breaking point. His tongue drags across Trianon's ear, contouring itself around delicate folds of cartilage, damp breath tingling in the ear canal. Trianon twitches and his hand brushes the shower rack, dislodging a mini-bottle of shampoo. His armpits squirt sweat. Insul's hand intercepts the bottle with a faint, almost sub-audible thump of plastic.

Trianon stares at the shower curtain, holding his breath. Music pounds through the floor, 808 kicks and vocaloid squeals.

Asteroid

What was that sound? Did Oenone stand up? Trianon feels gelatinized, like he's going to slip through Insul's arms and splat to the floor. He tries to untangle himself and stand apart, bracing for inspection by outside eyes, but that grip is too strong.

The toilet flushes.

The faucet runs.

Soap squirts, hands rubbing together for at least 20 seconds. He always liked how clean she was, devoid of overstimulating smells or triggers for his hypochondriac tendencies. Probably why she came up to this bathroom in the first place.

Silence. Did she hear something?

A popping sound. Reapplying her lipstick.

Trianon grips a fold of the shower curtain, knowing Insul can't pull him back without making noise. He was so scared of Oenone finding out, but being this close to her is unbearable, separated from the person he loves by a thin sheet of plastic. He doesn't know what would happen if he pulled the curtain (the morgue has plastic sheets for your loved ones too), but something would. And that has to be enough.

What do you see inside your head, Trianon? He can just imagine Insul asking him, with that pathetic curiosity for visualization. Well, Insul, I see you grabbing my girlfriend and slamming her head into the toilet until the water is red.

He lets go of the curtain.

A few seconds later, the door opens and closes. A chunk of Trianon's heart breaks away.

Insul exhales and releases Trianon from his grip. "She's been texting you." He holds up Trianon's phone. "I told her you were taking a nap. I said she should have fun and stop worrying. I mean, you said that."

Trianon resists the urge to grab his phone, knowing it would make things worse. Bullies look for a reaction, Trianon. You have to be a better victim, stop shedding so much blood in the water. But if it didn't work in high school, how much more perfect and platonic of a victim are you carving yourself into now?

"What do you want?"

"You're high right now so I figured it would be a good time to take advantage of you."

Weak laugh. "Let's go back to the party."

"Why are you talking to me like a friend now? Because you're scared?" Insul sucks on his bit finger, wincing. "Did you bring more pills?"

"It was just one."

Insul scans his face. "I don't think so." He grabs Trianon's hips and they twist helplessly, his fingers digging into the pockets, turning them out. Pyridostigmine pills rattle on the shower floor and he steps on them, crack, crunch.

"Please. Just let me have one. I'll be more fun. We can go party—"

"You want them so bad, lick them up."

Trianon looks at the crushed pills. The dosage wouldn't be right. And someone's germs are down there, thriving in a humid environment. But he can't go back to being so weak, pinned under those arms, struggling helplessly—

He kneels down and pinches at the pill paste forming on the moist tile.

Something hits his back, pushing him down. Insul's boot, grinding between his shoulder blades. "Use your mouth or I wash them away."

Trianon feels like he's going to puke again, all over the medicine. "You're being really mean."

"You know it's the only thing people respect."

He licks pyridostigmine powder off the shower floor, gross, disgusting, but it's in him now, a percentage of his bloodstream reclaimed, and Insul can't take that away.

"Haha. I didn't think you'd actually do that."

Trianon goes to lick again but gets hit by a blast of water, crushed pills flowing down the drain. He trembles in shock, cold droplets dripping from his face, cowering from the detachable shower head that Insul grips like a weapon.

Drip drip.

Slither and click of the shower head holstering.

Insul kneels with him. "You don't need that lightweight shit." He takes a baggy of white powder out of his pocket.

This is different. His violence is terrible but careful in its own way, he knows what his body can

do. This is separate from his body, it could kill you, you could overdose, it could be cut with something, you could lose your reality—

Have to stop him. No matter what. But you haven't hurt anyone yet. Not directly. Defend your honor, find out what happened at the zoo, but can you survive becoming a complicated story? You're not that kind of person, except part of you is now, and your organs are in rebellion. That would be your sanguine liver, your galling bladder, torrents of red and yellow like the toilet after he spit blood in your piss, the humors of infancy and adolescence drowning your adult spleen and your safe, phlegmatic brain. But this bathroom isn't a heroic landscape, it's a glorified hole for shitting and peeing, and you're the hole and you're taking his shit.

"What is that?"

"How about you let me know when it kicks in."

"I'm sorry you got hurt so bad, whatever it was must have been really fucked up for you to end up like this—"

"Maybe I was born this way."

Trianon shakes his head, that can't be true, it's too sad to be true—

"I thought you were smart. How many people are forced into existence every day? Like a million? And you think in this toilet world full of oil spills and 6G dick melting rays and plastic that will never decay, screaming babies squirting out cheese grater cunts, that someone can't get born with serious shit missing from their head?"

Trianon's eyes fill with tears, panicked and pitying. "No, you're right. But I have my own problems to deal with—"

"Were you? Dealing with them? Because you seemed dead inside, and I know because I am too. Maybe meeting me was the best thing that ever happened to you."

"I felt safe before I met you."

"You weren't safe, your brain just tricked you into thinking you were. At any second, you could get run over by a car or hit by an asteroid."

Trianon has a mental image of a car running someone over while they sleep peacefully in a four-poster bed. Nervous, freaked laugh, angel odd in the acoustics.

Insul laughs with him. "Hahaha. Get a job, Trianon. Cut your hair, Trianon. What is she, your mom?"

"What are you, my dad?"

“Did he ever do this?” Insul crushes him with a kiss, sweat and chlorine steaming from his hair, a burning flashback that licks the bones in Trianon’s face. Stomach acid spits up, coating the invading tongue.

“Sorry, I’m not good with stimulants—”

“It’s okay.” Insul grabs the vape pen and puts it in Trianon’s mouth, holding down the button. Trianon hesitates, then sucks on it, anything to dull this pounding in his head, in his body, in the world. He feels Insul fidgeting from the caffeine, shaking the pen. “I was so happy on our date. But the next day, even before Oenone came over, I could feel it. I knew you’d just keep hating me, keep planning, and I’d always be able to see it in your face. I’m retarded, but I’m not stupid, I’m not a fucking simp, I’m not going to let whatever we have be fake. I’m going to push it until one of us breaks. Until they shoot me or—”

“It’s easy to break me. You have all the power.”

“Then why are you still alive? Why does it hurt to look at you?” Insul opens the baggy, snowing white powder onto the back of his hand. He holds it to Trianon’s nose. Trianon blows hard through his nostrils, knocking the powder off and replacing it with mucus.

Insul blinks, stray specks of powder stinging his eyes. But his voice is calm, even paternal.

“These nice, affluent gamers gave us free drugs and you’re wasting them.”

“I’m just so extremely high right now I think it’s going to kill me—” What is this sensation beyond pain, this stretched-to-breaking neural screech? Is this what going insane feels like? And that’s just a bad weed trip and a caffeine overdose. If that powder gets inside—

Insul is biting his nails, but he doesn’t do that, you’ve watched him for weeks, you know his slightest movements. He’s tearing away the white part of his index finger with his teeth.

“What are you doing?”

The bathroom reverb adds an ethereal tinge to Insul’s dead voice. “If you won’t take it this way, you’ll take it another way.”

Reality slows, as if synced to Insul’s psychopathic heartbeat. Trianon fumbles with the shower curtain, feverishly infinite, wrestling a rippling undersea creature. Insul pulls him back into the shower, hands swimming up the Dungeon Star shirt, caressing the healing cuts, sensitive as raw nipples.

The 3rd And 8th Most Common Vegetable Oils By Global Production

Insul's hand slides down the back of Trianon's pants, compressed between soft flesh and tight denim, a warm finger gathering rusty aching feedback.

"No stop I'm not clean—" This is really it, this is more than physical abuse—and now Trianon's nails are rimmed with the lightest frosting of blood, red scratches across Insul's face.

"Hey. Don't do that."

Trianon feels his arm slow down, his veins a necklace of mercury, old bruises telling him to stop or something bad will happen.

In a reasonable voice, Insul says, "You don't want to get defense wounds, do you?"

Trianon goes limp. Insul grabs the bottle of coconut oil and squirts it on his index finger, then dips it in the powder baggy.

"Is this going to k-kill me?"

"No. It isn't going to kuh kuh kill you."

Trianon's face slacks with myasthenic fatigue, any benefits of caffeine or pyridostigmine fading under the cortisol overload. "Really?"

"Hey." Insul caresses Trianon's cheek. "I promise." He reaches inside Trianon's pants, touching his hole with a sticky finger. "Wow, it's more rubbery than I thought it would be."

"Insul, can we um, kiss instead, I'll kiss you, please—"

"Trying to control me again? Now that you need something?" Insul swirls his finger around, testing Trianon's tightness, chunky white globs melting clear in the hot furrow.

"You told me I was special." Trianon's voice breaks. He knows it meant nothing, just the meaningless, manic words of a human void, but there was supposed to be a way out, a means of placating, a safety within failure. Like he fucked up even the option of defeat.

"You think I'd ever kid myself into thinking everything could be nice and normal and you, and I—I'm not a fucking simp."

"I know you're fucked up, I know..."

Teeth grinding. "Sometimes I think you know me more than anyone ever did. Even him. But you'd never be with me."

“No fuck please I swear—” He gasps as a finger slips inside.

“You talk so much. I’ve talked to you more this month than I’ve talked to anyone for years.”

Trianon’s head is empty. If Insul punched him it would feel like nothing compared to this single finger inside him.

“I actually like it. But it’s why other people bully you. You’re not comfortable with yourself.”

“Because I t-talk?”

“Withholding is power. My friend did that. He was nice to me, but sometimes he wouldn’t respond when I said something. And when that happened, he had the power.”

Trianon speaks slowly, trying to concentrate with his sphincter clenched around that finger. “I don’t like playing games with people. I’m not good at it.”

“I know. It makes me want to protect you.”

Trianon tries not to cry as another knuckle sinks inside, muscles liquefying with each centimeter of violation, returning the full force of his disease to him. “Please don’t hurt me please—”

“I said I’m not going to hurt you.” Insul’s finger tries to curve up, but Trianon squeezes him out. “Stop getting tight.” Insul squirts more coconut oil, making a shiny mess. He dabs the baggy again and slips his finger inside, working the powdered oil into Trianon’s guts. “Haha you’re like a donut.”

“Shut up it’s not funny—”

“You whine a lot. When this happened to me, my hole was a lot smaller, and nobody was careful with me. I’m not going to let you get hurt.”

“Insul...” Who am I crying for, and how much powder is he pushing inside, what if it’s already the maximum toxic amount of whatever it is, what if I’m already dead, he overdosed me on warfarin by the pool, not knowing if I’d survive it—

Trianon grabs a bottle from the shower rack, unknown contents but the cap is open and he squeezes and something gets in Insul’s eyes, white and chemical smelling, an acrid sweetness, like a caustic mirror of the coconut oil greasing Trianon’s anal canal.

Insul seizes Trianon’s neck, high enough to force the chin back. His thumb presses into the hollow of the throat until the bottle drops.

“I think this hurts,” Insul says, milky tears flowing from his blinded eyes. He turns the shower on and leans into the spray, his hand still tight as a manacle around Trianon’s neck. “It’s not like

the movies. I'm not going to fall on something sharp just because you fought back a little. No one is going to open that door at the last second and save you."

The shower turns off. Insul's eyes flutter involuntarily, even more bloodshot than before. "You should have made it count."

He slams Trianon against the wall. Trianon thrashes as he hits the clear glass, his basolateral amygdala telling him he's falling into the naked air.

"Scared of heights," Insul says. Not a question, but a statement. Another data point in his Trianon model.

"God fuck no—"

Insul grabs Trianon's ankles and holds them high, ass exposed. Trianon struggles but his legs are constricted in the tight capris.

"NO NO NO—"

Insul crushes him against the glass, wet hair dripping darker spots onto the dark Dungeon Star shirt. Trianon looks away, trying to avoid the chemical drip, which is when he sees Insul's cock hard below him. His chest heaves up and down, each breath cut with razors. This is the first time he's really seen it, eyes forced open by fear and stimulants. Maybe six or seven inches, looks pretty normal, no visible diseases, but very hard, glistening at the tip, and this is where your tactical thinking breaks down, the end of all plans, neurons popping, terror burning through a stimulant lens, the skin of your back grinding between bony vertebrae and the hard glass supporting you, his hands gripping your skinny ankles and exposing you to him.

"Let's make a deal."

"A deal?"

"You tell me the truth, and I'll be nice to you."

"Okay."

"I'm glad we can finally have an honest conversation." Insul grabs the Monster can from the shower rack and chugs it, dribbling amber fluid onto Trianon's pale stomach, like stagnant water gathered in the belly button, hissing on the manipura. "First question. You said you got bullied in high school, you know, that other word they use for torture. Did you ever think about doing what I did?"

"I guess, but it was just a fantasy—"

"What was your plan?"

Trianon doesn't remember, it was a teen crystal that grew and dissolved almost without conscious recognition, but it comes out anyways, brain melted by weed and stims, mnemonic glaciers gushing through the carefully assembled suburban planning of his consciousness.

"My dad had a g-gun and I was going to ask him for lessons so I could see where the key to his gun cabinet was and I was going to go in his room and um, do something when he was at peak streaming hours and had his face cam on—"

"Haha wow. That's so good, Tria, that's so fucking good."

"—and then I'd tell my mom something, and um, then I'd go to school and—"

"Tell your mom what?"

"I don't know, um, thank you, it's okay, it's okay, he won't hit you anymore, or, um..."

"You're holding something back."

"...I thought about shooting her and saying you should have p-protected me, and um, um—"

"Now tell me about the school."

"I don't know I just wanted them to stop I don't even remember their names anymore—"

Insul kisses him, quick and controlled like he's shutting Trianon off. "Thanks for being honest."

"Can we, can we stop now—" Hard to tell if the drug is working, if it's responsible for this pure and immolating terror or if it's just the caffeine and weed and hard dick pointing at him and/or a heart attack aneurysm fast onset hepatitis, like he's rolled on X before (and now he's the X) and did the usual burnout shit, robotripping and smoking until he barely got high anymore, but he's never had a guy finger hard drugs into his ass—

"Do you think I'm hot?"

"I don't know you already asked me this I—"

"That's not an answer."

Coconut oil splats onto Trianon's hole and he gags from the greasy sweet smell. "Fine, fuck, you're hot. Is that what you want? Jamming another pen at me to make me say anything, does it really make you happy?"

Pause. "I just want one of you to admit that I'm something, for once. I want you to stop being a little bitch, holding back, keeping your dignity, keeping us separate." Insul's cock brushes lightly

against the outside of his hole.

“Fuck fuck fuck—”

“You know what the worst thing about being a school shooter is?”

“I can’t possibly imagine—”

“Everyone remembers how you looked in high school. But Blake didn’t look like that. It was like a different person.” Insul’s voice quavers, just for a second, followed by a forced laugh.

“That’s fucked up.”

“I was just another shitty haircut kid in a t-shirt too.” Insul’s voice goes cold and steady. “But I had a growth spurt after high school. Blake’s essence was entering my body. So we could keep going. When my dad would pray at dinner and it was time to say amen, I would whisper, thank you, Blake, instead. Thank you for making me strong.”

“He must have been really important to you.”

Pause. “Do you see him when you look at me?”

Anger whiplashes back again, sickened by the fawning instinct. “He sounds like a piece of shit, so I might as well be looking at him.”

“Is he hot?” Pause. “Am I hot?”

Paralyzing rage, at all the stupid questions, at everything lost, at all the ways it could have gone different, if only this brain wasn’t a retarded little animal brain—

“Clutch or kick, Tria. Am I hot?”

Insul’s cock stings him. “Yes!”

“Why am I hot?”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s easy to agree with someone when they’re torturing you. But I need you to explain it.”

“You sound like those teachers you hate so much.”

“Haha what the fuck kind of teachers did you have?”

“I just mean, the way you asked me that question—”

“Why am I hot? Why am I hot? Why am I hot?”

“Just a hot face, I didn’t think about it much, um, but it’s pretty striking and uh, distinct, and obviously it’s shaped well in a way people would think looks pretty good I guess—”

“Think, Tria. You’re so good at describing art. You can do better.”

Trianon takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. “When I first met Insul I didn’t look at his face much I just got the impression of his general status in society which is probably that some people would find him reasonably attractive and he had circles under his eyes with a lot of information I mean feeling, kind of intense to look at but I don’t look at guys like that, um, or people’s faces in general—”

Insul smiles like yeah, you don’t. “You little retard.”

“—um um um then I had to look at it because I needed to see if you were going to hurt me and they were brown and I hate you so much—”

“She’s never seen you like this,” Insul says suddenly.

“Don’t talk about her.”

“How does it feel knowing a school shooter knows you better than your girlfriend? What does that say about you?” Insul leans closer, pricking Trianon with the tip of his cock.

“I’m sorry I shouldn’t have looked I shouldn’t have looked—” Trianon feels his mouth babble, overloaded by the stim-depressant-mystery powder cocktail, hard to tell what’s a question anymore or what layer of reality he’s on just have to do anything to keep it from going inside—

“Look at what?”

“Those sites, the fans—”

“Fans of what?”

“People like you, um, shooters, I don’t do it anymore I just thought it was interesting—”

“I should put that in the manifesto. An autistic boy will be assigned to every Shooter as a neuro-death-scribe.”

Trianon’s skull turns to a fisheye lens: every inch of the world a high school, gutters for bullets, freshman blood mopped from sanitized surfaces, their bodies fertilizing their memorial gardens. Following Insul like a sensory squire, emaciated body dangling with magazines, memorizing the endless corridors and kill-quads, alert to the smallest shift in noise or electricity, predicting

incoming lockdowns and the movements of power-armored SROs.

“Did you jerk off to my friend? Little bullet wife?”

“I didn’t do that I only looked at the older ones the new ones felt too real—”

“Hahaha you’re even a snob about school shootings.”

Trianon sweats under the solar glare of that manic voice, coconut oil melting off his ass, dripping to the shower floor.

“Between us, between bros, between uh, hostage-kidnapper confidentiality, I thought my friend could have been more creative. If he’d waited for me, it would have been historic. He just got one pipe bomb off. That’s only 1/30th of a Columbine.”

“I’m sure you would have done a really good job—”

“And I showed him, right? At the museum? God mode plan. They even thought you were a girl.”

Trianon remembers Insul gasping on the floor of the conservation room, neck red with strangulation. Real god mode plan. But something bad was happening nearby, even worse than that. There was another person there, or very much not there, hissing, was a snake involved? Don’t think about it—

Insul’s cock twitches, setting off a tremor of purple-red-white radiation that paralyzes Trianon’s throat. “Is it hot knowing even though I’ve hurt so many people, I kept you alive?” He gropes Trianon between the legs and finds the throbbing tension crushed inside the tight denim. “Feels that way. But it’s not just about being the special one who gets to live. It’s about the opposite too. Knowing I’m just as capable of killing you. Isn’t it?” He fondles Trianon again for confirmation.

“P-please just let me down I think I’m going to shit—”

“Sure. Why don’t I give you some privacy? Why don’t you go call the cops?”

“I swear I won’t—”

“I know you’re thinking about escaping. It would be weird if you weren’t. But it won’t be that easy.”

A feeling of dread. “What do you mean?”

“One of Dahmer’s victims got away. A kid with a hole drilled in his head and the cops gave him back and they laughed about it even after the guy got caught. What do you think would happen if you told someone? A mature, adult male like yourself?”

Just two guys, is that what they'd see? How could no one have helped him by now, in the middle of civilization, all this asphalt and concrete and electricity doesn't mean shit. Wetness boils through his eyes, matting black-green hair to his face.

"Yeah, you understand." Insul leans forward, his cock squishing into the fat of Trianon's ass. His long lashes are wet with tears, irritated by shampoo.

"Please don't r-r—"

Insul vibrates with a manic jockish purr. "You're being kind of obvious right now. Of course you don't want me to rape you. I know that. It's kind of the point."

The word hits Trianon like a slap, the one he'd been trying to avoid despite all its trappings being present, hoping Insul would be satisfied with creepy licking or kissing, anything but this, the word he'd avoided his whole life with the subconscious reverence of someone whose soul believes, despite any other horrors it has endured, that this particular catastrophe could not be survived, that it would present a unique and final psychological demise, distorting one's life beyond what a life can handle.

He feels something hard graze his hole and he gasps. "I was good I didn't lie please don't hurt me back there—"

Insul sighs, air hissing through his stim-clenched teeth. "Remember the elevator we came up in? Imagine if the lights went out. You can do that, can't you? Make pictures in your head?"

Easier than you know. A black elevator appeared as soon as you said those words.

"So imagine the elevator stops, and no one is with you, you're alone. And you're born that way. And you go there when you dream. When you close your eyes. That's where I am. But now you're in here with me and I'm not letting you out."

Through the refraction of Trianon's drugged bloodstream, the shower really feels like an elevator, humid and claustrophobic as their heavy breathing thickens the air.

"If you hate me, if you know how disgusting I am, then you understand why I can't be trapped with myself."

"You just got hurt you didn't mean it you don't have to—"

"I want this to be real."

"Feels real, feels really really real—"

Insul greases his cock with coconut oil. "I've never done this before. I fucked a girl once, but it

didn't mean anything—"

Bass slams through the floor like an externalization of Trianon's panic. He kicks and claws, this can't be real, someone will save him, he screams and Insul slaps him hard. He stares in shock as blood runs from his nose and trembles on his upper lip. As it trickles into his mouth, he slides down the glass wall, too weak to support himself—

“NO!”

—a hot beam melts through his guts and

[illegible][illegible][illegible]

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Anointed

“Does it hurt?”

Don’t know, can’t know anything right now, this tiny aperture of his body is pulsing into every other part, swelling every cell, blood bulging in his veins, abdomen stretched taut, stomach not sure whether to drain down or geyser up, eyes and mouth turned to black holes. Insul’s tongue hangs out like they’ve been killed on the same spear.

“Nonononono—”

“I’m already inside you.”

“No...”

“Fuck, how are you so loose?”

Trianon’s slack facial muscles stare back as if in answer, this final betrayal of his disease. His cock lays cold and shriveled on his belly. He can feel every twitch and swell of Insul’s hardness, corpus cavernosum, your cave-like body, or an elevator, descending into the earth or rising into the sky, there’s too much of both, muddy innards stirred below, hyperventilating lung hell above. The skyline at his back was muted by a thick wall of glass, shielding him from the deadly drop and freezing fog and howling wind, but now his skull is opened to it and nothing is familiar anymore, not even his pains, he can barely feel the sticky sensations or the hair in his face, and it’s really *in* his face, threading into his nose and eyes and mouth, caught in his teeth, tasting the salty strands.

How many layers can be scraped away before there’s no Trianon, when will he stop, he won’t, his brain doesn’t work like that, but he managed not to stab you to death, managed not to tear open your chest, he bit his hand instead—

“Please be nice to me,” Trianon says, clinging to Insul’s shirt.

“Then kiss me.”

Trianon strains for Insul’s face but he can’t reach it, impaled by that cock, the helpless damage of crucifixion, death by gravity. Insul laughs and leans in to kiss him which slides another inch or mile of hardness inside. Trianon’s guts cramp and gurgle around Insul’s cock, tightening in panic. With each of Insul’s thrusts, icy shock melts into beads of boiling water, crying as Insul stretches his hole, fucked in full view of the city.

Then movement stops.

“What are you doing?”

Silence. The anal sensation is somehow even more uncomfortable now, paralyzed around the stuck, slimy mass splitting him apart.

"Feels weird..." Trianon looks up and his hole tightens at the sight of that familiar horrified pleasure. This is what Insul wants, to humiliate you, to fuck you in second person, dissociated into the new body he's carving and caulking for you, knowing he's changed you even more than the scarring on your chest did. He could have manipulated someone else, some lost soul more burnt out than you, a perfect vessel who buys into his shit, so why did he choose you?

"I know what, you're doing..."

Still no response. He's withholding, letting you hear your childish whine until you shut up.

"You..." Can't remember anymore.

There's only who gives the pain and who has to take it.

Insul finally moves again, hips slapping against Trianon's ass, and he realizes Insul's cock wasn't even in all the way. He grunts, breathing heavily, each penetration wiping his brain clean.

Insul says, "Does it hurt?"

Rage flashes, unpredictable as lightning through soft fawning clouds. "Not like, you care." He tries to say more but his brain is empty again.

"I said I wouldn't hurt you like that."

Too much saliva is pooled around Trianon's tongue to respond with dignity. But the thrusting accelerates and his mouth slackens, drool running down the sides. He whispers something cringe like god save me, please and it sounds even more retarded through his useless jaw hanging open like a puppet. Insul's face rubs into him, dirty brown hair soaking up his tears. He feels like he lost his favorite toy, whatever that means.

"If someone was coming to save you, they would have done it by now."

"God..."

"You're outside everything like me. Nnh, hold still, I'm trying to, okay, there, fuck."

He's right. You were always alone out there, walking through the empty spaces and saying the right words and thinking no one would see you.

Except this time when you checked the darkness, you found him instead.

When new life is found, it won't look like us. Even a microorganism is a miracle when you think the universe is a dead and empty place. That school cafeteria was a panspermic outlier, an explosion of cosmic debris across the student body. When all the other stuff is scooped out of your brain, those hard, defensive, educated chunks, something like pity remains.

He wasn't meant to survive. The person least likely to survive a school shooting is whoever pulled the trigger. That's why you never did what he did. Something was wrong, but you didn't want to get hurt, right? Except that doesn't seem to have fixed your hurting problem, but relax and it won't hurt, but if you do, your brain stretches as well, nnnh, nhhh, you never let yourself be the first person in your life, that's why you're so tense—

—this is a secret I have found
it hurts and I don't want it
he taught me the shape of my throat
imaged by crushing
by fluids forced down and forced up
taught me how much my veins could lose without dying
and now the shape of me back there
the shape i can't see by myself
the shape that shit couldn't show me
you are a boy-shaped shit
fucking from the toilet of the world
strong enough to hold me open
something hard, not relative or abstract, not a promise pretending to be a person
a shadow harder than all the real people telling me to keep existing for an unknown reason

i remember how i felt in high school
everything hurt so much i stopped trying
but there was something feral that i needed
that i should not have pushed back inside me

but i don't owe him for whatever epiphany this is
i shouldn't have to be kidnapped and beaten
and

r—

r—

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— - —

for an epiphany

this is probably just something that would have happened if i got into a car accident (trash might have flown around the interior but there would have been no broken CD shards to cut me, my old Dungeon Star disc locked inside the antiquated stereo)

i should have made it count

you told me that
you're my responsibility, Insul
when the world solves you, it will be too impersonal
they won't know where to hurt you
they don't know what you deserve
i hate how real my hate for you feels
realer than—
realer than—
uhhh, uhhhh, uhhhhhhh

"Hey."

Insul's face is inches away from you, shining with sweat, but calm and regulated. A cold part of Insul's brain isn't losing control, even now. Because hurting you must feel better than fucking you.

"If I didn't want you paying attention while I did this, I would have roofied you instead."

Trianon can't feel his face anymore. Only Insul knows what he looks like. Rain pours down the glass at his back, the skyline liquefied into another jpeg. None of it was ever real. He hangs doll-like, crushed against the wall as Insul repetitively violates him.

— — — — —

The hard mass slides out and Trianon spasms as every nerve back there ignites at once. More oil squirts onto the stretched pink ring of his asshole, a bitter shit smell filtering through the sweet fragrance of coconut.

everything is a flat surface
watched from behind his eyes
safer here

Something is wrong, wrong on top of wrong, a new nausea, more than indigestion or caffeine jitters, creeping from the corners of the shower, staining each incoming sensation.

“Wait,” Trianon says, but this is insubordination on the cellular level, rape of his neurotransmitters. His breathing turns sugary and the glass and tar and plastic in his bones melts away, he still feels like he needs to throw up but he can’t remember why that was bad, it still hurts but the pain is different, transmuted—

“I think this is...”

“Did you, nghh, figure it out?”

“...ecstasy.” Trianon giggles, still crying. This is the opposite of ecstasy, no matter how much dopamine his brain is forced to produce, but that mechanism of action is how he met Oenone, at a concert, normally he’d never be that charming, but apparently he was, instead of his usual mute, awkward self, what kind of foundation for a relationship is that, both of you rolling on a drug that makes all the happiness in your brain explode out of you? She’s the foundation of his life, she proves he’s a man, a person, in possession of a soul, but what if it’s not real? Even you realized you had a certain kind of attractiveness, and that despite that certain kind of attractiveness, handsomeness, ~~prettiness~~, you still couldn’t get with a girl without chemicals significantly modifying your shitty little retard brain, because they all drifted away after detecting your subtle dysfunction, subtle as a soul, but that same fundamental wrongness is what the guy, the cock, the death filling you up likes about you, the vile cringe you suppressed after high school, compensating with niceness, everyone thought you were boring and had nothing going on inside but that’s because you were so afraid of what was really there, nghh—

Insul gags, then laughs uncertainly. Is he feeling the same nausea?

You’ve never done ecstasy, Insul, it’s the exact opposite of your personality, a disorienting blast of light in your dark elevator, tortured by angelic muzak.

“Stupid,” Trianon says. As Insul fucks his molly-oiled innards, a random thought shoots through his brain like a micrometeorite, this is where most of the body’s serotonin comes from, like there is no drug, just euphoric secretions being mined from his ass. Another wave of raped dopamine hits like eating too much candy and getting sick—

“You’re so loose, I don’t know if it’s the myasthenia or the ecstasy, those are nice words, right? Fuck, I wanna see what I did,” Insul pulls up Trianon’s shirt but it keeps falling. “Bite down—” he stuffs the hem of the shirt in Trianon’s mouth, you wore this at a Dungeon Star concert you were

so excited but it was too loud and you left early not understanding why you couldn't enjoy it like everyone else, retard, you probably didn't even wash it, ancient teen sweat crystals entombed in the fabric and they're melting in your mouth because you opened it like he told you and bit down like he told you and held the shirt like he told you, crying and drooling into the shirt clenched between your teeth so he can look at the red cuts he mutilated into your pale chest, X, the world really did fall inside it, but you're not a shitty soulless painting, you're beautiful, he said you are, no one ever said that before, handsome maybe, but nothing so soft and expansive as beautiful, handsome is a knife, no, you know what a knife really is now, anyways, handsome is a carved thing, a still thing, not liquid like beautiful, liquid like the stuff he's making come out of you, fingers tracing the X, the blinded eye of his storm, damaged but not destroyed, all those bodies spinning in his slaughter cyclone and somehow you're not one of them.

"Thank you for not hurting me," Trianon says, the drool-soaked shirt falling from his mouth, panting, crying, talking, he can't tell the difference anymore, a respiratory cloaca. Please keep using lube, please don't hurt me back there, please—

Insul stares at him, flushed and hard and hungry. Then he relaxes, eyes and lips heavy again, like he knows how scared you are, so scared he doesn't have to hurt you, and you feel how hard, nnhh, it makes him knowing he has that power over you, enough power to show you this twisted kindness.

worming n grubbing don't feel like anything just feel like nothing nothing nothing

Music thrums through the bones of the penthouse and the vibrations seem to contain his favorite songs, brain soup coating the tiles ego-iridescent.

*don't own a gun i just point
red on your head like anoint*

*if eaten i'll survive
if fed i'll become invincible*

That one can't be real, way too obscure, he loved that song but he forgot it when he left high school, associating it with being cringe and confused, one of Dungeon Star's earlier tracks, and even by their standards a big departure, when they were trying a new genre every month, but it's such a good song, that raw chorus delivered with a weird whiny pop punk lilt, fragile and shy but hopeful and triumphant, not totally sure of itself but pushing on anyways.

"if eaten I'll s-survive, if fed I'll-ll-ll-ll—" bouncing as Insul slaps into him, supermelted coconut oil raining from his ass. "—if fed—in—invincible—" Lettuce exploding in the backseat, mozzarella melting through the floorboards, corn dogs at night.

"For some reason music sounds good in your mouth."

Trianon shuts up, his delirium receding. You don't get to enjoy that hole too.

"This drug feels like shit," Insul says, suddenly still.

"Because it makes you feel bad when you hurt people?"

"Fuck you."

"You are. Dumbass."

"I bet the feeling stops when I shoot inside you." Insul sinks back inside and Trianon makes a high-pitched gasp. He bites down, too fucked to realize his teeth are sinking into Insul's shoulder. The world melts into polarized planes of resistance and permeability.

Insul slowly thrusts in and out, Trianon's eyes rolling with each movement. "But the other half of me wants to treat you like a princess, take you places, cringe shit, see what normal looks like."

Something is happening with their mouths, lips and tongue, don't call it kissing, still getting used to the strong bones and cracked lip on the other side, tongue rough like a cat, switched into the girl's position, no, the pain position, princess-receptor, not just pain, something on the edge of pain, galvanic honey oozing through his pelvis.

"You were right when you said I shouldn't have lived this long. I wanted to die with him. Every year I wondered why he didn't take me with him, but now I want to live. Because you're really hot and I like putting my tongue in your mouth. And your personality or whatever."

"Mhghh—"

"You need to tighten up or I'll slide out."

"Can't—"

Insul grabs him by the throat, knuckles tightening with each thrust. Dizzier, darker, the weed makes reality so slippery, easy to feel like he's already dead, fucked as a corpse. The music gets muddy and rusted like he's hearing it through Insul's ears.

"Ggghhk—" Maybe Insul isn't trying to kill him, maybe he's too high to realize Trianon can't breathe, either way, maybe this how it ends, as a five foot six necro-Fleshlight discarded in a rich woman's penthouse bathroom as Insul vanishes back into the world.

"Nnnngghhhh!" The taut tip of Insul's cock presses into his prostate, rubbing, pulsing, forcing weeks of backed-up, terror-concentrated cum to dribble from Trianon's limpness, sticky on his belly.

Insul touches it, glistening white web between his fingers. He licks it hesitantly, then sucks his hand clean. Is it bitter like a scared animal, adrenaline burning your glycogen, not enough lactic

acid for that healthy happy taste, or maybe that only affects meat, but maybe that's next, the shower does smell like a slaughterhouse, coppery and fecal and antiseptic—

“Taste.” Insul grabs Trianon’s face, a pale leg hanging unsupported. Trianon feels his warm saliva backblast from Insul’s palm and realizes how many droplets were spraying from his mouth with each penetration. He’s starting to feel the individual parts of his body again instead of a holistic dopamine-symbol blob. He laugh-cries, panic rising again. Maybe this isn’t molly in his guts, maybe it’s some kind of freaky gamer designer chemical, because it’s wearing off fast, not that it was exactly dosed according to the highest protocols of pharmacology or anything, maybe he’s going to die and not even realize it. His tears squirt between Insul’s fingers, stained from the semen drying there, trickles of salty milk.

“If you keep crying I’m going to cum,” Insul says, his voice unsteady.

“Please don’t cum in me please—” Sudden terror of being infected, strange evil dirty cum hypochondria apocalypse.

Insul shudders, collapsing onto Trianon, chewing his neck, grinding teeth broken up by jolts of climax. Trianon finally feels it, the cum that his deeper guts couldn’t sense, spurting inside his pink hole, then onto it as Insul pulls out. Blood and black mold rushes through his face. He watches the ceiling blankly, toxic slime dripping from his guts and splatting on the shower floor, followed by wet broken glass from his eyes.

Fault Creep

He lays on the floor, slumped bonelessly. His hole is gaping and oozing, reflected in the glass. He stays that way, outside of time.

Strong hands fix his clothing, capris and shirt pulled back into place, sticking to the slime on his belly. The shower runs, filtering through Insul's crotch, dirty coconut oil pouring into the drain, that's gonna clot, drill it with a snake, scrape the rape from your pipes—

Insul rubs Trianon's face with a monogrammed towel, working at smears of oil. Trianon's eye twitches. When the rubbing stops, he crawls to the toilet and pukes, barely able to get his chin high enough to rest on the porcelain and vomit a stream of Monster-stained bile, like his body is purging itself of Insul's poison.

He feels his hair being tucked back, kept from falling in the toilet.

"You r-r—" he trails off, unable to say it.

"I what?"

Trianon picks at his skin. Nothing. Nothing happened. He'll do what he used to do, something he never told anyone.

Some of the art he restored, he made small changes, almost without thinking about it, a silent perversion in his fingers, and sometimes larger divergences when he thought he could get away with it. Changing the color of the sky a hundred years ago.

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we'll do that here
paint it out
add a new layer
except you can't do that with skin
not when two big slashes disfigure your torso
blind cleavage, remember what that means?
when the layers of a painting are separated but you can't see the break
and now your chest is blinded
and your shirt a flimsy layer
that must be removed sooner or later

it feels like so long since you touched your tools
since your position was reversed and you became the art
damaged, restored to his specifications

heated and sliced, permanently— — - - - — -

A crunching sound breaks his dissociation. A Monster can lays in the corner of the upscale bathroom, crumpled and tossed by Insul, who is currently inspecting himself in the mirror, making sure particles of violation are removed.

Trianon stands up, wobbling. The reek of the coconut oil is going to make him throw up again—

The mirror flits past, a flushed face drowned in a chaos of black-green hair, and another face he can't bear to look at, teeth and sweat and triumph—

Frames skip and he's out of the bathroom limping through a flat plane of 3D penthouse furniture models.

He feels twinges of Insul's cock inside him, mapping out his hidden subterranean structure, a series of symbols (sit, shit) converted to a pink cave system, and in that system, evil guy cum oozes leisurely, disrupting his gastrointestinal processes, and then converts back to symbol, secretions of magic damage, each gurgle bursting images across his visual cortex:
Insul serving a tennis ball at him faster than he can react,
Insul shivering, naked wet torso exposed to high-altitude wind,
Giggling with Insul as a pen presses into his belly, the other boy's chest shaking against him in a rare loss of control,
and something else pressing into him with brain-destroying fullness—

He's on the second floor now but the music still sounds far away. Everything is sealed in plastic wrap, even the people. His vision flows around them like a time lapse of river water over rocks.

Someone bumps into him, but the touch lingers, not letting go. He stands paralyzed as the crowd passes him at 10FPS. A quieter song comes on and words become audible.

“—so while you napped I cornered Stafford and rode his ass, like, literally got him to get his phone out and send an email—”

“Don't say it like that.”

“Like what? Are you okay?”

He hears himself say, “Yeah.”

“Your pupils are gigantic. Did you take something else?”

“Just, uh. Energy drinks.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“You said, uh, something, Stafford...” His tongue feels broken.

“I got him to commit. You’re in.”

He can barely process this. But it means money, right? Control. So it must be good. A past self would have been thrilled to travel for the first time outside the country and visit nice clean hotels and be important, but right now he just wants enough money to buy a gun and a car, the two most widely available and legal killing machines available to the consumer, and then he’ll drive and keep driving, avoiding sand of every color—

Oenone’s voice comes back into focus. “...it’s a pretty good salary, you’ll even be able to afford your own place—”

“I didn’t mean to be a burden, I’m sorry.”

“What? Oh no, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean, you won’t have my income hanging over your head.” Her booze-flushed face gets even redder. “So you can, uh, know if you really want to be with me. I guess after everything that happened I’ve been worrying if our relationship is real or not, if I was manipulating you without realizing it. I know what your dad was like, always guiltling you.”

“Oenone...”

“But I really do want to live with you, if that’s what you want, I just, sorry, I didn’t mean to bring it up, I keep forgetting that alcohol makes me drunk, apparently—”

Trianon feels his tear ducts spark, all dried out. “Thank you. I’m serious. You always looked out for me.”

Oenone hugs him and the cuts on his chest don’t even hurt. He closes his eyes, trying to feel her warmth through the plastic wrap.

She sniffs and says, “You smell good. Is that coconut?”

There was more in his tear ducts after all, dripping onto the floor behind her, trampled by rich kids. Grease soaks the back of his pants, sticky and embarrassing. He tries to pull away but he’s too weak for her to even notice the attempt.

“Hey.”

Insul looks healthy and glowing, even with the rims under his eyes, realer than anything, free of plastic wrap. How much energy was stolen in the bathroom? That has to be as good as it gets without actually killing someone—

Trianon claws at himself as they talk to each other, nails digging until his brain is blank again.

*

"You didn't bring your pills?" Oenone studies him by the light of the kitchen. Indirect mood lighting, but it has a sobering, mundane feel. His face must be drooping.

"I did, but..." Insul is a few feet away, calmly directing Stafford's son to load a Rick and Morty vape for him from a selection of flavored cartridges. "...they got lost."

Oenone sighs and tucks her hair behind her ear. "Are you okay?"

Insul sucks the flesh from another black ink wing, a pile of discarded bones on the counter.

"Yeah."

"I've been trying to talk to you but it feels like you're checked out. I just want to have fun with my boyfriend before the night is over."

"I want to have fun with you," Trianon says mechanically.

"Can we dance?"

"Yeah."

— — — — — — — — — —

—

you used to like this song

— — — — —

— — — — —

but when you move your body
you feel hard glass on your back
and sweaty hands on your ankles

— — — — —

— — — — —

she looks nice in her favorite black dress and perfect makeup

— — — — —

but it's just a picture
like a picture of the beach

— — — — —

He sways back and forth lifelessly. It's hard to move with the tight Converse scraping his heels.

"You okay?"

"Just tired."

"You look pretty wired to me." She laughs and leans in.

—
—
—

kissing
hot meat feels the same
tastes like meat smells like meat
too close too warm too—

"Ow!" Oenone stops dancing and rubs her lip.

"Huh?"

"Your teeth!"

"Sorry..." Trianon feels his teeth grinding, awkward and unaligned, bruxism made idiotic by his muscle disease. Zombie boy, rotting in plain sight.

"You're obviously tweaking hard. Are you sure it was just an energy drink?"

"Um..."

"I'm not trying to be your mom, I'm just worried, okay? When we started dating, you—"

"I know. You don't have to remind me."

"This is hard for me too, okay? I'd never forgive myself if something really bad happened and you were gone forever but I don't know if you even think about that because you're so depressed—"

Rotting, lich-raped flesh...

"Did you take anything else?"

Stretched open—

"I didn't take anything."

"You really seem like you're on coke or something."

"Whatever."

A few people glance at them, their stillness obvious amid the dancers. She guides him behind a

row of bamboo, onto a teal sofa. “I’m not trying to make a big deal out of this, it’s more about, feeling like you don’t tell me anything. Like we’re strangers—”

“Yeah, mom, I’m on the drugs. Send me to boot camp. Make a man out of me.”

“What? Where did that come from?”

“Sorry.” He looks around dazed. He’s not sure where anything is coming from.

“I don’t understand. We used to be all over each other. Now it seems like you can barely touch me.”

“I’m—I’m sorry.” Trianon lays a pale hand on her leg. It trembles, moist on her skin.

Oenone pulls her leg back.

“What did I do?”

“Nothing. I just—everything feels weird.”

“Sorry...”

The music drops in volume and Oenone looks up. No one is dancing anymore, everyone is crowding toward the glass walls.

*

People run through the streets, water stained red by flashing car lights. The wind must be really strong to sweep waves like that. But up here, behind thick glass, the entire world is on mute.

“—looks like another flash flood. Poor bastards.” Stafford comes over and talks to Trianon and his girlfriend and his rapist. He nods automatically, not hearing a word. Insul’s laugh almost sounds natural, especially when the noisy room cuts the edges off, compressed into normalcy.

What did Bataille say? *The sea continuously jerks off.*

Fragments of Stafford’s voice: “...Christ...someday we’ll be flying here by helicopter...which isn’t fair, right, everyone should have their own helicopter...or maybe a drone showing them different places...I’m looking at a few nonprofits right now...investing in the future...”

Insul passes the Rick and Morty vape back to Stafford’s son and exhales, vapor washing across Trianon’s face, making him cough. It smells like industrial cherry. “Want any?”

Trianon shakes his head. His brain feels drilled open, filled with lighter fluid, burning away the delicate protective layer of whatever kept him sane and human. And even before this guy came

into your life, into your death, you barely kept it together—

—

—

—

— —

maybe that's why you got high so much
because you never had as much as anyone else
you were born lacking
but you found an existence on the frozen circle at the bottom of hell
at least it was something to stand on
but the ice was thinner than you knew
and you fell through

Dante had to crawl across Satan's cock to escape
you did that
you took all of him
to the hilt
you were the "round aperture" through which he saw the "beauteous things that Heaven doth
bear"
and you survived it
but when Dante descended through the ice
he emerged on the other side of Earth
and saw the stars
but outside there's only the swarming LEDs of gig slavery
and a storm fueled by the toxic ice of the Antarctic.
the circle of Hell melted and liquid Satan evaporated and came to us
in the form of clouds, sweet innocent clouds
thickening into a dark wall
and now microplastic rain is crashing against the penthouse windows

—

— — —

— —

—

—

People jostle past him, eager to view the drowning world below. A pink rubber purse deforms around his waist as a girl with brittle blue hair squeezes next to him. The pressure feels nice and heavy.

The party will end soon. He'll have to ride that elevator back to the earth, into the storm, where it will be very cold and very loud and there will be very few witnesses. But maybe it will be okay. Maybe Insul got what he wanted. Maybe he'll get bored.

Fuck. Trianon covers his mouth, flushing red as cum squelches from his guts, warm and sticky between his cheeks. His heart pounds and he can't breathe.

—
— -
———
—
—
don't think about it
—
——
—
don't
—
—
stop
—
- - -
— -

The world is encased in plastic wrap again, flat in every direction. The crowd is tight enough to keep him upright, so he stays there, looking at nothing, feeling nothing.

His hand slides inside the purse. Cosmetics knock against his knuckles, then a hard rectangular shape. He pulls out the phone and slides it into his pocket, keeping his hand there because the capri pockets are too shallow to fully conceal it. He backs away from the crowded glass. Insul is talking to Oenone. That's the trade-off. The only way he'll leave you alone is if he's with Oenone, because she's connected to you. Scanning her weaknesses, endearing himself, lying to her—

Trianon's throat is dry. He goes to the kitchen and opens the giant fridge, which feels like prying open a vault door, and he drinks an entire bottle of mineral water, spilling it across his shirt. He looks down at the darkening fabric and smells sweat and energy drink and the sweet oil used to open him up—

The phone buzzes loudly, his palm itching under the vibration. He looks back. Insul and Oenone are still talking, but the pink-purse girl is walking around squinting at the floor, followed by a friend who appears to be calling the phone currently in his pocket. He can't take the phone out and silence it, because the case is gaudy rhinestone and what if the girl looks over—

He stands by the speakers, concealing the sound in the music, ears hurting.

The buzzing finally stops.

He limps onto the balcony at the other end of the living room. As the glass door slides open, rain slaps his face, blown almost horizontal by the wind. He hunches behind the glass railing and swipes away a deluge of notifications. The phone is locked. He tries holding down the

volume and power button at the same time.

The screen turns red.

Now dialing emergency services...

Now dialing emergency services...

Now dialing emergency services...

A calm voice answers, barely audible over the wind. He crams the phone against his ear and says, "I'm being kidnapped I'm at the—"

"...due to a high call volume, 911 may be experiencing delays. Please stay on the line..."

Countless lights flash through the fog, stranded drivers and flooded tenants. He has to beat them.

The voice recording drones on. He glances back into the living room. Through a rain-smeared filter he can barely make out Insul surrounded by the gamer guys, even the one he beat up, laughing like a bunch of primates.

"Please please please," he whispers. He knows exactly what he'll say, and the address of the penthouse will make it top priority. He just has to talk to a person.

Bodies pass behind the glass, losing interest in the low-visibility disaster happening below. Is someone coming toward the balcony? He pulls himself up and leans over the railing with the phone hidden from view. Blobs of rain curl and twist across the red screen, bloody refractions. He turns down the brightness so the glow doesn't show on his face.

The balcony door screeches open.

He doesn't turn around. Maybe someone is trying to get a better look at the flood. But he knows that silence too well, because his entire body reacts, changing in moisture, Ph, and posture.

"Hey, Tria."

Trianon hangs his arm over the railing, squeezing the volume button until the voice recording fades.

"Y-yeah?"

Insul is almost by his side. He bites his lip, frustration breaking his face into pieces. He lets go. The phone drops into the fog, vanishing instantly.

Insul bumps into him, was that intoxication or on purpose? He flails as the city tilts below him, hands sliding across the wet slippery railing.

“Fuck!”

“Did you think I was going to push you?”

Trianon looks up, nose dripping mucus, red from the cold. “I don’t know what you’re going to do.”

“Good.” Insul traces the sliver of exposed belly under Trianon’s shirt, making the nerves tremble wrong and raw. Lazy sadism, probing for a reaction. Are you bored of me, was my suffering not interesting enough? Interesting enough for you to lose control inside me—

Trianon’s fingers are suddenly wet. Some skin is worn away on his arm. When did that happen?

“What did you do to yourself?”

“Nothing.” The tension must have been wicking off into his fingers, because he can’t show it in his face or he’ll get in trouble—

Insul licks the blood off, like a jaded parent wiping away a smudge with saliva. Trianon pulls away, looking to see if Oenone is on the other side of the door, staring horrified—

She’s on her phone, looking distracted as Stafford pontificates at her. Another life, filtered through the dark blue aquarium of the penthouse glass.

Insul’s eyes are heavy with weed, but the stims have his limbs fidgeting, his own form of displacement, perhaps, for whatever he wants to do to Trianon right now. “She really doesn’t see what’s happening to you?”

“I don’t want her to see.”

“If you were in trouble, I’d know just from the look on your face.”

“I—” Trianon stops before he stutters.

Sometimes during high school he would fall asleep imagining someone strong at his side, a juvenile fantasy of cool, usually the 18-year old emo guy taking him to house parties and mentoring him, protecting him. He never fantasized about being the strong one, because that seemed impossible. Even in his dreams it could only come from someone else.

Insul presses close, shielding him from the rain.

“Um—”

The floor shudders. Is he fainting? Is he going crazy?

The balcony shakes again, rolling under his feet. He clutches Insul to keep from falling over the railing, but Insul is shaking too, the world is shaking.

The wind is so violent and loud that it takes a few seconds to realize the building has stopped moving.

His face is pressed into Insul's chest, into the dried sweat and sweetness of oil and hormonal stink. But the freezing air strips the smell of its worst parts, warms it by contrast. He hides in that dark, Insul's heart beating violently against his crushed lips.

"Are you okay?"

Trianon nods, embarrassed, uncurling his fingers from Insul's shirt. He can hear something different about Insul's breathing. Most people wouldn't call that panic, but he knows the rhythm of Insul's dark triad respiratory system. If the building goes down, Insul will be unrecognizable meat like the rest of them, all cunning and strength rendered null.

Oenone grabs Trianon as soon as he steps inside. "Holy shit. You were on the balcony? That must have been terrifying."

"What happened?" he says, surprised at how steady his voice is.

Stafford wheezes, "Welcome to earthquake country," blotches of brown liquor at his feet.

The floor is no longer a constant. Their height is now real and this is no longer a pocket dimension, he is fully aware of the earth and the sky. But for some reason Oenone reading her phone with a certain expression is the only thing that scares him right now. Did Insul text her something from his stolen phone? She looks up and he holds his breath.

"A wave just hit the coast."

He relaxes. It's just something happening to someone else. "What kind of wave?"

"Like an earthquake tsunami type thing. I think the city is okay. Wait. Insul."

"Yes?"

"Your house."

Trianon thinks of the beach house, flooded in every room by sudden white foam. Feels good. It should be destroyed.

Insul shrugs. "It doesn't belong to me."

"Huh?"

After a pause, he says, “It’s my parents.”

“Mine have a cabin. They’re always inviting me to stay there on vacation.”

Trianon says, “What’s the elevation?”

“It was years ago, but I remember the car rattling a lot. I think it was higher up?” Her nails click rapidly as she texts. “Goddamnit. My uncle says.” Trailing off, click click click. “There’s a lot of fucking water. We should go. Somewhere.”

Trianon remembers the drive to the museum past the flooded park. He’d gotten used to that kind of low-elevation, west coast drainage deficiency. But it’s been raining for weeks and now it’s coming down even harder and this is a new feeling, like when fire season lasted an extra four months as a teen, not able to open the windows, trapped in a sweltering spaceship of suburbia.

“Did your uncle use the word ARkStorm?”

“The what storm?”

“Um, basically giant storms hit the state fairly predictably if you look at the geological record but no one cares for some reason. It’s called an atmospheric river and this one might be really big and keep coming and a lot of infrastructure is going to stop working for months.”

“We have to learn about ARkStorms now?”

“I knew about ARkStorms,” Insul says.

Yeah, I’m sure national disaster played a big part in setting the stage for Hostage Harems and Bullet Wives. “If it’s that kind of storm, the whole state will be affected, the Central Valley might be an inland sea again, some of the levees might even be trapping the water in instead of keeping it out. The west coast doesn’t have a good system for this kind of thing.”

Oenone looks at her phone. “I can’t find a single cab—”

Trianon feels sick excitement at the broken world being revealed to her, to everyone. Except Insul. Insul knows. Insul is the brokenness.

“Fuck! We can’t get to our apartment and we can’t stay here—” She straightens up, takes a deep breath, and suddenly seems a lot less drunk. “Okay. We’ll be okay.”

“We will?” He realizes how much he’s needed to hear those words, for every possible reason. Maybe it would be okay to tell her—

His stomach hurts, a sinkhole of dizziness. He crumbles into the couch where he fell asleep earlier (warm and high, still not knowing what would happen if he went upstairs). Appetizers

glisten nearby, Euro dairy unctuous and cursed Mediterranean. Nervous party-leavers scoop the last ones up like they're going to ration out a megastorm on crudités.

Oenone is still by the window texting with her uncle, maybe he can drive here in a militarized boat, that would be kinda epic.

Trianon says, "Hey, Insul."

"Yes?"

"I want those snacks."

Insul looks at him, then goes to the table and carefully places a selection of appetizers onto a paper plate. He brings it back with a glass of sparkling water.

"Thank you."

"You never asked me for something before."

"Really."

"Begging for your life isn't the same. It's not personal."

Trianon stuffs his mouth with bruschetta toast and bleu cheese. It's nice to eat off a plate. Outside, siren lights race across a ceiling of fog. He giggles. Everything is breaking outside. Just like it is inside.

Stafford's voice scrapes in the background, does he ever shut up? Trianon trembles, his knees rubbing together. If he asked, Insul would throw that guy off the balcony, just for him—

Oenone comes to the couch, her face hard and focused, hair pulled back into a ponytail. "We need to get out of here." She refreshes her phone, then puts it away. "But I'm officially giving up on cabs."

"I can help," Insul says.

"How?"

He dangles a car fob.

*

Before they leave, the gamer guys gather around Insul, hands slapping and phone numbers being exchanged (into Trianon's old phone). He rubs the head of the guy he beat up earlier and laughs indulgently. Was that another baggy slipping into his pocket?

"You seem comfortable with them," Trianon says.

"I used to go to tournaments, LAN parties. So I could crash at people's houses."

As they leave the penthouse, Insul's hand touches the small of Trianon's back, just for a second, and he feels smothered in shit.

*

The elevator opens and water laps at their feet, the parking garage echoing as it drains the flood into a cold cave under the tower.

"Stafford's son said I could drive his car."

"Really?" Oenone says.

"He doesn't need it right now."

They splash through the water, Insul's boots heavy and protected, Oenone wincing as her open-toed flats taste the chill, and Trianon's Converse filling with cold liquid, cooling his blisters, ahhhh, washing the blood out.

Insul presses the key fob and Trianon jerks as a car yelps.

"Wow," Oenone says.

A sleek, lime green car with a huge anime decal, an angel-demon girl with massive boobs.

"Real inconspicuous," Trianon says. Exactly the kind of car you drive if you don't want the police to notice you.

Oenone sweeps the trash off the backseat, onto a floor covered in Taco Bell wrappers. "That kid lives in a penthouse and his car looks like this?"

"I think it's acquiring an autumnal fragrance," Trianon says. "We have to let it compost." His eyes are glassy.

Oenone rubs her bare arms. "Start the car, please."

Insul is silent. Then he locks the doors and starts the engine.

*

The car chugs through the flooding city, rain rattling the roof like the sky is bleeding from its

heart.

Trianon sits in the front seat, a block of ice. Oenone refreshes her phone compulsively. Insul is doing his usual no-boundaries exploration of the environment, bored at the slow traffic. He starts by pushing an unlabeled button on the dashboard.

Nothing happens.

Oenone says, "Look outside." The water glows satanic red around them. "Nice underglow."

Insul checks the center console, sifting through used vape cartridges. He finds a metallic gold tube with Japanese engraved on it, a mechanical mod like Trianon's dad tried to get into, pure mechanism no regulators. He turns it on.

Oenone notices. "That's the kind of vape that explodes, right? You were telling me about that guy, Tri—"

"It's fine," Insul says.

She laughs. "Don't yell at me when your jaw gets blown off."

"I don't yell."

It's true, Trianon thinks. At least he doesn't trigger that particular trauma from my childhood. A quiet tormenter.

Insul takes a hit from the heated mech mod. Oenone says, "Are you good to drive?"

"Yeah."

She looks out the window, too tired to argue. "Are we heading back to the apartment?"

"Should we?" Insul says placidly.

The traffic ahead of them is barely moving. Emergency lights flash where someone hydroplaned into an Apple Store at the bottom of a hill street, rain speckling the screens on display tables.

Insul says, "What's the address of the cabin?"

"You think?"

"Seems like the safest thing," he replies, as if it didn't matter to him.

Oenone reaches between them and types the address into the dashboard GPS.

Shouldn't have done that, Trianon thinks. But the drugs are fading and the corroding pain is back, eating out the string in his tongue and the lights in his eyes.

*

He wakes up nauseous, cum oozing from his hole. His head feels like it was beaten with a tennis racket, but his teeth have stopped grinding. He cracks his jaw open and moves it around mushily.

They're on the highway, trees rushing past. The opposite lane is engulfed in a mudslide. Through the fogged glass, the dark gray mass looks like nothingness swallowing the land.

He rotates painfully to see through the rear glass. The city is behind them. That means something bad. But it's too big to think about, and he is very small. It feels like he's riding with his mom and dad.

He forces himself to look at the driver. Insul looks nothing like his dad. Just some guy his own age. And the mirror shows him a rectangle of Oenone very different from his mom, who had black hair and thick eyebrows like him. Oenone is blond with dark roots and she plucks her eyebrows and she didn't give birth to him. They order takeout and watch streaming and have a million in-jokes, if he could remember them.

The car turns off the road and his heart speeds up. He grips the handle of the door.

Through the rain a convenience store paints itself into existence.

*

"This is like 120 MPH wind," Oenone says before she gets out and the storm whips the voice from her mouth and pushes Trianon back and Insul grabs his shirt to keep him from blowing away.

They run inside. It's empty except for mud and leaves tracked across the floor. Insul heads to the unpowered refrigerators, grabbing bottled water.

Oenone looks nervous. "We're just taking it?"

In a monotone, tired voice, Insul says, "I'm not going to die of dehydration because there isn't a fake guy standing behind that counter who will take pieces of paper from me with numbers on them."

Oenone laughs. "End of the world, right?"

"End of the world," Insul says flatly.

Oenone looks kind of thrilled. She grabs a few bars and flips through the gum rack.

Don't get mad, Insul. I know you'd rather be driving alone with me. Societal collapse is your dream date.

Oenone says something about looking for a bathroom and disappears into the employees-only area. The others hunt for snacks as wind screams behind the glass, bukkaking the anime girl on the car with high-velocity stormjizz.

Insul checks the phone that used to belong to Trianon. "Your mom keeps calling."

"She called? You never told me?"

"She's not a good influence."

Brittle laugh from Trianon.

Insul crams protein bars into his pockets. "Yeah. I'm a bad person. But you know that about me. Your mom got to you earlier."

"Got to me?"

"You don't have perspective on her. Because she was your least bad adult."

"She did a lot for me."

The phone lights up and Insul unlocks it, a new swipe pattern to mark it as his, could it be an X? "I'll just block her number. Don't worry about it."

"Please—"

Insul looks up.

"Can I talk to her? You know we'll stop getting signal soon anyways."

Insul stares at him, finger poised on the block button. He hands the phone over.

Trianon gives him a grateful look, then answers the call.

"Mom?"

...

"I'm okay."

...

"Yeah. Are you—"

...

"Good. I—"

...

"What?"

...

"I can't hear you."

...

"Yeah I—yeah. Hard to hear. I know."

...

"Yeah. I'll call when I—yeah. Bye."

Trianon hands the phone back.

"How was it?"

"It didn't feel like anything," Trianon says quietly.

"Yeah."

"She should have divorced him."

"Want me to visit her? Or your dad?" Insul runs his finger along the counter. "911 is down. Could maybe do a little Kinkel...twofer..."

"I don't want anything to do with him." Trianon opens a bag of pizza-flavored potato chips. "You know what I mean. Hurting him would be too..."

"Intimate?"

Trianon looks away, chewing the chips with difficulty.

"What about your mom?"

“She doesn’t deserve that.”

“I bet it was your mom who called you smart. Trying to get you into movies and modeling, probably likes you working at a museum. Because you’re a sensitive boy, right? Can’t defend yourself. She knew you’d have to offer something up. Your brain. Maybe your body.”

Trianon’s mouth is dry. He fumbles with a bottle of water but can’t open it.

“But I get it. Your brain just wants to focus on nice pretty things and get autistic about history, language, aesthetic shit. Around me, you can do that. You don’t need a job, don’t need to keep trying so hard.”

Insul twists the cap off and holds the bottle to Trianon’s mouth. Trianon grabs it and waits, lips cracked, before finally taking a sip.

*

Energy drinks and water bottles roll around the back of the car, bouncing against Oenone’s thigh, black dress pulled up slightly. A half-eaten Luna bar rests in her hand, a smear of chocolate on her mouth. She wakes up and checks her phone.

Insul’s leg bounces like he has to piss. He scans the side of the road.

Trianon looks out the window. The rain is so heavy and his vision so blurry that only impressions of liquid forest flit through. Would kill for a pyridostigmine. But you can’t find those at corner stores. They do sell energy drinks. Trianon cracks the lid on a Swordhead Ultra, a slender purple-green cylinder promising herbal madness and toxic serenity. Insul grins at him in that enabling, death jock way. The mech mod rests between them, radiating uncomfortable heat.

They pull into a rest stop, running in the cold rain toward the twin openings of a public bathroom. Oenone darts into the women’s side and they go in the other. A dad in a camo mask is helping his son use the urinal. He glances sideways, eyes suspicious or maybe just tired, then returns to encouraging his son in a low murmur. Insul waits to see which stall Trianon goes inside, then pisses in the urinal in front of it.

Trianon pulls his pants down, skin covered in indentations from the tight denim. He tries to do it standing, but his legs buckle. He sits down, slumped against the tank. As he pisses, something else drips out of him, burning from his hole. That has to be the last of the cum. Please. His teeth crush together, trying to keep the tears back, afraid of drawing attention. Once the camo dad might have been the kind of bugout bystander he’d bet on to have a gun or knife or something, try to be a hero. But after everything he’s seen, he has no confidence in anyone being able to save him.

He looks under the stall. The boots aren’t there. Need to get back to the car. What if Insul is

mad at him? What if he's doing something to Oenone? What if he cuts your face?

No, Trianon thinks. He likes me. Then the storm chill in the bathroom sharpens, crypt-cold after days of rain, falling heavier and colder by the hour, his skin sticking to the toilet seat.

There's no reason Insul can't cut your face, all he wants, up and down and across and in and out, because it'll turn other people off, not him.

More cum oozes out and the warmth brings Trianon back. He wipes, trying to get rid of the sticky mess. Faster. Don't make him mad.

He barely washes his hands, just a splash, germaphobia not even kicking in, then runs to the car, collapsing in the front seat. Insul is there, but the rest of the car is empty.

He tries not to sound terrified. "Where's Oenone?"

Insul fumbles with the mech mod, jamming a new battery into it. "I killed her."

"What?" The world flashes white.

"Just kidding."

Oenone emerges, chatting with the mom from the minivan family. Death recedes, leaving the trouble of being alive, his ass tingling with shards of hypochondria. In a quiet voice, he says, "Do you have any, um. Diseases?"

"I haven't stuck my dick in anyone else for at least a year."

"That doesn't mean you don't have something."

Insul shrugs and checks on Oenone. Still talking to the minivan mom, making a commiserative face. His hand slithers onto Trianon, pulling his shirt up. Trianon breathes heavily under Insul's gaze, his unique erogenous zone exposed.

"Looks nice," Insul says. "I think it's starting to set."

Trianon closes his eyes, trying not to cry, because he doesn't know if he'll stop by the time Oenone gets back.

- — - —people who can't sign their names
sign with X
he signed me
the only way he knew how
emotionally illiterate— — - —

"Why don't you stop thinking so hard and tell me."

"Huh?"

"You look fucked up. You're thinking about me, aren't you?"

"I was thinking how people sign their name with X when they're illiterate."

"I should sign my last name too."

"Mononyms are cooler."

"You'd better hope they are." Insul vapes on the mech mod until the windows are fogged. His eyes are hollowed out, bloodshot from smoking and exhaustion.

He probably had an ascetic lifestyle before this, drifting from place to place with only a notebook. Maybe he needs drugs to support his intrusion into a foreign reality. You were meant to be a school shooter, the most disposable organism, bursting as you rose from your depth, horrifying the people who discovered your gore washed up on the surface. But your friend swallowed your sin and you survived, somehow.

"Why do you look sad?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"I know what you look like when you're scared I'm going to hurt you, and when you're worried about me killing your girlfriend. But I don't know that look."

"I think I was feeling bad for you."

"What?" He almost looks angry.

"Nothing. Just that stuff I said before."

"About me not being able to visualize in my head?"

"Just wondering how your life would have been if you hadn't met that guy in high school."

"I was already fucked."

"You really think shooting two kids in a cafeteria didn't have an effect on you?"

"It had an effect on them."

Trianon hesitates, then puts his hand on Insul's arm, careful to keep it on the jacket sleeve,

avoiding skin contact. Rain beats against the windows. Insul's lips twist, trembling for a second, then he bites down on the traitorous flesh, and his face is still. He passes the mech mod to Trianon.

The thought of taking more drugs brings up a surge of bile, but the mod is warm so he holds it, and then he sucks on it. Vapor ghosts from his mouth, curling across them, a shared atmosphere.

Suddenly Oenone is back in the car, slamming the door against the storm. But his hypervigilance didn't trigger, didn't need to. The scariest thing in the world is already sitting next to him.

"I hate to say it, but this is kind of fun." Oenone takes a fat hit of the mech mod and sinks back. "Not having to worry about art world politics. Not having to be a neurotic bitch. Just a girl in a car with the guys. The three of us going on a road trip. Three is the perfect number."

"More or less," Insul says.

Cat Hole

"I can drive." Oenone leans forward, wisps of blond hair falling loose from her ponytail, brushing Trianon's arm.

Insul tightens his grip on the wheel. "Why did you say that?"

"You've been up all night. So I thought—"

"I like driving." The rims on Insul's eyes are carved deep. How long has he been coasting on stims?

Trianon's hand drifts back and touches Oenone's, a timid movement, hoping Insul won't notice, those hooded eyes consuming the road. Her skin is cold, arms pale and bare in the black dress.

He says, "Did you forget your jacket?"

"Shit. I was so spaced out."

Trianon turns the heat up and puts his hand back in hers. Eyes closed, feeling her soft skin, another fuzzy pseudo-sleep comes over him, the new way he's learned to rest.

In his mind's eye, where Insul can't go, he sees himself leaping through the trees alongside the car. Effortless, predetermined animations, in contrast with his physical clumsiness, or maybe that's the wrong word. A skittish fragility, never quite sure where to put itself, hummingbird brain. His dad tried to teach him games but they were too fast. Battle royale shooters with 99 other players, or mobas and fighters with a similar number of characters to memorize. He kept dying without understanding why. Don't want to die without understanding why.

Head sagging into the seat, he picks up the faintest remnant of new car smell. Lingering VOC's, carcinogen perfume. Things are still being born in the world, if they are strong enough. Machines like Insul, powered by chemicals, born from a gun, raised by cars. You're too organic, soyboy. But feeling too much pays off sometimes.

He opens his eyes. The car isn't lining up with the road. He waits to see if his retinas are out of alignment. And they are, a little, ghostly rain road, but something is still wrong.

"Insul."

No response.

"Insul."

The tires sing a different song as their rubber traces the edge of the road. There are no railings, just a line of trees along a matted slope descending into the kind of west coast demi-forest he

would walk around as a kid, past stagnant creeks feeding into drainage pipes. But now everything is wet down there, and things are losing their distinction.

Trianon pinches Insul's arm, hard. Those heavy eyes snap open and Insul jerks the wheel, spinning them sideways into the center of the road.

After a silence, Trianon looks back. Oenone lays on her side, hair askew. In a measured, slightly shaking voice, she says, "I'm going to drive now."

Insul drops his hands from the wheel.

"Just a sec." Oenone cracks her door and winces at the cold spray. "I need your jacket, Insul."

Something bad moves through Insul's face, then drowns in weariness. He hands her his orange parka, the material hissing as it slides between the seats. Oenone zips it up, disappearing inside the larger fit.

"I'll be right back." A burst of rainy noise, then the door closes. They watch her sprint into the trees on the side of the road.

Insul turns his gaze back. Trianon has that feeling again, of locking eyes with a rabid animal. Fearing it might turn on him, coupled with the pity of seeing a sick thing.

Insul's head sinks into the wheel. "When I fell asleep, it was like you died."

Trianon sits still, heart pounding softly.

"Or like you never existed at all. Like it wasn't even possible for this dream to come true."

"You're talking..." An unbearable brittleness, the doomed headache of this apocalyptic comedown.

"I'm talking. You fight it harder than you fought my cock."

The rain outside seems like all the tears he's cried, can no longer cry. This vehicle is like an exoskeleton that he needs to function, deprived of his own mass and momentum. "What's your point?"

"I almost killed you." Insul laughs with a scrape in his throat. "Then I would have really been alone."

"I feel dead."

"I wouldn't let that happen." Insul sniffs the air. He looks down and realizes Trianon's hand is silently burning on the mech mod. He pulls it off, exposing angry red skin. He quickly pours

bottled water on it, trickling through the burnt fingers onto the composting Taco Bell bags.

The driver side door opens. Trianon thrusts his singed hand between his legs.

“Fuck it’s wet out there,” Oenone says. “I’ll drive, you can sleep.”

Insul crawls to the back seat and curls up on his side. Oenone takes the parka off and pushes it onto Trianon. Warm despite the rain, with that metallic jock smell that Oenone’s perfume couldn’t sweeten. She pulls the hem of her dress down and picks away the strands of grass clinging to her ankles. “Road trip, road trip,” she mumbles, tired-looking but not undead like Insul.

Trianon can tell Insul isn’t asleep, with that sense he painfully developed in his company. I could make you fall asleep. If I let my hand drop between the seats, within your reach. If you could feel I was there even when you closed your eyes and the world disappeared. All you need is to know my heart still beats.

But I think you should stay awake.

*

Oenone says, “When was the last time we saw another car?”

Her words bring Trianon’s unease to the forefront, the feeling that the rainy void around them is an alternate reality devoid of human life. He tries to remember. “Maybe half an hour.” Things are always happening half an hour ago.

The scarring on his chest feels sensitive, electrified, especially with Oenone nearby. This hidden proof of the other world he lives in. He wants to touch it, neurotically measuring the damage. Instead he picks at the underside of his arm. These little gouges are so easy to hide. Such pleasure to have something of his own.

He looks up from his haze and realizes there’s no land on the left side of the highway, just a gray abyss of fog and sea. He can barely breathe. “Do we have to take the coast?”

“It’s faster,” Oenone says.

“Okay.”

“I know you’re not good with heights. But we can’t get stuck out here.”

The car rattles and he grips the seat, fingers taut as claws. But they’re still on the road, crushing clumps of vegetation blown by the storm, asphalt stained brown with loose earth. “Wish I was driving,” he says.

Oenone squints through the windshield wipers, her teeth set in concentration. "You can't drive stick shift."

Insul's voice intrudes from the back seat. "I can teach you."

"You boys can drive around all you want when we get there. If you can drive on water."

Something wails, the car skidding as it brakes hard. Insul slams into the back of Trianon's seat.

The road is gone.

After a long silence, Oenone pulls the parka from Trianon's lap where he was concealing his arm-picking. She puts it on and gets out, leaving the door open. Trianon shivers and follows her to the edge, Insul trailing him like a shadow.

The Pacific tongues the gap where the road fell into the sea, foam spraying the exposed strata. Dark and heavy waves, rising so high they make Trianon step back.

Oenone's blond hair whips sharply, burning in the car headlights. "Mudslide."

Trianon hunches behind them, weak with sympathetic vertigo. Drops of rain ricochet from the asphalt around him.

Insul turns to Oenone, the skin around his eyes corroded and purple. "I can drive now."

Oenone's face is hard to read, drawn tight from the cold.

"We should take turns. It's safer that way."

The fog flashes. A silent, sorcerous blink. Trianon counts under his breath, waiting for the thunder.

*

Oenone lays in the back seat, parka pulled over her like a blanket. Insul drives down a forested side road the GPS swears will get them to their destination, even as the car icon drifts off the map, flying over matte green land and pockets of flat blue.

Trianon says, "Hey."

Insul's eyes flick toward him then back to the road.

"You said you'd teach me how to drive stick."

Oenone murmurs sleepily from under the parka, "I thought you hated driving, Tri."

"I think he's old enough," Insul says. "Aren't you?"

Trianon flushes. He can't think of a response that wouldn't sound stupid.

Oenone rolls on her side. She always fell asleep fast, taking him by surprise. He would talk to her until he realized her responses were gibberish, despite the earnestness of her tone. He found it cute, but now it feels like an eerie echo of what he fears, their relationship a series of coincidences, talking past each other, the barrier between him and humanity never truly lifted. It's like you need to get yourself beaten half to death to have a decent conversation around here.

Insul hovers his foot over the left pedal. "This is the clutch." *Clutch or kick.* "You step on it and the brake at the same time. Then turn the key. Make sure the parking brake isn't on." He touches the lever between their seats, then his hand travels forward. "Gear stick. Move it through the maze to set the gears. Drive gear, park gear. It's obvious what those do. Set it to reverse if you like going backwards. Neutral is where we started. Car on but not going anywhere. But you start by shifting to first gear."

"Okay."

"Take your foot off the brake, get it on the gas. Get off the clutch but take it slow."

"That's fucking insane."

"Yeah." Insul shifts to fourth gear and the car speeds up. "But then you get to have fun."

"Doesn't seem that hard."

"It's like a gun. There's a lot of things you should know so you don't get killed. But it's not mandatory."

Wonder why he doesn't own any guns. The shooter manifesto had such fetishistic illustrations.

"Fifth gear." Insul jerks the stick shift all the way up and Trianon can really feel the speed now, windy trees sweeping the hood.

"You're going too fast." Trianon watches the miles per hour increase on the speedometer screen, bright green numbers flickering into yellow. Tires growl with the rough edges of this off-brand road, far from the frictionless mainstream streets that render the car silent and virtual. Like when the quake wobbled through the penthouse and revealed it to be merely man-made materials stacked on top of each other to an absurd height. In the same way, Trianon knows he's sitting on a combustion engine separated from him by a thin layer of metal.

Oenone stirs in the back seat. "Hey, stop fucking around."

Insul takes a tight corner, face disturbingly alive, like he shouldn't be making that face with Oenone around, vintage face, sick and unsheathed.

"I said stop—"

The car jerks, screeching to a halt, and Oenone grabs the back of their seats to keep from falling.

She says, "If you're going to drive like an idiot, give me the keys."

*

The road climbs higher, curving above a valley. The storm reveals rifts in the earth, filling them with gloomy water, gutters for loose vegetation. Trees snap under muscular wind, canopy becoming incoherent, reverting to primordial swamp.

Trianon can't believe how comfortable Insul is—no, even Oenone was comfortable, this isn't psycho callousness, this is normal, to drive a car, separated from death by only a single mistake. Because you're alive until you aren't.

He opens another Swordhead can and sips it. He needs the energy to inflate his lungs and keep his heart pumping, as if they're fighting every second of reality that flows through his body, refusing to fuel his cognition past the moment where he stepped into this illegitimate timeline, the thinnest nanofilament of air and blood still connecting him to the desert house where he stared into a painting with an X slashed into it, not knowing something dark and dead drifted in the pool outside, kept clean by a top of the line chlorination system, water in the desert, a toxic oasis, attracting such terrible things to drink at it. You drank of it. Energy drink stains your mouth, reminding you of every other chemical he's forced into you. Chlorine, pills, pepper spray, energy drink, all underscored by notes of bile and copper.

Oenone fidgets. She looks at the empty bottles and cans rattling on the backseat floor. "I'm guessing everyone needs to piss as bad as I do." She drives to the side of the road and sets the parking brake. They're on a hill, steep enough for rainwater to flow past Trianon's Converse, dizzying like the tide at the beach.

No movement from the back. Is Insul actually asleep?

He and Oenone are alone on the road. He sees himself grabbing her hand and leading her down the hill. Offscreen. Scroll credits.

Insul stirs and unwinds himself from the car. The rain hits his face, softening the features into something almost gentle, forcing his eyes shut for a moment, serene as a death mask.

*

They huddle under a rock overhang, rain guttering into moss-carpeted puddles. Insul vomits in the distance, a sound someone might mistake for a wild animal.

“Is he okay?”

Trianon watches his piss trickle down the slope, yellow quickly washed clear by the rain. “He’s fine.”

Oenone pulls her dress up behind some foliage, clumsy in the orange parka she still wears. It’s nice to see her looking wild, hair tangled and makeup running. Even back at the apartment she always had a certain decorum he couldn’t completely relax around, contrasting with the way he moved and talked if she wasn’t there, his autistic gait and finger twitches and noises. But she didn’t know that, and he was so afraid of losing her. But she’s an understanding person with a sense of humor, so maybe he could have been more himself and allowed them to grow together. Or maybe she would have hated it.

Now there are even more tunnels and eruptions in his body that he has to conceal from her, disgusting and spastic, the buried radioactive and hydrological contamination of Insul. The body he had around her feels like a construct he can barely remember. Is the Trianon-Insul body another construct, or a more true excavation of his archaeological trench, brushing away the dirt of pure symbol?

His heart aches and he can’t keep it inside. The safest thing he can show her is with his mouth, with language, moderated in a way scars and effluvia can’t be.

“You were right, Oenone. Something is really wrong with me.”

“What do you mean?”

Trianon pauses to listen. The puking has stopped, but he hears a series of coughs. “Like really, really wrong.”

“Can you tell me?”

He picks at his arm. A new patch of skin is wearing away, an inch from the rawness he scraped open last night. “It’s too late. I fucked up.”

“Tri. Whatever it is. We can work through it.”

His mouth feels hot, a shoddy weapon already overheating. “I—”

A twig cracks.

“Sorry. Never mind.”

“Tri?”

His voice is monotone again. “How far is the cabin?”

“Uh. A mile or less?”

Trianon rubs a leaf between his fingers, breaking the sap into his whorls. Then he hears a sound from Oenone and he turns, almost slipping. Insul stands amid the dewy ferns like he grew there, so still that the rain falling on him seems holographic. “I can drive.”

Oenone crosses her arms over her legs, looking off guard. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’m sorry for messing around. I’ll drive safe.” His face is calm, remasked.

She looks too tired to argue. “Fine.” She reaches in her purse and tosses him the keys.

Trianon watches Insul descend the slope, disappearing behind rippling branches. He pulls his capris back on, gritting his teeth at their tightness. He waits, not wanting to go back into the rain, or in the same direction as Insul. Then he realizes Oenone has an uncomfortable look on her face. She probably has to shit and is waiting for him to leave.

He walks through the trampled foliage where Insul’s boots were. When he reaches the road, he sees Insul at the edge, looking down into the valley, seemingly oblivious to the rain drenching him. Trianon gets inside the car, letting in a spray that dapples the passenger seat. Water drips from the tip of his nose.

Drip.

Drip.

His fingers return to the raw patch of skin on his arm.

Pick.

Pick.

He looks up. An orange blur walks down the road.

He puts his seat belt on.

The blur gets closer. Oenone, wearing Insul’s parka. At the same moment, Insul crosses the road.

The windshield is a screen through which Trianon can watch. The scene is a forested slope to

the right, a foggy valley to the left, and the storm-swept road splitting between them.

He presses the dashboard button and the underglow bleeds into existence. Insul looks back. Trianon returns the gaze through blobs of water. Insul walks toward the driver's side and stands there, red underglow catching on his soaked body, shirt clinging to his chest.

Trianon leans over and cracks the door, letting in a cold razor of wind. Insul pushes the door the rest of the way, exposing Trianon to the full coldness of the storm. As Insul slides into the driver's seat, Trianon leans into him, to the limits of his seat belt, strap cutting into his shoulder.

Insul freezes.

Trianon moves an inch closer, brushing their lips together. Insul shivers, rain hitting his half-exposed body. Warmth flows from Trianon's mouth into that cold face. He takes the keys from Insul's hand and slides them into the ignition. He twists and the car hums around them. Insul's jaw tenses, but Trianon's gentle, feline licks open it up again. Insul's unwashed mouth has a cold storm tang, refreshing and galvanic. He trembles like he's going to fall, his tall body cramped in the door frame.

Trianon releases Insul's mouth, leaving it open and wet, brown eyes heavy and drugged looking. He reaches for the driver's side shoulder strap and pulls it over Insul's neck, delicate as a scarf. With fascination, he realizes Insul's madness was invisible because it was so quick and efficient, the confidence of violence. But when seized at the other end like this, Insul doesn't know what to do, and the madness frays bright and endless and questioning, around and around and around.

"What are you doing?" Insul says.

Something clicks and the car begins to slide.

Insul looks past the curtain of black hair and sees the parking brake in the down position. At the same moment, Trianon twists it around Insul's neck, pulling it down and around in a loop. Insul thrashes, nearly slipping free, but Trianon keeps a grip on it, polyester burning his hand as Insul's wild movements pull it tight.

Trianon shifts the gear into reverse and the car rolls down the hill.

Insul grabs Trianon but he's secure in his properly fastened seat belt. The car gains speed and Insul's boots scabble for traction on the slippery asphalt, pulling the strap tight around his neck. Trianon's foot is on the gas, forcing Insul to run so he doesn't get dragged. He looks down the hill and sees the curve in the road, and beyond, a drop. He clutches Trianon's shirt so hard it tears, pulling himself as close as their kiss.

Trianon twists the wheel and the car swerves, sideways across the slope below the road. Insul spins free of the belt just before it cuts through his neck, dropping to the muddy incline,

skidding, crashing into the muck at the bottom of the ravine.

The car tilts on its side, groaning with momentum, then slams back down on its wheels, just above where Insul lays. Trianon stares at the mud-covered windscreen. Hot lines burn across his torso and abdomen where his seat belt cuts into him. His chest is almost an asterisk.

He turns on the headlights. Rain falls on Insul's body, glowing like sparks through the beams.

Trianon cranks his seat higher. He keeps watching.

Insul pushes himself upright, gasping. Each drop of rain seems to hit like ball bearings on his back. Trianon grips the wheel, resting the sole of his Converse on the gas pedal. Insul looks up at him through a mask of mud, eyes wide, teeth flashing white.

The car shoots forward, neon-red dirt spraying before it like the earth is bleeding. Insul runs, mud sucking at his boots. He makes it three steps before the car knocks him down and goes over him.

Trianon keeps his foot on the pedal until the car is stuck, wheels spinning. Rain rattles on the hood, reverberating inside the ravine. He can't feel Insul, the car rutting with anal blindness. He looks through the side windows. The ravine is filling with water.

He gets out, mud slurping at his Converse, cool and slimy on his blisters. He walks along the side of the ravine. Too slick and steep to climb, and growing steeper as it wears away under the relentless storm. He grabs at some bedraggled bushes but they're too beaten down to bear his weight. Trees creak at the top, roots exposed, bent so far it feels like they could drop on his head at any moment. This is the wrong side. He crosses, seeing the clean line of the road above. The earth is firmer, slippery but not melting under his feet like the sludge below. He climbs with careful weakness, on hands and knees, but something whips at his brain, telling him to go faster, Insul is right behind him, going to pull him down into the cold water. He grinds his body against every solid fragment, rocks and branches and everything else the soil rejects, the ravine wall shedding under him.

The edge isn't getting closer. He feels himself sliding back toward the cold water with mud at the bottom of it, sinking within sinking. He grabs at scrawny weeds and his palms burn, skin stripping. Gravity pulls him like Insul's ghost, a blister screaming as he digs his heel into the yielding earth.

He stops sliding. A hand grips his, unreal against the repetition of mud and water. He scrambles up, the last of his strength, barely hooking his ribs onto the edge of the ditch, where another hand joins the first, wrapping around his shoulder, and he kicks against the muddy slope like he's throwing a tantrum, and suddenly he's on the side of the road. It's very dark up here without the car, storm clouds thick as night. Rain falls into his open mouth. He lays there like the mud, not seeing time, patiently dissolving.

She shakes him, a tremble in her hands. Does she think he's dead? Is he?

He gets on his knees and looks down.

The ravine gorges itself, the gorge ravenous for rain, a monstrous ditch violently dimpling. Leaves and branches drift across the surface, matting into a drowner's canopy. Neon red glows through the debris, a cursed red pool, staining every drop that falls from his face.

Opponent Process

Oenone shields her phone from the rain, looking for signal.

Trianon says, "Even if you had service, there's no way anyone is coming out to this random gulch."

"Gulch?"

"Ravine. Ditch."

"I know what a gulch is, I just don't understand how you're so calm, we can't just leave him there—"

"He's not a good person."

"How is that relevant?"

"It's relevant."

"You're being a scary fucking psycho." Oenone takes a step down the slope, finding footing on a rock.

"Stop."

Oenone looks up, blinking in the rain.

"He's probably already dead. Look at the water." Up to the middle of the tires.

"I can't—"

"Us dying isn't going to help anyone."

"I don't understand why you're—"

"He fucking kidnapped me."

*

They sit under the rock overhang that was their toilet half a world ago. Rain breaks through the canopy, diluting the smell of waste into something refreshing and earthy.

Oenone waits for him to speak, arms crossed in that orange parka. He can't tell her to take it off, not in this bitter cold. But he wants so badly to press into her warmth.

"You need to tell me what's going on or I'm going to have a breakdown."

The truth that he bit back for so long has become too big to get out of his mouth. Break it into pieces. "I didn't fall in a ditch." He pulls his sleeve up, showing the bruises on his shoulder.

Oenone is silent. Then she says, "Did Insul do that to you?"

"There was an element of coercion..." He masters the trembling in his voice. "In our relationship. In fact, I never met him before that trip to the desert."

"Oh my god."

"He beat me. And he kidnapped me."

"What the fuck." Her face is pale. "Why didn't you escape? At the aquarium?"

"Well, Oenone, if I had to give constructive commentary on the situation, I would say that being assaulted and imprisoned and not having medication for my muscle disease created an environment that wasn't conducive to me using sick martial arts to turn the tables on my captor in an empowered manner as seen in the movies." His dry tone wavers. "And then he threatened you. And I didn't want you to die."

He flinches at her sudden movement, her arms wrapping tight around him, whispering something like baby baby baby I'm so sorry...

He pushes her away, the orange parka making his heart beat fast. "It's okay. It's over. We're safe."

Oenone puts her soaked hair into a ponytail, fingers slipping a few times. "But the car, how did it—"

"I was just sitting there. And he attacked me. I think he hit the parking brake and we slid down the hill. It all happened so fast." He relishes the stock phrases, almost giggling at their safe, milky legitimacy. "I was lucky to survive."

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"It was a ravine filling with water during the biggest storm in the last one hundred years, in the middle of nowhere. In fact, he was probably already dead when the car went over him."

"It what?"

"It ran over him. It slid on the mud." He makes a helpful gesture.

"Shit."

"Yes. Seems pretty definitive, doesn't it?"

Oenone nods, looking ill.

"In fact, it's incredibly lucky that this random thing happened, because we would have been stranded in an isolated cabin with someone who kidnaps and hurts people. It would have been a nightmare."

"You're right. It was just so intense, seeing you both go down into the—" She wipes her eyes and takes a deep breath. "But if he hurt you, then I'm glad he isn't around to do it anymore. I'm so sorry for what happened to you."

"It's over now, Oenone. It's in the past."

"Yeah..." She stares into the fog.

Trianon sits there patiently, playing with the torn sleeve of his shirt.

"I never saw someone die before, and after what happened at the museum, it feels like the world is tearing itself apart—"

"People die all the time, Oenone."

"Yeah. Fuck. I was so stupid. I should have done something."

"You didn't know."

"I thought you were pushing me away for a reason. I used to be weird about boundaries so I tried to give you space so I wouldn't keep making the same mistakes. I thought if I focused really hard on getting you a good job, maybe that would fix things. Like it was the only gift I could give you without. Contaminating everything."

"Oenone..."

"Seeing how Insul looked at me when I went to his house, I thought, I must be the crazy girlfriend, Tri's been telling everyone what a control freak I am."

"How could you think that?"

She pushes her finger into the wet earth, seeing how deep it goes. "My last boyfriend. He would fuck me and say all these nice things. But it felt like he spent his time with other guys. The time that meant anything. Like I was the enemy and he was on this, aircraft carrier with his friends, waiting to invade again."

“The outside,” he whispers.

“Yeah. I couldn’t point to anything wrong he was doing. I just kept getting lonelier. Provoking him. Getting in fights. It made me go a little crazy.”

A crushing sadness in this cold air. “I never wanted to be separate. I was fucked up too. About my own shit. I wish I could go back. I—it didn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Those messages—”

“He made me.”

“Made you what?”

“Unlock my phone. He sent those. Everything that came from my phone was typed by him.”

“That’s so fucking creepy.” She looks lost inside that big parka, squirming like she wants to hold him. He can’t resist her body heat anymore and sinks into her, closing his eyes. This isn’t an orange parka. It’s eigengrau.

*

They walk down the rain-blasted road, clinging tightly to each other for warmth. Trees roar below them.

Oenone yells, “We’re going to fucking freeze.” They’re dressed for getting in a taxi and going back to their apartment, not a century storm. “Fuck!”

“How do we get inside the cabin?”

“My parents left a spare key in a thing.” Worry creases her face, visible even through the blanching rain.

“Are they okay?”

“The last text I got, they were freaking out, my grandparents live in Central Valley and they aren’t responding and it’s probably just a power outage but my parents are driving all the way out there to check on them.”

“I hope they’re—ow!” Trianon trips over himself. In that throbbing burst of pain from his feet, he thinks, I don’t care about your stupid grandparents, fuck them. This storm is their fault.

“Shit, are you okay?”

He claws at the laces on his Converse, but they’re too tight and wet. “I need to get these off.”

Oenone looks in her purse, apologetically handing him a nail clipper. He saws at the laces with the filing blade. Old laces, but the blade is so trivial and his fingers are so weak.

"Here." She takes the clipper and he zones out. At some point she makes a sound and he looks down and she's picking the frayed laces free. He pulls the Converse off, gasping as they slide from his heels, raw and bloody.

"Oh my god."

The blisters are huge, skin scraped away.

He hobbles down the soft earth next to the road. The mud feels good between his toes, cool rainwater washing the bacteria from his broken heels.

*

"Where is it?" Trianon's teeth hurt from chattering. The world is so big when you're not in a room or a car. This black-green noise of wet bark and leaves, tiling indefinitely.

"I think it's one of these side roads."

Trianon can barely tell the dirt paths from the wilderness, everything muddy and wind-smeared. He tramples through foliage, going faster and faster, then stops.

"Oenone."

No answer.

"Oenone?"

He looks back, about to yell for her. But something stills his tongue. He doesn't want to be loud here. He wants to be unseen and tiny and insignificant. He slumps against a tree, his legs warping under him like the bones are leaking through his heels.

Something rustles behind the tree. He picks up a rock.

"Fuck," Oenone says, kicking aside a branch.

"Why didn't you answer me?"

"What?"

"I said your name."

"I don't know if you realize this, but you're really quiet."

"Whatever."

"Come on," she mumbles, spitting wet hair out of her mouth.

He stumbles after her, head down, following the splat of her flats. His feet are covered in red lines from thorns and branches. He never felt a single scratch.

The forest opens and he looks up.

He was expecting a rustic wooden cabin, not a modern looking two-story building with a glass facade. The porch extends over the ground on metal supports, the kind of space he'd crawl under as a kid. He climbs up the steps and collapses against the door, shivering miserably. He sees Oenone's blond hair disappear under the porch. He tries to look over the edge but stops at the heavy line of rain spattering from the roof. Leaving the dry zone under the overhang feels impossible, the pulverizing downpour still echoing on his skin.

Oenone shouts and he presses himself against the glass wall. She runs up the steps and jams a key into the lock.

The living room has wooden accents and a floor of dark stone. He crawls, leaving a snail trail of rainwater.

Oenone laughs deliriously. "Fuck, that would have been so bad if I couldn't find the key."

*

Pulling the filthy capris off feels like flaying his skin. He stuffs them in the bathroom wastebasket and rubs his legs. Broken skin and poor circulation from heel to hip.

He wants to throw himself in the hot shower, his chilled body dying for it. But as he steps toward it, he feels Oenone pulling his shirt up from behind. He jerks it down and sits on the toilet seat. "Is there another bathroom?"

"Tri?"

"Sorry. I just. I need to get my head right." That's a good reason, right? You don't want to be around someone with the wrong head, do you?

She looks like she's about to protest. Then her gaze falls on his bruised legs. The hollows under his eyes. "I understand. I can use the upstairs bathroom."

"Okay. Um, you don't have to go, I can use that one, I want you to be comfortable too, sorry, I—"

“Don’t be sorry, baby. Will you be okay?”

“Yeah.”

He waits until he hears her climbing the stairs. He walks around the cabin with those bare bruised legs, locking the doors and windows.

*

Mud runs cloudy brown from his body where he lays on the shower floor. He has a jar of peanut butter and he eats it with his fingers. A little water gets in the jar but it’s easier to chew this way.

The shower is a glass enclosure. He likes that. Curtains are scary. He can see everything in here. The Dungeon Star shirt lays torn on the tile, the logo fragmented as memory. Such a nice, empty bathroom, the only other motion coming from a high window pulsing with rain, that cruel, endless, freezing rain. But the water hitting him is hot, so hot and purifying. This is how reality should be. Just this shower, forever.

He smells something sweet. The toiletry rack hanging in the corner. Crumpled old bottles of travel size shampoo and body wash, one uncapped and laying on its side, hole encrusted with congealed fragrance. The smell seems to grow, until he can’t think of anything else.

He grabs the bottles and puts them in the wastebasket on top of the capris. A reek of dirty coconut oil hits his face. He turns up the heat until he can only smell hot water.

*

He opens the bathroom door and listens. Oenone’s shower is still running upstairs. He walks down the hall, dripping on the stone floor. From a closet he pulls a big fluffy towel onto his naked body, meltingly soft in its abundance of threads.

He climbs the stairs to the second floor, slow and aching. His feet feel like rotten fruit. He follows the sound of her shower to the master bedroom. The bathroom door is open, her soaked black dress discarded on the threshold.

He traces his chest. Perimeter check. The scars show above the towel. He looks through some drawers, finding only old people clothes. He puts on a dark gray cable knit sweater, then tries to find pants that won’t hurt his legs. There’s a houndstooth skirt and dad jeans. He can’t bear feeling denim again. The skirt looks most comfortable, but Oenone is here. He pulls the sweater down, barely covering himself.

I can do anything I want now, he thinks. Walk and eat and wear clothes. I love wearing clothes.

*

Oenone sits at the dining table wrapped in a red towel, checking her phone as she eats her way through a box of Saltines.

"Are you getting signal?"

"Calls are gibberish. But I get delayed spurts of emails. It's miserable. Apocalyptic." She looks at Trianon hunched in the corner, swirling a finger around his jar of peanut butter. "Wouldn't you be more comfortable at the table?"

Somehow he hadn't considered that. He gets up painfully and sits at the chair across from her. She pushes a bag of crackers toward him, along with a granola bar and a bottle of water. He drinks until it's empty, so fast his stomach hurts. "What kind of, what kind of supplies do we have?"

"These snacks. Some canned food. The booze my parents left here. A couple gallon jugs of water. But I think there's a rainwater reservoir or filter or something, my dad was always bragging about it. He had a very mild prepper streak, but I think it was mostly an engineering challenge to him."

"Good. But we'll need more food."

"I am not looking forward to that walk. I want to stay here until the sky runs out of rain."

"It won't. How far is the nearest town?"

"At least a few miles."

"Do we have money?"

She taps her purse. "I have my card."

He suddenly feels uneasy, surrounded by the clear glass walls of the cabin. "I don't know if we can carry groceries like this. And the town is probably evacuated anyways."

"Can we get food from the forest?"

"I don't think that would be sustainable."

"We're just two people, I don't think it's that bad for the planet."

"I mean killing something is very messy and the animals are probably hiding from the storm and even if we found one we wouldn't be able to catch it and if we did we don't know how to cut it open."

"I was thinking more like, berries."

"The woods aren't full of berries and treats and fucking faeries. This is the west coast. It's fake forest."

"Can you not talk to me like that?"

"Sorry." He barely remembers what he just said.

"It'll be okay. We have a generator. We have water. We have enough food to think about our next move. Okay?"

"Okay."

*

He finds a knife in the kitchen. An axe in the closet. A few sticks of firewood and a bow saw.

A toolbox in another closet. Screwdrivers, power drill, multitool, and so on. He pulls a few blades from the multitool, then pushes them back inside. Next to the box is a heavy black Maglite. He checks the battery, filling the closet with bright light. Dusty jugs of antifreeze and Drano.

He hears a metallic slam.

He flicks the Maglite off and walks quietly down the hall. The front door is locked, but he can't see the back door. He grips the Maglite like a club. He passes the laundry room. The door is open, revealing a narrow interior. He hears the washer running. He peeks inside. Oenone sits on a stool, combing her hair out.

"Hey. I'm washing our clothes."

He lowers the Maglite. "Thanks."

She points at him and goes chk-chk. "You got it."

He sees a gun cabinet at the end of the room. He approaches it, mesmerized. "Your dad hunts?"

Oenone smiles lopsidedly. "Um, well, look inside."

He pulls up the bolt and opens the cabinet. Two weirdly shaped, bulbous guns, slotted into a rack.

"My family loves paintball. They'd have these leagues and keep track of points and stuff. You should have come last year, you'd have loved it, you little gamer."

He touches the first gun, black with a red dot reflex scope on it. "Why does it say Las Vegas on the grip?"

"You know, I...I don't know."

He picks up the other gun. Pink camo. He points it at the washing machine, squinting down the iron sight.

"You look cool as fuck, babe."

"Yeah I do."

"That's my guy, protecting us from the mutants."

"Do you think I'm beautiful?"

"Huh? You're hot, Tri."

"That's not what I said. I mean beautiful."

"I guess I haven't thought about that term much."

"Am I worth going crazy for?" He smiles like he's making a joke. "Just freaking demented?"

"Doesn't sound like a healthy relationship to me. I got tired of that kind of thing in high school."

Trianon swivels the long thin barrel of the paintball gun until it points at her face.

She stares at it coldly. "Is it loaded?"

He checks the hopper. It has a few capsules inside, like gumballs. He rattles it.

"Okay, then don't point it at me."

He elevates his aim an inch above her head. "Maybe we could do that Burroughs thing, if we find some apples. Or those berries." His sweater rides up, exposing him.

Oenone pushes past and grabs the black Las Vegas gun. "Or maybe I'll shoot your dick."

He feels his balls tighten. He tries to keep the banter coming but feels empty all of a sudden. "Um..."

Something clacks and he flinches, legs rubbing together. It was the sound of her putting her gun back on the rack. "Don't you want some underwear?"

He'd barely realized he was exposed. Hadn't considered that he had the right to that privacy. He pulls the sweater down, nodding mutely.

She opens the dryer. A few pieces of abandoned clothing, forgotten in their cycle. "Looks like my dad or brother left these here."

He puts on the dark boxer briefs as Oenone returns the pink camo gun to the rack, locking it in.

*

There is one door he hasn't checked, set in the back of the stairwell. He expects to see a closet, but instead, steps descend into darkness.

Oenone brushes past him. He hesitates, then follows her, taking the steep steps slowly. At the bottom she flicks on a light, revealing a cozy den, with a widescreen TV, cushioned wooden seating built into the walls, and narrow windows so overgrown with weeds they barely admit any light.

His bare feet pad across the polished concrete floor. On a center table he finds a bag of expired trail mix, yum yum yum. An M&M drops to the floor with a click, percussing in his head with a metallic ring, lingering like tinnitus.

Oenone kneels on a cushion. "This is my favorite room in the cabin. I used to sleep here sometimes because I was scared of the windows upstairs. The trees kept scraping on them."

Trianon nods, grinding stale nuts with his weak jaw.

"I kind of want to sleep in here."

At first Trianon wants that too. Subterranean and sheltered. Rain muffled to a whisper. But there's only one exit. The stairs. He looks at the rectangle of light at the top, a piece of candy melting between his fingers. "Let's sleep in the master bedroom."

He climbs the stairs, getting weaker with each step, tingling spreading through his limbs. By the time he reaches the top, he's crawling. He can feel Oenone below him, uncomfortable, worried. He stands up and grips the door frame, taking a step across the threshold. He looks right, then left. The hall is empty.

*

He checks the locks again, upstairs and downstairs. Oenone watches, saying nothing.

He goes down to the laundry room and takes the pink camo paintball gun and brings it upstairs and puts it under the bed where he's already put the kitchen knife, the axe, and the Maglite.

The bow saw and toolbox is in the basement den, resting on the scuffed and faded cardboard of Oenone's old board games, inside the hinged hollow of one of the cushioned seats, which double as storage chests.

He flops onto the bed and doesn't understand how he was ever standing upright. She pulls him in and his eyelids melt like Dali clocks across her breasts. Rain sounds play, just like back at the apartment, until his head goes black.

*

Hands all over him. He tries to pull them off but they stick like pitch, slimy and groping. He tries to say something but his mouth doesn't work. He hasn't had his pills for a hundred years. He's covered in rain, no, it comes from his body, the hands are opening him up, squeezing pus from his wounds—

He falls off the bed and it hurts and he's still wet, not a dream. But no one is touching him. Oenone is asleep, her breathing soft and slow.

He hobbles to the bathroom and turns on the light, orange and cursed on the wooden walls. He feels under his sweater, finding only sweat, not blood.

There it is. A wet spot on the front of his boxer briefs. He pulls them down, the fabric tearing from where it adhered to his stickiness. He wipes with a tissue and puts it in the toilet and pisses, his urethra stinging, then flushes it all away. He can breathe again. But his lungs hurt as they expand, with physical pain, or neurotic awareness of his disfigured chest, or both.

He pulls the sweater up, expecting to see the vivid X. But something fresher lays between the scars. Nail marks. Clawed as the car slid down the hill.

Defense wounds. How cringe.

You could have perforated me in a few more seconds with those untrimmed nails, if you found my jugular notch, or got my eyes under your thumbs. But you were cold and hungry and awake for days, fueled by stims and obsession, costing you precious milliseconds of reaction time, just enough for even a spineless, weak, pathetic bitch like me to—

Thunder growls in the distance. He thinks of the coast and its voracious waves, tearing chunks from the highway. Thinks of the ravine, full as a river.

He washes his hands. A manageable amount of water. But there's no towel, Oenone must have taken it. He stands there, hands dripping, and as he closes his eyes, the clear water becomes a warmer color.

He opens them. A small human shape is captured in the bathroom window, his reflection a smear on the absolute black of night. One way, like an interrogation window.

He returns to the bedroom and lays on the mattress, waiting for his hands to dry.

Dacian Mother

He wakes up early and goes downstairs and checks all the locks. When he gets to the front door, he pauses.

The orange parka lays on the floor, standing out like a malignant seafloor invertebrate against the muted furnishings. He shoves it under the couch, then looks through the glass facade. The fog is thick, but early morning shows him the ground around the house. Nothing but lawn becoming wetland.

*

The dryer spins and he watches. Eventually it stops. But he doesn't.

He hears someone coming. It's okay. Those are Oenone's footsteps, light and safe. She opens the dryer and throws the Dungeon Star shirt at him. He clutches the hot fabric to his chest. The smells are all gone.

Oenone steps into her underwear, black panties hanging slack between her scratched legs then pulling tight. The black dress follows, swallowing more of her skin. Like she's resetting to just before the party.

He looks up her skirt. The void speaks. Asking if he's okay.

He opens his mouth but nothing comes out. He's not sure what to say. The answer to most questions now seems to be no. Or in part of his brain that zaps him when he tries to access it.

Dusty, narrow, only one exit, he pushes past her and goes to the living room and plants his hands on the cold glass of the wall, like water for his palms to drink. Outside, the forest is a liquid haze, verdant mercury. "Any more cabins out here?"

She speaks slowly. "I remember we'd go down to the lake and I'd complain about the walk back up here and wish we were in the cabins closer to the lake. So yes. There are. But they're probably flooded." Oenone slips her flats on.

"No."

"No?"

"We can't go outside."

"I'm just checking to see how cold it is. We're going to have to get food eventually."

Can't leave the womb yet. Too weak. Shaking. "I need to, um..."

He goes to the bathroom and shuts the door, sliding to the floor. You ran him over. You're not weak. You're strong. Your wheels spinning in the mud, coating his face, leaving no room for his cruel expression. How did he look? 3,000 pounds of metal is a less than subtle instrument. Even if he didn't go under the wheels (and you would have felt that, rubber rolling over him like muscle), the impact must have knocked the masks from his face, leaving only sincere and desperate breathing.

Should have checked under the car. Should have watched. You deserved to watch.

He traces his scars under the sweater. Diagonal. Diagonal. Bishop, bishop, Boden's Mate, but you didn't expect that pawn to queen.

*

In the master bedroom, because you're in control now. But the part of you that pulled that parking brake is hiding now. Or you're hiding from it. Because it's hard and strong and definitive, cutting out all nuance. When you hurt someone, you need to remove everything from your heart except hurting them. And you're laying on her chest and she can feel your pulse and you're afraid what it might tell her.

So you tell her something else. A safer truth. "What happened to me, it was like a job. There was nothing outside of it." He picks at his sweater, coaxing a loose strand out. "And I don't, know how to express what happened to me, to anyone else."

Oenone brushes his hair out of his eyes and says, "Do you think a therapist—"

"What if I'd rather tell you?"

"I'm right here."

Something builds inside him. Cracking at his ribs. "I want to tell you everything."

"Then tell me."

"I wish you already knew."

"How do you mean?"

"I wish you knew when you looked at me."

"That's romantic. But I'm not a mind reader."

"I couldn't see his face."

"Tri?"

"Under the wheels. It just ended like that."

"Sounds traumatic."

"It must have been. For him."

"No, for you."

He looks at his hands. Spectral with old bruises. She's right. It must be traumatizing. But he doesn't feel anything. Just the hard bad thing inside him, resonating in his left hand. It held the seat belt so well. "I just wanted to see what it was like."

Oenone listens, her breathing a little too careful.

"I wanted to do what he did to me. To see if it was..." Worth it. If a face could be worth that much. He traces his features, pain shining like profane makeup. Could this face launch a thousand ships, a single tag on AO3? "Who brought a faggot to bright-burning Troy," he says, laughing without joy.

She gets up, letting him fall back to the bed where the heat of her remains. "You're being kind of..."

"Kind of what?"

"Nothing. I'm sure you have a lot to process." Her voice and posture is business hard. Exiting his scrawny atmosphere, like a mother returning to her work. She's trying to be understanding, but there's something about you. Not your words, exactly. Trauma leaves so much room for plausible deniability. Maybe something in your face. She can read body language effortlessly, like so many people. Not you. You had to teach yourself manually, under a microscope. Well. That's not entirely true. It's an easy narrative. A bullet point on a website for parents inconvenienced by their children. You weren't teaching yourself to notice body language. You were teaching yourself *not* to notice. Because you did see things, lots of things, but they were all inconvenient, embarrassing, the kind of thing adults don't like to have pointed out. You were supposed to understand how to manipulate people and sell yourself, not become overwhelmed by the raw data fueling everything.

No wonder you didn't figure him out until it was too late. Too busy looking at each individual, glistening tooth to see the whole slaving jaw.

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It feels like he's been waking up every few hours, rain recycling itself across the windowpane with maddening repetition.

He hears gauzy pop. It must be real, because his dreams were only playing Dungeon Star, distorted into an oneiric key. Underneath, the sound of water. It's been running for awhile, sleepily perceived as rain, but you can't really hear the rain in here. It's the kitchen sink.

He coughs, groping blindly for the cup on the nightstand. It's empty, and has been for a long time, he remembers waking and telling himself to fill the glass then falling asleep again. He tries to get up and collapses on his belly, in shock from not being in shock—

Something clinks on the nightstand and he tenses, about to reach under the bed for something sharp.

"Brought you water," Oenone says. The glass is now full. He chugs it at an awkward angle, too stiff to sit up, spilling cool on his shirt, wetting the hidden scars.

"The immortality chimerism," he mumbles. That's what he was dreaming about.

Oenone feels his forehead. "Do you have a fever?"

"Don't think so."

"What's an immortality chimera?"

"Something in the water. Released at a certain melting of the ice strata. Like a clock. Like those self-bondage mechanisms. Releasing the earth from its artificial bondage, self-imposed to avoid confronting the void."

"Sounds really high concept."

"If everything was frozen like this forever, is this how I'd want it?"

"You should probably recover first. You don't want to wake up with bruises everyday."

"When would you freeze it?"

"Hmmm. It's kind of a stressful decision. Forever is a long time."

"It is."

"Maybe when I was a kid. That seems safe."

"You were happy?"

"Sure."

"I can't think of a single day I'd freeze from back then."

"Then when?"

He hides his face from her. None of the days look good anymore, even the good ones. They were only good because of his ignorance. Because he didn't know how weak he really was.

"Babe? Are you crying?"

"I don't think so." He touches his eyes and the tips of his fingers shine.

"Sweety."

"I'm definitely not. This is a different kind of fluid."

"I'll refill your water. Then you can keep having these different kinds of fluids."

*

Trianon dances across the stone floor, arms tracing retarded shapes in the air, obeying an unheard melody that suggests when a limb needs to pull back, how long to drift, when to turn. You can't go too fast or it looks unnatural. That's what people always said when he danced around them. But sometimes nature is very fast, and he has to listen to it.

His legs give way and he's down on his knees, radiating pain. Of course. You can't do that. You're weak. A small dry laugh. Air instead of water. Evaporated tears. But there are some of those too. This different kind of fluid.

You had some strength. It wasn't yours, but it was pledged to you. It was the strongest thing that ever happened to you.

The front of the cabin is glass, but the rest is covered. Like the windscreen of the car, blinding him to the squirming life in his periphery. He feels the urge to run into the rain and feel the world on every inch of him. Instead, he scratches at the floor with his nail.

Scratch.

Scratch.

“What are you doing?”

He can see now. Hundreds of tiny X's etched in pale lines into the stone. He looks up at her.

“I wish you'd answer me.”

“I was.”

She covers her face, fingertips working her brow, shielding her eyes from him. “It feels like something happened. That you aren't saying.”

“Hahaha.”

“And you keep laughing.”

“I'm just a funny guy.”

“We're running out of food,” she says flatly. She's hard again, back to business.

He blinks. “How many days have we been here?”

“Three. No, four. I think.” Her hand leaves her face, responding to the calm in Trianon's voice.

“Okay. It'll take at least an hour to reach town. Probably more in this weather.”

“Should we go for it?”

They move around the cabin, wordlessly preparing. Umbrellas like dead squid on the countertop, along with a shapeless old jacket she found in the laundry room, their last granola bar nestled on top like a complimentary candy at the shittiest hotel.

Trianon says, “We need to start in the morning. We can't be out in the dark.”

“Tomorrow, then.” Oenone sets an alarm on her phone. She yawns and sinks onto the couch by the glass facade. Trianon joins her, his weak face deforming around her lap. He watches the empty fireplace, a black hole, burning time.

*

Drifting with her, every small movement felt, skin sticking together. Rain flows down the glass,

smeared along the hard invisible barrier. It's dark outside, leaving only the ugly indoor stars of red appliance lights.

He feels her feeling him being awake, bodies coming alive when someone else can witness them. Her lips attach to his, soft and sleepy. He watches from behind his eyes, the shadow of her face dripping with hair. He grips the back of her dress, a smooth and endless material draped over fractal spines, infinite ass, pornic shapes rippling under his fingers.

The mouth kissing him suddenly becomes hard and rasping, a red-hot pipe to which his lips stick and blister and burst.

"Fuck," she says, tasting wet and metallic. "You bit me." She gets up unsteadily, cupping her mouth.

"Sorry," he whispers. Time has already passed. A line of light under the bathroom door. He tries to move, maybe to try to fix things with her, maybe to go upstairs and hide under the blankets. But he can barely walk, and it's not just the muscle disease. He slumps against the glass wall of night, pressed so heavy it only makes him harder, humping softly, trying to ignore his reflection, that weak face deformed by fear. He slides to the floor, dizzy from the rush of blood, rubbing his boxer briefs, barely remembering how he used to get off. The orange parka under the couch smells like the rain on the other side of the glass, and another smell, maybe minerals, encrusted mud, or—

Slime floods his underwear, weeks of weird fucked shit expanding from his orgasm, aching, atrophied, and with each spurt, a flash of burning hands on his skin.

Danger Triangle of the Face

He cranes his neck, inspecting the split in Oenone's lip. It felt like a harder bite than that.

"Tri?"

He looks up and the world falls into focus. The soft light of early morning, identical to evening. Paintings and figurines throughout the living room, without subject or meaning. "Yeah?"

"Last night..."

"Sorry."

"You're not the one who needs to be sorry. You're traumatized."

I'm traumatized.

She continues. "I was half-asleep and forgot where we were and I just wanted to be close. I wasn't thinking."

"It's okay."

"Is it because he hit you?"

"Huh?"

"Is that why it's hard to be touched?"

He doesn't respond.

"You flinch a lot."

"Yeah. I'm ruined now."

She touches his shoulder. "That's not what I mean."

"Whatever's wrong with me, it'll take too long to fix. You already spent so much time on me."

"You're not a burden."

"You can fix someone once. Maybe that's worth it. But twice? Your twenties are almost over. I wouldn't spend them on me."

She's silent for a long time. "That's really hard to respond to. But I love you. And I'm not giving up on you."

"Yeah, what could that mean, that could mean, maybe, I could be a friend you text sometimes. That way you'd be supporting me but I wouldn't be sucking up your energy or interfering with your life in any meaningful way."

She looks like she's about to cry. "Tri..."

He blinks. What did he even say? "Sorry. I didn't mean it." Whatever it was.

"I feel like what you want from our relationship has changed."

"Changed how."

"I don't know. Sometimes I feel like your mom and I don't know if it's healthy—"

"Do I make you feel weak?"

"Weak?"

"That's how it was with. Other people."

"With him?"

"People who like being confident. I think I make them feel weird."

"Weird?"

"Their self-image doesn't fit together."

"My self-image is fine."

"You should take a spin, then."

"A spin?"

"You know. On the ride I took. It does really interesting things to your self-image."

"That's fucked up. But I'm not your enemy." Oenone falls back onto the couch, staring at the ceiling. "I just don't want to be alone. This feels like the edge of the world."

After a minute, he curls up on her chest. "I don't want to be alone either."

*

It feels perfect there, brain empty, the closest he comes to solace. Eventually he feels her body

twitching under his, typing so quickly into her phone he can feel each muscle firing.

"I got a text from Stafford's son. Clay? Clayton? Not sure if I'm imagining the suffix..."

Trianon thinks of the anime car drowning in the rain. He wonders if the red underglow has died yet. "Is he mad about his car?"

She looks at Trianon carefully. "He asked if, the person, who borrowed the car was going to bring it back soon."

"Maybe he'll forget about it."

"Probably."

"If he asks, we can say we, lost touch with the person who borrowed it."

"Yeah. About that. He says he's going to be in the area, whatever that means. Did Insul give him the address?"

"I think Insul would have wanted privacy."

"Privacy?"

Trianon is silent.

"He also said his dad wants to talk to us."

"Why?"

"He says his dad wants to fly us out of the country or something. Some kind of rich person bug out thing. Maybe the museum is fucked."

"But we're stuck here."

"I think he'll actually get a helicopter down here if we ask him. We could be interns for some McAfee kind of guy and get paid to watch him do coke. Or not do coke, but have ideas that are as good as coke ideas."

Weak laugh from Trianon. "Won't you miss conservation?"

"I still have my private clients. And I wouldn't have to deal with the politics."

"Thank you for teaching me," he says suddenly.

"Yeah, babe. You're good at it. Sometimes you got the colors wrong, maybe you're color blind or

something. That would be a weird thing to not know about you. But you were good.”

“I’m not color blind. I just...”

She waits.

“I’ll get the colors right next time.”

*

In the conservation room at the museum. He watches over Oenone’s shoulder, relaxing with each stroke of her brush, humidity-gored flesh regenerating into delicate Sabine skin.

She takes a cotton swab and dips it in solvent. “You have to be careful about this part.” She lightly brushes it across the dirty edge of the painting. “Especially once we reach the center. That’s what everyone focuses on. The edges of an image are the most forgiving, people expect a vignette effect, for it to fall away like their peripheral vision.”

He bobs his head up and down. “Especially with Chagliani’s faces. He takes all the light out of the sun and puts it there. It’s amazing he could get that effect with the pigments he used. He understood how the brain generates the illusion of seeing and he started there, not the canvas, um...”

He feels dizzy. Something is off-gassing. Oenone notices him wobbling and she screws a cap onto an open container.

Dip dip dab. Biting her lip as she looks for the next ambiguity to correct, ruthlessly editing the damage into the truest version of itself. He knows that leap. The crucial decision to sacrifice the true platonic origin, impossibly longed for like childhood.

“The director wanted to see me later,” he says.

“You may do coke with her once.”

“Yes, mother. Uh. What do you mean?”

“There’s a price for everything. You have to figure out how much you’re willing to trade. It’s not worth doing coke with her every night, but if you do it once, part of her will remember you and want to do good things for you.”

“But you don’t do it—”

“I did coke with her 20 minutes ago,” Oenone says.

“You sound so calm.”

"I am calm. Maybe it's an ADHD thing. Maybe I'm just a calm person." She puts her hand on the small of Trianon's back, sending a flutter through his stomach.

"Um..."

"I know you have an addictive personality, so I'm not letting her drag you into her world of vice. Not an angel like you." Her tone is ironic, like she gets when she's focusing hard on the restoration and doesn't remember to put sugar in her voice. It's one reason he likes restoring with her.

I don't have an addictive personality, he wants to say. But maybe what he thinks of as a non-addictive personality is only so defined because it has so much to fight against.

"Maybe we could do a little supervised coke," he says. "To practice."

"Coke pretty much runs itself. Just don't creep on her and hold back every third thing you say."

"I don't creep on people."

"You're a good boy. But stimulants are the worst part of people."

Whatever. Coke is shit anyways. His nose hurts just thinking about it, the ghost of a drip. He likes stims as salt, enhancing the flavor of other things. And like salt, it's clear and colorless. He prefers the deep fried prism of acid or the iridescent sweetener of ecstasy, but mostly the warm au jus of weed, relaxing his doomed muscles, forcing him to stop fighting his disease. Another reason he likes watching Oenone work. He could watch for hours, if this painting was damaged enough to demand so much of her attention. Maybe the next painting that comes in, he could do a little preliminary work...

Oenone glances at the security camera, then nods at another table. "We should look at the Beigentine Viper."

"Is it damaged? I thought—"

She goes to the camera's blind spot, and he follows. The Beigentine Viper appears to be fully restored. He remembers Oenone telling him how she sourced the iconic Flayed Red pigment to a small maker in Gilroy who was retired but had a few bottles left in storage.

He turns around. "This is—"

Her soft turtlenecked chest crushes his face. He stands up straight, trying to minimize their height difference. The crotch of her slacks rubs into him and he almost falls across the painting.

"What if they hear?"

She kisses the side of his mouth. "Then you'll have to be quiet."

God her makeup is so nice. He can't believe people can be this hot. But he feels himself shrinking down. Why? Why? Everything is perfect right now.

She can feel the pressure fading in his pants. "Are you okay," she whispers.

"Yeah..." He grinds into her, but the harder he tries, the more exhausted he feels. He slumps onto the table, trying not to touch the painting, and once again she's taller than him, those coke-pupils staring down at him like black olives. He needs another pill but they're at home. He strains to kiss her, barely reaching her lips. Her grinding becomes perfunctory, he's not doing enough, he's too passive and his brain won't shut up. He gets even smaller. He tries to keep from falling across the painting, contorting himself. Something sharp presses into the side of his abdomen, maybe a tool or frame. It hurts, he feels fear, he tries to move but she doesn't notice, mistaking it for more grinding, keeping him pinned. She smiles with surprise and he realizes he's hard, pressure building between their crotches. She reaches down to unzip him.

"Nngh!"

He lowers his head, face pounding with blood, teeth gritted with shame, stickiness pooling between his legs, humidity damage.

*

His blisters won't stop itching. Probably need to clean them again. But he hesitates every time he looks at the shower. He's been keeping to the open space of the living room, away from the rest of the cabin, hallways packed efficiently as intestines, opening like rectums to key features like the master bedroom and the den, but otherwise very cozy. Like being in the back seat, unable to see where you're going.

Oenone looks at her phone. "Shit."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Good shit. Stafford said he'd take care of our transport. We just need to walk to town and he'll send someone to pick us up." She puts the phone in his hand.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"They want you to email them and formally accept."

He looks at the blank space where words can go.

"You're not going through me anymore. This is all you."

*

Oenone finds more clothes in a hamper, forgotten after a family wedding. Trianon puts on her brother's black slacks and white dress shirt. Not the best fit, but he feels, for the first time in a long time, like he can walk around in something loosely defined as the world. This is how he was before. Some kind of baseline, at least cosmetically. And maybe that's all there is. Cosmetic, kosmein, kosmos, order, arrangement. What you wear is how you apply definition to all this naked scared wriggling flesh goo. A blank canvas. Not going to be blank again.

What to put there instead? He came from nothing. He listened to his dad scream at a thin black rectangle for years. At anonymous strangers conveyed by liquid crystal sandwiched between two pieces of glass. Then his mom drove him to his bit roles in those high school movies, windows rolled up against the toxic smoke sky.

Part of him would wonder, when do things start to get real?

Now he knows.

But as abruptly as a car crashing into a ravine, blankness is back. What did he say to Oenone? That he should have watched? Not enough. Should have listened. Should have smelled. Should have taken it into him with every sense. Now his belly feels so empty he can barely stand. But he can't eat. The food left in the cabinets has no taste, less than a taste, it steals taste from him.

He buttons up the dress shirt, studying himself in the mirror. His face is so thin under the harsh light. A twilight of bruising shot through the pale skin, so close to healing they seem like hallucinations.

Oenone seems sad, even if she's trying to hide it. Is it the bags under his eyes? They got crazy dark. He wonders if they're permanently fucked, if he'll need concealer. But it's kind of a cool look.

She enters the mirror with him, a golden counterpart. "You look dapper."

"Thanks." He feels like a zombie next to her. He was always just on the cusp of being tall enough for her. Short and scrawny, but he worked out, wore shoes with a thick sole, tried to eat well, ignoring the part of him that said starve starve starve. He could just barely fit into her world. But after losing so much weight and not getting enough sunlight, green strands still in his hair, he looks adolescent and cartoonish by her side.

She finishes applying her lipstick, a shade of pink she rarely wears. Her soul must be light right now. Otherwise she'd choose red or plum. He has a complex flowchart of her makeup choices and how they correspond to her mood, developed over nervous months of getting to know her without having internalized her body language, and later as a beloved hobby, waiting to see

how each new cosmetic mapped onto her emotions, and admiring the precision of her choices. And now his body does the same for her, this mimicry of death.

"Guess vacation is over," she says, a little sad (brown eyeliner) but excited (pearl eyeshadow).

She walks away. He stays looking at the mirror. What a helpless thing. In the end, it wasn't anything he did so much as standing in the right place and looking interesting. A vandal decides to vandalize you instead of a painting. A school shooter decides not to shoot you. And now a helicopter will descend from the air, deus ex machina. That would be the stupidest story ever, a jerk-off narrative in that notebook manifesto.

He composes the message. Oenone helps him fill it out. He has a headache by the time he's done, but there it is. A reasonable, polite, yet enthusiastic response, agreeing to meet in town. Maybe it won't be a helicopter. Probably just a car. But it would be nice to be separated from the earth for awhile.

He presses send.

Message not delivered.

He walks around the house, passing the bathroom, where Oenone rinses old mud from rubber boots. A box of Ziploc bags rests on the sink.

"I can't get signal."

"Just keep pressing send until it gets through."

Message not delivered.

He goes upstairs and touches the kitchen knife under the bed. Then he withdraws his hand. Where would he fit that? The screwdriver would be easier to bring. More streamlined, with a misericorde vibe. And if you get caught with it, you just seem like a salt of the earth DIY guy instead of a serial killer.

As he descends the stairs, the message goes through. "Hey."

Oenone zips up a wrinkled jacket and throws the hood up, lined with a faux fur fringe. "Yeah?"

"I sent my reply."

"Fuck yeah." She drops the boots at his feet, black and shiny. He pulls them on. It hurts to walk but it hurts less than it did.

She looks outside, then opens the door. He winces at the rush of bitter air. "Come on," she says, like she's talking to a cat.

"It's too cold." But it's more how the wind tosses his hair around, getting it in his eyes and tickling the back of his neck, strands pricking so irregularly that his brain can't filter them out.

"Just try it, okay?" She walks down the steps, crinkling from the Ziploc bags wrapped around her flats. She waits for him, rain sizzling on her umbrella.

He looks around. Trees. Trees. The same monotonous downpour in every direction. His vision is still a little blurry, but it doesn't look like anyone is out there. He struggles to open his umbrella, the ribbing expanding then collapsing, his palms burning as he tries to push the runner high enough to click into place. Finally it stays open, black webbing covering his vision. He walks across the rain-line and immediately feels the force of the sky on the surface area of the umbrella, heavy and deafening.

They walk down the muddy road, through the fog engulfing the hill. The town is probably visible from here on a good day, but right now it's hard to believe in, as if invented to lure him from the cabin, which has also vanished. His body feels clear as the rain around him, thoughts racing without friction. He slows down.

Oenone's umbrella speaks. "Did you forget your jacket?"

I'm not cold, he starts to say. But he must be if he's shaking this bad. He walks back and the cabin is still there. He climbs up the steps and fumbles the door open, dropping the umbrella on the floor, too weak to close it. He goes to the kitchen and pulls the jacket off the counter. The house already smells of the outside, contaminated with earth and rain. He hadn't realized how much he depended on the sealed atmosphere to keep his emotions in check.

Oenone stands in the open doorway, waiting for him.

"Shut the door," he says.

She sighs and closes it, then shakes her umbrella out, sending droplets across the dirty footsteps of the floor. She places her neatly folded umbrella next to the gaping one he abandoned.

"Lock it."

"I thought we were—"

"I'm not ready."

The door clicks as she turns the key.

"I just need a minute."

“Okay.” He watches her open a can of something in the kitchen. Golden Sliced Apples (Suitable For Pies). Treating herself since they won’t have to worry about rations anymore.

He wanders back to the living room. A small mirror hangs on the wall, excising a square of white dress shirt. Some shirts are so thin you can see through them, especially if soaked by the rain. He tries not to think of doing this calculus for the rest of his life.

Oenone carries a plate from the kitchen. Glistening apple slices with a side of graham crackers. “Want some?”

Trianon says nothing. His face is slack, teeth exposed. His eyes are open wide, pupils dilated.

“Sweety?”

Her nose explodes and she slides across the hardwood, plate spinning and crashing against the wall. Pale gold apple litters the floor, a whiff of cinnamon.

Insul shakes his hand out like he hurt it, a shimmer of red on the knuckles. Rain-punished hair hangs across his eyes, rimmed corpse purple, the rest of his skin drained of color.

Oenone grabs a shard of plate from the floor and gets up, her plastic-wrapped flats crunching a graham cracker. Blood fountains from her nose, dark where it falls on her black dress, bright where it collects in the folds of the plastic bags.

Insul steps toward her and she points the shard at him. He stops, then looks sideways. Trianon freezes under his gaze, backing away from the sharp-tipped umbrella resting by the door.

Oenone hesitates, then her fingers rotate the shard slightly for a better grip, exposing the jagged edge. A muscle twitches in her arm and Insul kicks her in the stomach. The shard drops from her hand and breaks in half and she collapses, gasping for air.

Trianon picks up one of the figurines decorating the living room, a generic swirl of nothing, but heavy enough to hurt something. Insul comes over, slow, like nothing is wrong, like Oenone isn’t incapacitated on the floor behind him. He touches the figurine and it vibrates into his palm with Trianon’s trembling. He places it on the coffee table. “This probably weighs a little less than that car did.”

Trianon flinches as Insul’s hand caresses his face, ice cold. “It really is beautiful,” Insul says, sounding surprised. “I couldn’t see it out there.” He kisses Trianon’s limp mouth, tasting like rainwater and dirt.

Something coughs horribly.

Insul’s lips slide away, leaving a wet smear on Trianon’s cheek. He looks back at the source of the sound. Trianon follows his gaze, eyes sick and heavy. Oenone retches violently, on hands

and knees, a web of saliva connecting her lips to the floor, and with each contraction, her nostrils speckle the stone with blood.

A whisper flutters through the delicate bones of Trianon's ear, into every part of his body, breaking down and dissolving every scrap of strength he gathered over the past days. "Things are going to get really dark now."

Accessorizing

His boot rests comfortably on Oenone's neck. Hair covers her mouth, sucking in, lifting as she exhales.

"Please don't," Trianon whispers.

"Why?"

"It would reflect poorly on the living room if someone died in it."

Insul laughs and his boot shakes, turning Oenone's gasps vibrato. "I can see how hard you're trying to keep it together. But you don't have to anymore." Trianon looks up at him, eyes drifting apart. That necro-jock face splits in half, a fission of cruel lips and scraped cheekbones.

"Because there's nothing you can do now."

*

Below the earth. Listening to the rain strike the surface, the ambience of waking up in a casket. Staring into the black reflection of the widescreen TV. It leans in the corner, no longer at the center of the room.

Something snuffles where it used to be.

The door at the top of the stairs is slightly open, just enough light to see her by. Oenone kneels on the hard floor, yellow rope looped through the metal brackets where the TV was mounted, stretching her bare arms upward, wrists tied together. Blond hair sticks to her punched face, dipped in red like a festive counterpart to Trianon's toxic green tips.

"You attacked me," Insul says. "So he must have told you about me."

Her lips move like she's saying fuck fuck fuck under her breath.

"I wasn't sure he would. I know he likes to be clean. So I thought he might keep it a secret. Try to move on." Insul twangs the rope connected to her wrists. "What did he tell you?"

She sucks down bloody saliva. "Nnh. You hit him. You kidnapped him."

"It's probably a little too late to deny that."

She jerks on the rope, testing the secureness of the brackets. "Let me go. Now."

Insul touches a drop of her nasal blood on the concrete floor, pressing his thumbprint into it. "Lucky this isn't carpet."

She shuts up.

Insul turns to Trianon. "Plastic wrap?"

"Um. We have Ziploc bags."

Insul gives him a look like, seriously? Now he's searching the room, flipping up the hollow cushion seats. The stairs are so close, and Insul's back is to him. But he could barely climb them before, and now his muscles are pools of liquid fear. Insul is almost to the seat where the saw and toolbox are hidden. But then, as if sensing Trianon's gaze, he comes over and sits next to him. "I think I found the part of you that was going to shoot your dad."

Trianon can't read his expression, the mask clouded with bruises and something else. So he doesn't respond.

"You almost killed me."

"It's the kind of game we're playing."

"Yeah." The smile stretches around something hard and sharp. "But without a car, I think I'll win."

"Can you at least let her go?"

"That's a stupid question."

"I know. Just. Please don't hurt her." More than you already have.

"I'm outnumbered. I need to control the situation."

Oenone is silent behind the blond wall of her hair. Some part of him was hoping a real adult would have the magic words to fix this situation. Like it could only have occurred as a result of his unique and particular weakness. But after getting kicked in the stomach, it makes sense to analyze the parameters of the nightmare. Just like he did at the very beginning.

"Something hurts." Insul says, touching Trianon's hair. "What is it?"

Trianon twists away, embarrassed that Oenone is witnessing this horrible intimacy. "Blisters."

Insul lifts Trianon's foot and sniffs his heel, then stands up. "Don't go anywhere or I'll kill you. Or her. Or whatever. Just think of the scariest thing you can. I know you will." He goes upstairs, leaving the door open.

"Help me," Oenone says.

Trianon comes closer. The knots are bitterly tight. "I can't untie you in time. I couldn't even take my shoes off." He sinks to the floor, legs tingling painfully.

"You have to try."

"He'll just hurt us."

"Wow," Oenone says, blood encrusting her upper lip. "It would suck if he started hurting us."

"Sorry."

Oenone strains at the rope, trying to get on her feet, but as her abdomen tenses, something gives out and she falls back down. "My fucking stomach."

A sound at the top of the stairs. Trianon scuttles back to where he was and curls up. The stairs creak, those narrow stairs that Insul seems to fill like a human spider, blocking the light. He takes Trianon's foot by the ankle and strokes the blisters with a wet towel, slow and gentle. Trianon lays on his back, helpless with his foot in the air. It hurts, but the towel is cool and cleansing on his broken skin, the repetition soothing. His eyes shut. The sound of a cap being unscrewed. He winces at the burn of the antiseptic, but as bandages seal the blisters, he could almost cry with relief.

Silence. He opens his eyes. Insul looks incredibly tired, like he's thinking of standing up but keeps putting it off. His movements have been stiff and painful. But he's still a little stronger than he should have been. Strong enough to subdue them both. He can't have been outside that whole time, in the relentless downpour.

"How?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yes."

Insul leans back on his arms, staring at the ceiling. "It hurt. I remember looking at the bottom of the car. I was stuck in the mud. I couldn't breathe. Because the car hit me. It was bright under there. It hurt my eyes. I thought the red light was emergency lights. I wasn't thinking right. I thought it was the ambulance from when I was a kid. Then I thought it was the cops. Shooting fish in a barrel. That's what I read in my head. I heard you talking up there. Mostly her. Her voice was higher than yours. You sounded calm. That was sad. Then I stopped hearing her. Was that when you told her about me?

The water got higher. It was cold. I didn't want water in my nose. I pressed my face into the car. It smelled like dirty gasoline. The water kept coming. It was hard to move in the mud. I thought my legs were broken. But they were just cold. It was slow but I crawled out. Then I got inside the car and turned the vape on to feel something warm. I smoked some of it. But it wasn't

enough. I got out.

I walked to the part that was close together, full of branches. I climbed up. That part was slow. I got cut a lot. The branches broke under me. But I got out. On the other side from you.

I kept going through the forest. I thought I found some weird sticks. They were black and plastic. Tent poles. Then I saw something swinging in the air. I didn't know what it was. It looked weird and lumpy. I got closer. It was one of those bags that campers tie in the air so animals don't eat it. That's where I got the rope for her.

I untied the rope and dropped the bag. There wasn't a lot left. Some cans I couldn't open. But there was a bag of jerky so I had protein. I drank rain off the ground. My mouth still feels like dirt. I was thirsty all the time.

I tried to remember what you looked like. It wasn't the same.

It's a boring story. I was just cold and wet and kept moving."

"You were out there for days."

"I found an RV stuck in the mud. Really shitty and old. Most of the stuff was gone. Maybe they had to leave it. There was a blanket. I fell asleep. It smelled like weed. There was a can of Spaghettios but no can opener. I got it open. It took a long time.

I don't know how many days I was there. I knew when I was strong enough. I walked around the hill until I found a way up. I saw a cabin. It wasn't this one. I kept looking. I saw you. In the window. I stayed by the side of the house so less rain would fall on me. I waited. Probably hours. Maybe a whole day. Then I heard you go out. I tried the door and it was unlocked. I went inside."

"Why didn't you attack us when we went out?"

"I was cold and hungry. Needed a jacket or food or I was going to pass out. And I knew you'd slow her down. I had time. I saw the granola bar and ate it and drank some water from the sink. It was probably less than a minute. I couldn't find a jacket but I was going outside anyway. Then I saw you coming back and hid. Stop listening to us."

Oenone turns away, only her lipstick-smeared mouth visible. Insul walks over and takes something out of his pocket, a phone with a marble case.

"Unlock this."

Silence.

"Just do it," Trianon says, feeling scared. "Trust me."

Oenone's fingers flex above her head like she's fighting pins and needles. "I need my hands."

Insul holds the phone to her face. "Use your nose."

Her cheeks redden under the dried blood smears. Trianon knows that fresh, unbroken resistance, welling up so easily, unable to accept that all connections to a sane reality have been severed. But she moves her nose across the glass, up, down, side to side. The phone unlocks. Insul taps the screen with his thumb, light and dark flashing across his features. "So Stafford's really giving you a job."

"Guess so," Trianon says.

Click click click. "I'll say you can't because your, um, life plan changed."

"Please don't." There's no energy to Trianon's voice. He feels stupid for even saying anything.

"Hmm. Clayton wants his car back. You really sidestepped that question."

The car flashes through Trianon's mind, drowning and burning at the same time.

"Want to see what it did?" Insul peels off his muddy shirt and jeans. A massive bruise covers his ribs, almost too big to parse as one. Trianon is transfixed. He put that there. It really happened.

A ripping sound cuts through his reverie, duct tape wrapping tight around his wrists. Insul's torso is so close he can see every tiny scratch, and a leaf sticking to the stomach. The giant bruise doesn't even seem like part of that body, a black hole eating through the torso. Now his ankles are being taped together. It doesn't matter. Any freedom of movement is a red herring.

He watches Insul climb the stairs. There's something awkwardly animal about it, with no clothes to curtail or channel his movement, seeing each flicker of pain and stiffness along the legs, up into the spine. The door swings shut. For a moment they're in darkness, then the door bounces off the frame, letting in a sliver of visibility.

Is he that confident in his restraints? Or is he too exhausted to care?

Water gurgles through pipes, bleeding into the sound of the rain. Trianon feels like a cave creature listening to flooding tunnels. A blind little worm, limbs fused together. Worm boy in the basement.

At some point, he realizes she's been talking to him. "He was at our apartment, at the party, in the car, why didn't you—"

"Why didn't I what?"

"Nothing."

"The hill wasn't enough?"

"The hill?"

"That was me. I did that to him."

"Oh."

"You know the Poinsettia High School shooting?"

"Not really."

"It wasn't far from where I grew up. They boarded up the old cafeteria and it was like that forever. Me and some other kids ended up there once, drinking at night."

"He can't be the shooter. The shooter died."

"If someone shoots two kids in a cafeteria and no one is watching, did it really happen?"

Light flows down the stairs, slithering around Insul's naked body. Cleansed of dirt, his cuts and bruises are more vibrant, isolated as gems. He works his finger into the bottom of the peanut butter jar, scraping out the dregs that Trianon left furrowed around the sides. "This all you have?"

"Yeah."

"Guess we'll have to revert to cannibalism."

"Come on, pick a lane," Trianon mumbles.

"What?"

"Just, figure yourself out. You're not even into cannibalism."

"You don't know that."

"Whatever."

Insul perches on the balls of his feet, keeping his voice down. "I licked your blood."

"You'd lick anything that came out of me."

"Shut up. It's not like I couldn't get into cannibalism."

"Can we just have pizza again?"

"Haha." Insul waves a peanut butter-smeared finger. "Here. Free calories." Sticky, overwhelming texture, rubbing his gums, chunks in his teeth—

"Leave him alone," Oenone says.

Insul pivots to her, lithe on his bare feet. "I'm the victim."

"The victim?"

"Your boyfriend hit on me."

"You're insane."

"He was addicted to drugs. That's why he was at my house. He was afraid you'd find out."

Trianon breathes faster. Oenone looks at him and he shakes his head.

"Then he tried to kill me. So I'm just protecting myself. Because both of you are crazy."

"I don't believe you."

"You trust him?"

"Yes."

Insul turns and stretches his arms behind his back, cricking his neck from side to side. "Did he tell you about the museum?"

"Museum?"

"He was there."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"He got me inside. Look at him. Listen to him. See if he denies it." Insul pauses, allowing Trianon's silence to fill the room.

Oenone says, "He's lying, right?"

Trianon's throat feels like sandpaper. "Yeah."

Insul speaks without emotion, as if calmly relaying a series of events. "You hit on me. You

cheated on your girlfriend. And you asked me to steal shit from the museum.”

Oenone says, “Wait. Who killed those people?”

“There was a third person with us. A crazy drug guy. Trianon’s supplier. I don’t know where he is now. I never wanted that to happen.” Insul strokes Trianon’s cheek. “He manipulated me.”

Trianon jerks his head away. He feels like he was punched in the stomach. It wasn’t real before. Any number of secrets can be hidden inside Insul. Insul doesn’t count. Insul isn’t part of society. Insul is fucked. You can tell him anything. But telling Oenone made it real. Everything he pushed down. The director’s body hissing hot air. Bullets in the ceiling. Tar across a cop’s nose and mouth. And a knife slicing across his chest, scarring it for life—

Insul wraps his arms around Trianon, and Trianon strains against the duct tape, writhing in his grip. “Your boyfriend kissed me. He never told you about that either.”

“You obviously forced him, you freak—”

Insul tears the duct tape off Trianon’s ankles, taking hair with it. Trianon’s feet kick free, spasming in pain. “I didn’t have to.” Insul tugs Trianon’s legs apart, exposing the erection straining at his pants. Trianon sweats into Insul’s naked chest, the white dress shirt sticking between them. He tries to say something then shuts his mouth before he pukes.

Insul gets up and Trianon falls on his side, knuckles white, taped together tight as prayer. The stairs creak, followed by a click as the door shuts for real, leaving them in darkness. It smells bad, stronger now that he can’t use his eyes. And it’s going to get worse, he knows how those smells get worse with time, stinking and souring. He hyperventilates, claustrophobia stuffing his face like cotton.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the museum?”

He tries to get his breathing back under control, air is everything down here, fighting the dogs of the dark for scraps of it, fighting to be understood. “It wasn’t my fault,” he says, voice breaking. “I never—” No moisture remains in his throat. He sticks his tongue out, trying to taste the rain. It was everywhere before. Why can’t he feel it now?

“Stop freaking out. I know he’s a psycho.”

He licks his lips. “You—you don’t believe him?”

She doesn’t respond at first. “Of course not.”

“Okay.”

Something changes in Oenone’s voice. “Do you think he’ll, um. Do you think he’ll do something.

To me.” She trails off, unable to finish the question mark.

“Like what?”

“Like. Rape me.”

Trianon tries to keep his voice steady. “No. I don’t think he’ll rape you.” Tears run down his face and drip across his bound fists as he cries silently in the dark.

Saturday Morning Cartoons

His face pops, stinging, dripping, he thrashes in the duct tape. Bleeding, arms stuck together, is this how he dies—

An oily chemical smell. Nothing in him makes that smell.

Insul stands naked at the bottom of the stairs, the paintball rifle leaning back on his shoulder, pink camo against his zombie skin. Trianon's cheek burns. He wonders what color the paint is. Can't stop being a canvas.

Insul approaches Oenone, bound against the wall. She looks passed out from exhaustion. Stretched like this, Trianon can see the gym toning in her arms. She always kept in shape. Even with his pills, he was never able to keep up with her. At the right moment, with the right tool, with the right mentality, she might be able to hurt Insul very badly.

But there's no food and he knows how that goes. Weaker and weaker. Bargained into surrendering what little defenses you have, until you're just a hungry hollow of yourself.

A kitchen knife clangs on the floor.

"Found your weapon stash." Insul dangles the paintball rifle. "Were you really going to shoot me with this?"

"I thought I could blind you."

"Yeah. Maybe. I'd have used the axe, personally. But with your weight, the knife would have been better."

"I know."

"Good." Insul rips the duct tape off. Drops of blood well from Trianon's skin, mushy and depilated. "Take off your clothes."

Trianon numbly pulls his pants down.

"And the shirt."

"Please. Not in front of her."

Insul picks up the knife and walks over to Oenone. "Isn't it weird how he took his pants off before his shirt?"

Trianon says, "Wait."

Insul holds the cold of the knife between Oenone's eyes, just enough to draw a bead of blood down the bridge of her nose. Her arms spasm in the rope, too weak to fully conduct the fear traveling from her brain. Trianon knows that parodic reflex. It happens all the time with his slow, diseased body.

The knife points at a blue eye. "Don't worry. She won't see anything."

"Stop. I'll do it." Trianon undoes his dress shirt, fingers slipping on the buttons until the shirt hangs loose. He leans forward so it doesn't open all the way. But Insul brings the knife close, coaxing Trianon's neck up until the shirt falls open.

Oenone gasps. Hot tears fall down Trianon's face, trickling down his neck onto the X-shaped scars on his chest.

Insul points at with the knife, gesturing for Oenone. "Like it?"

"You really hurt him," she says quietly.

"It's hard for me to be creative. You should appreciate the effort." Insul follows Trianon's gaze. "You keep looking at something."

His face can't stop leaking. For a second he wishes Insul had started there. Severed some nerves, impaired his affect, mitigated this constant betrayal of eyes and lips.

Insul opens the hinged seat and takes out the toolbox and saw that Trianon hid, setting them aside innocently. He holds up a cardboard box. The cover says:

Zero Heaven
the Board Game of 999 Honors

"Wow. I played this."

"I did too," Trianon says. He buttons his shirt back up, too tired to care how Insul reacts.

Oenone coughs and says, "Yeah. That was my favorite as a kid." He can feel her taking cues from him. Understanding how he placates Insul. Distracting with talk.

Insul is going through the toolbox now. "I liked the uh, Atlantean faction, they had a..." He trails off as he opens the multitool, alien blades extending, birdlike and reptilian. He puts it down and picks up the knife instead. "Let's start with something simple." He glides toward Trianon, upstairs light flowing across his ribs, turning the black hole of the bruise to a nebula.

Trianon's eyelids flutter as the knife touches him, light as a toothpick. He hears Oenone about to say something, then stifling it, as if understanding that Insul hates the sound of her voice. Thank you, he thinks.

"I wonder if you could have done it," Insul says. "Used this on me. It's not like a car."

"Can you blame me?"

"No. But you understand, right. What your dad taught you. Power is supposed to go one way. You're not supposed to flip it."

"Is that why you like guns?"

"Guns?"

"Power flows from the barrel of a gun. That's what Mao said. If you want to talk school shootings, he killed thousands of teachers. Middle schoolers, college students, whatever, beating the adults to death with nails, pouring boiling water on them, tearing them apart. Sounds like your wet dream."

"Wow."

"This is kind of funny, they had to wear signs with their names crossed out with red X's. Some got X's shaved into their heads. You like that?"

"I wouldn't do that to your hair." Insul runs his fingers through the damp black tendrils. "You should tell me more stuff like that from history sometime."

"Sure. Maybe we could do that right now."

"I think I matured. Since then."

"Since when?"

"Being a school shooter." The knife drifts down. "I like guns. But they're instant. You shoot and it's over." He runs the blade along Trianon's thigh, leaving the finest red scratch. "But this is detailed. It takes time. I think I'm really growing, uh. Artistically."

"Why," Trianon whispers, all bravado drained from his voice. "I did what you told me to do."

"Listen. I need you to remember something."

Trianon looks up from the knife with great effort.

"I'm proud of you. I really am. But I have to make sure you can't hurt me again." He grips Trianon's foot, holding the knife cold against his sole. "Do you understand why? Hey. Shhh. Do you understand why?"

“So I c-can’t walk?”

“Yeah.”

A hot line slices across Trianon’s sole and the knife is no longer cold. He can’t feel how deep that was, if it cut a nerve, he has no metric for being cut on the bottom of his feet. He opens his mouth but all the air is gone.

“It’s fine. I sterilized it.”

“Oh, um, thanks—” Another slice and he screams, falling on his back, sweat pooling, sticky concrete against his spine. He hears Oenone begging Insul to stop. His ears hurt. “Oenone, please. You’re just making it more s-stressful.”

Insul points the knife at Oenone, blood dripping from the tip. “Yeah, Oenone. You’re stressing our boy out.”

Slice. Trianon’s foot arches, vibrating as he tries not to jerk it, trying to keep worse damage from happening.

“Stop!” Oenone yells.

Insul picks up the paintball gun and shoots her. She yelps, a bright green splotch staining the black dress. “Shut up or I’ll, uh. Hurt him. More than I already am.”

Trianon stares at a single M&M on the floor. He used to render his surroundings as an archetypal basement, the way the brain fills in when you’re focusing on more important things, like being tortured. But now domestic details are trickling in, and in this captive space, he’s forced to regard them with an attention outsize to their importance. The potted plant in the corner, plastic and deathless. A black and white coffee table book titled *10 Horses*. The framed poster of an old movie isn’t so bad, *L’Inconnu du lac*, crayon men in primary colors by a lake under a black sky, wasn’t Oenone’s mother a movie critic? And Insul must be an editor, the way he likes to cut footage—

“You need to breathe,” Insul says. Trianon tries but he can’t, throat twitching in anticipation, tearing the air into fragments. “Hey.” Insul holds a black rectangle. When it turns on, Trianon recognizes the wallpaper: Oenone on a yacht, hugging her brother and laughing, barely in frame, a blurry picture she always said she was going to change but never did. “Breathe.”

“Trying.”

Insul slides the toolbox over. Trianon’s sweaty hands slip on the floor as he tries to scoot away without using his feet. “This happened before. And you lived. Right? Because I was careful.”

“Mmh.”

"You're safe."

"I'm safe."

Insul props the phone up against the toolbox. "I'm putting on a cartoon. Okay?"

Trianon nods weakly, swallowing the salty mucus pooling in his mouth. A tiny video plays at the end of the tunnel of his eyes.

"Do you like this show?"

"Uh huh."

"It's from when you were a kid."

"When we were."

"That's right."

The knife slices again and Trianon's eyelids flash, obliterating black, then back to the cartoons, squishy shapes breaking apart and reforming, voice acting mangled by the phone speaker.

*

Blood pools in the Ziploc bags around Trianon's feet. He hiccups, and this respiratory metronome returns a sense of time to him. The knife being cleaned. A glass of water flowing down his throat. The cartoon ending. Watching the final frozen frame with the same attention as when it was moving.

He tries to stand up automatically. The bags crinkle and he cries out, pain shooting through his feet. He collapses, soles ringing like they'll never stop.

Insul sits cross-legged, watching Oenone like TV.

"She can't stay like that," Trianon says. "Her arms..."

Insul sighs. He loosens Oenone's ropes and she slumps to the floor, arms purple. He covers his mouth with the knuckles of his hand, looking thoughtful, still gripping the knife.

"Thank you," Trianon says, surprised at how easy that was.

"Take her clothes off," Insul says suddenly.

"Why?"

“Do it, and I promise not to hurt her tonight.”

He wouldn't lie to me, Trianon thinks. He tells me when he's going to hurt me. So Trianon crawls over, feet too raw to touch the floor. He pulls the dress up, feeling Oenone's arms hang heavy inside the inverted fabric, then flop out of it. Her eyes open and he freezes with sudden shame, like this was his idea, like he's a participant. But if he stops, something bad will happen. And her eyes are glazed, is she even seeing him?

Insul takes the dress. He holds it, a shadow in his grip.

*

Trianon lays against the wall, pale from blood loss. It accentuates the black dress hanging over his skinny body, splattered with green paint across the chest. Which means his cheek is green too, like his hair is leaking. The dress smells like blood and sweat and his girlfriend.

Oenone's hands are tied again, but looser, limp in her lap. She wears the white dress shirt, flaps hanging over her black panties. At some point the shirt picked up a few smears of red. Another canvas.

Trianon touches the Ziploc bags, squishing the blood through the plastic. “I feel. Weird.”

“Yeah. That's probably enough time,” Insul says.

“Are you letting me bleed?”

Insul takes Trianon's feet out of the bags, slowly, avoiding pressure on the soles. “It's easier when you don't have all your blood inside you.” He starts applying antiseptic.

“It burns it burns—”

“Shhh.” Insul rubs his hair, scratching until the sensations blur together.

Now big bandages are closing up his foot wounds. He wonders what they look like. How they'll scar. If he'll feel them with every step he takes for the rest of his life. He was always hypersensitive to small changes in his body, unable to stop picking at scabs or biting an uneven nail. He thinks he'd kill himself.

“All done.”

Those hard fingers rake through his hair, sending tingles through his scalp. He's so sensitive after all that pain, unable to control his reaction, his relief. His eyes drift apart, muscles melting.

"I got you something."

*

Insul places the bowl on the ground, careful not to spill it.

"How'd you get that?" Trianon says. Cereal with dried berries and milk. "You weren't gone long enough to visit town. And you wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't what?"

"Wouldn't leave me out of your sight that long." Because if you can't see something, it doesn't exist.

Insul laughs, then chokes on the sound, his mask thin and sleep-deprived. "Yeah. I fucked up. I attached myself to the shittiest feeling. People like you looking down on me. And I made you part of my life. That was stupid."

"Bet no one ever tried to run you over before."

"No. They didn't."

"That's not looking down on you. That's taking you seriously."

Insul traces the giant bruise that paints his torso. Something fragile flits across his eyes. "You really got me. I should have broken my neck rolling down that slope. I should've drowned or froze or starved. You did such a good job. It wasn't you, it was me." He grabs the toolbox, saw and knife balanced on top, then climbs the stairs, looking unusually thin as he catches the light, like the freezing wilderness stripped a crucial mass from his form.

The cereal looks soggy enough by now. Trianon manages to get a mushy mouthful down. As he gathers the strength for another, he notices Insul's shadow hovering uncertainly on the steps.

"Hey. Is there any special food you want?" That voice sounds strange in the reverb. Like it belongs to someone else.

"Um. Pizza?"

"Okay." The shadow trembles, and disappears.

Sweethearting

He can't tell if he's asleep or awake. He stretches his fingers into the void. Something touches him, living and warm.

"Tri," she whispers.

"Uh huh."

"Can you untie me?"

His fingers feel webbed, rudimentary, devolved. His feet throb in the dark, sparking with red lines. "Hard to move. Sorry..."

"It's okay."

"I'm glad we can touch."

"It's okay," she says again. She doesn't sound very sure, but he appreciates the effort.

*

Something clatters down the stairs. A plastic bucket. Eventually, Oenone uses it. Trianon wonders why his bladder doesn't pulse sympathetically, then realizes, with a terrible brokenness, that he pissed himself earlier. Can she smell it?

The sound of rain and piss. The smell grows in the room, shared, not just him, sick complicity in squalor. Occasional bowls of canned food, but also fresh fruit, dripping from Trianon's loose mouth. If it was just canned, he'd think Insul found something in the kitchen they missed. But the fruit is from the outside world. Not a nearby tree, either. Stickers like a supermarket. He doesn't understand it.

*

A blinding beam breaks the dark. Insul is a shadow behind the black Maglite. But he already fed them today or tonight or whenever it is. He shines the light at the apple on Trianon's plate. Covered in tooth marks.

"Your mouth is really that weak?"

Trianon looks up, jaw hanging loose.

The next time food comes down, Trianon has a cup of applesauce to go with his oatmeal.

*

For the past hour, Oenone's been straining against the bracket mount. With her hands in front of her, she's able to grip the rope itself for support, even got the mount to wiggle slightly. But only slightly. "This is fucking insane."

"I know."

"We have to do something—"

"How many times do you think I had this exact conversation with myself?"

"You're not alone anymore."

He cries, applesauce mushy in his mouth. Just a quick, reflexive sob, dislocated from the rest of him, a wet glitch. "I don't—I—"

"We're together. It'll be different. We can make a plan."

"It wasn't my fault."

"I never said it was."

"I know I should have ran at the aquarium. But he was going to kill you."

"I'm sure you did the best you could."

"The museum, I didn't think he'd—" He still can't say it.

"Kill two people?"

He almost throws up, his head swimming in the darkness, a jellyfish of pain. It feels like aquarium glass between them. "I didn't know, please don't hate me please don't hate me."

"...I don't hate you."

But he can hear something in her voice. Something is broken. He can't tell what. It's like high school again. Knowing he was fucking up but not being able to tell why. Except in the dark, he doesn't even have a face to study. But he thought he was done with that. He knows how to talk to people now. Knows what disgusts them. He's memorized it until he knows what they hate better than they do. But after being an accomplice to two murders and felony property damage, the secrets of the world have been rewritten. He has to learn all over again.

Maybe it's okay. Maybe she really understands. But in this basement, compared to Insul, they're both normal people. He's not sure the same will be true outside. He's adjusted to Insul's atmosphere. A relative pressure of murders.

“The next time he comes down, we have to hit him.”

A tremor passes through Trianon’s bandaged foot. “We’re not strong enough.”

“He’s going to kill us.”

“You don’t know that.”

“We can hit him with a bowl.”

He tries to make his foot stop shaking but it barely belongs to him anymore, amputated by fear. “I hit him with a car and he’s not dead, he’s not dead—”

“That doesn’t mean anything. People get hit by cars all the time and they’re fine.” She pauses, watching his fingers trace compulsively across his chest, scar ridges under the soft dress fabric. “Fuck. I wish I could hold you right now.”

“Me too.”

A door creaks and the stairwell glows softly. He tries to remember. Is it dinner? Or breakfast? But it doesn’t matter. The only time is pain and not-pain.

Insul wears the gray cable-knit sweater and the black slacks. No bloodstains, looking freshly washed. They’re tight on him, legs almost spidery under the loose sweater. He picks Trianon up. Again, the sensation of being weightless and hollow-boned. He looks over Insul’s shoulder. Hard to read Oenone’s expression through dim light and dimmer eyes, but he sees the white of her finger creeping toward a ceramic bowl. And then what? Still tied up, with a casus belli.

“It’s okay,” he mumbles.

She must hear something in his voice, because her shoulders slump.

*

Insul sets him on the toilet lid. Natural light comes through the window, hurting Trianon’s eyes. He tries to read Insul, but the mask is back. Fed, slept, showered. No intents, only actions. Turning the shower on with a startling squeak of the metal knob. The room leans, as if tilted by the knob. Trianon tries not to slide off the toilet, his thighs sweaty. If the room has a slope, won’t the water fill it up?

The shower. It’s fucking with him. The same furnace as that dripping hot penthouse glass cage 70 stories above the earth. Why was he brought here? Insul doesn’t care how filthy he gets. Are they going outside? Does he need to look de-victimized? What happens to Oenone? She doesn’t have a muscle disease. She’s harder to transport by car. She’s not a self-anesthetizing chattel

like you.

Insul pulls the black dress off and Trianon's arms fall limp from it like Oenone's did, except it's not a temporary kink of circulation, it's just him. You're not your disease, you're a person with a disease, people kept telling him after he got diagnosed, but right now he feels totally merged with it, unable to remember any other kind of proprioception.

Insul helps him into the shower. He watches the red drain from his feet. Water never runs clear anymore, it always shows him the colors of damage. He wonders why Insul isn't saying anything. Maybe this is it. A convenient place to bleed a body out, one at a time, ignorant of each other's fates. The thought is heartbreakingly lonely. Not even being able to share an exit.

"Hey, Trianon."

"Yes, Insul?"

"Are we friends?"

Trianon laughs, water running between his teeth. "You're so fucking funny, did you know that?"

"No. But thanks."

"Sure."

"I know a lot of shit happened."

"Yeah, I guess some shit happened."

Insul strips the bandages from Trianon's feet, exposing the cuts to the water. "Need to keep them clean."

Trianon feels like he's being run in a dishwasher, inert and scoured. "Sure."

"How are you holding up?"

"Huh?"

"You're not broken, are you?"

"Do you think I'm broken?"

"You stopped fighting."

"What's the point?"

Insul places his hand on the scars, at the center of the X. "You don't seem happy."

Trianon tenses, contracting around the touch, knees lifting, shoulders steeping. "Do you see yourself as having anything to do with that?"

"I hurt you."

Trianon's eyes clench painfully tight, taken off guard by the naked admission. "Yes. You did."

"Are you crying?"

Trianon leans back into the shower, letting the spray hit his face, a mask of water. "No."

"I didn't kill her."

"Thank you for that."

"You're welcome."

*

He walks to the front door in the rubber boots, Insul supporting him with an arm under the shoulder. He tries to put his weight on the less-cut parts of his feet but it still hurts, his legs stumbling in the black dress, knees brushing past the hem. A perfume of dried sweat on the collar reminds him of the reality below the floor.

The door opens and the rain is real now, background noise made liquid and spattering off the roof. Insul leans in the doorframe, waiting for him. He tries to walk across the threshold but each step stabs his feet.

"You're so dumb. You literally made it so I can't walk. And now you want me to—"

Insul moves toward him, then stops when he sees the flinch. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Maybe not this second."

Insul hunches over. "Get on my back."

*

Trianon holds the umbrella, a black fungal cap on their piggyback organism. The mist is so thick he can feel it glittering on his skin, vibrating with how close it is to becoming water again. His head slumps on Insul's shoulder, staring at the passing trees. They're going downhill. But not along the road. Into the wild. Countless neo-waterfalls trickle like lube around them. The basement seems as limited and insubstantial as a nightmare compared to the life exploding

around them. But if they're leaving, Oenone will starve.

"Where are we going?"

Insul doesn't answer.

The hill slopes into water, but it lacks the worn correctness of a longtime shore. The colors are fresh and jammed together, land grass undulating in the shallows. The lake of Oenone's childhood has metastasized. Further down the shore, a cabin is half-submerged. Trianon stares into the dark windows of the exposed story. Something haunts it. As if the flooded beach house had washed up here and they were still inside.

Insul puts him down. Pain arcs through his feet the instant he touches the ground. He slips, splashing into the lake. As he falls, he sees a pale ghost burning with black tendrils, his reflection. Something yanks him back and he thuds into Insul's chest.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Why are they here? Can't look to that heart for information. The one that kills without skipping a beat, so steady Trianon's pulse slows in response.

He twists away. "Don't touch me."

Insul picks up the umbrella and holds it over them. "I thought this would be nice for you."

"Maybe if my girlfriend weren't locked in a basement."

"I should have deleted her the second I saw her."

"I'd never forgive you."

"I know. It's the only reason she's still alive." Insul pauses. "Does that mean you forgive me for the other stuff?"

"Stuff isn't the word I'd use."

"Then what?"

"Abduction. Brutality. Torture."

"Torture? I was just hurting you to make things happen."

"Okay."

"I had to keep myself safe."

"You enjoyed it."

"Yeah. But I'm trying."

Insul touches his arm and Trianon recoils, stepping out from under the umbrella. "Trying what?"

"Come back."

Trianon looks up, rain stinging his eyes. "No."

"You're just getting wet."

"I don't care."

Insul drops the umbrella, letting the rain hit him too. "I wish I was someone you could be friends with."

"I wish you knew how."

Insul seems to struggle for his next words. "I think I've gotten stupider since we started hanging out."

"You're not stupider. You just haven't grown since high school. You've been wearing that mask, withholding, like you said, so long you tricked yourself."

Insul is silent for a time, then the strain on his face recedes, leaving only hard statue for the rain to run down. "Killing was easy. And it'll be easy again."

Trianon shivers.

"I think this is just the first dream I ever had. I'm not used to it. But when it ends, I won't even remember."

Insul's feet are placed precariously on the slope. Mossy stones pock the shore, hard and smooth under their green camouflage. An easy place to slip. Bang your head. And it would be close enough to watch. To feel him struggle under you, bleeding into the water—

Something emerges from the fog, drifting across the lake. An abandoned boat?

No. Someone is aboard, holding a clear umbrella. That's why they looked strange, solid clearness holding back liquid clearness. That guy looks familiar. Stafford's son, standing on the prow of the boat. The track jacket buzz cut gamer who insulted Trianon is behind him, and another guy rummages in a cooler, bottles clinking.

Clayton. That was his name.

"Ahoy there, or whatever," Clayton says.

*

Insul unpacks groceries in the cold light of the kitchen. He hears them in the living room, faint and television-like.

As he reaches into a bag, the plastic crackles, familiar under his fingers.

*

He lowers cold jugs of milk into a bag, then shoves the receipt inside. Someone thanks him. He kills them mentally, his ninety-seventh bullet of the day, then grabs the next bag. He wants to be in the back, stocking with Blake. But the self-checkout lanes are broken, have been for months.

The line is empty. He reaches into the pocket of his apron.

"No phones during work," his manager says, striding past on the way to a customer dispute, too distracted to chew him out. Kill his family in front of him, Insul thinks therapeutically.

Blake appears, work uniform over his shoulder, long hair unleashed. He tosses a candy bar on the black strip of the conveyor belt. Insul rings it up, then waits, because he can see Blake still has a tall can of beer in his jacket pocket.

The other boy smiles, easy and natural, until Insul hands him a receipt for the candy bar.

"That's right," Blake says, then walks out.

Insul stands there, retro pop playing over the supermarket speakers. The saccharine repetition makes him sick and dizzy. He points the scanner at the manager across the store, one eye shut, clicking his finger, psh, psh, psh.

His phone vibrates, a buzz in his belly. He checks it stealthily.

what time are you off

He types back, 5.

usual place

He feels a rush at the senior's attention. They used to hang out with Blake's stoner friends and that one college dropout in the camo with all the guns. But lately it's just been them. Pure, undiluted, intoxicating, a chance to talk about the true nature of reality without other people making stupid jokes and ruining everything. But it's been awhile since their last real

conversation. It hurts to be away from that attention, an agonizing, physical itch, gut aching.

Play Date

Trianon sits on the couch, feet screaming silently. The hill was a hard climb. Insul kept giving him smug looks like, you wish you could ask for my help. But you're a healthy, normal person, aren't you?

Clayton lays at the other end, smoke drifting from his mouth into the sealed air of the house. He has sandy blond hair, a few wisps falling over his face, and a mole by his right eye. He speaks calmly, almost drawling, relaxed from the high, holding out a Moral Orel vape. "Want some?"

Trianon takes the vape quickly, sucking down the painkilling fumes until he can't hold anymore.

Insul leans against the wall, looking tense in this interstitial situation. Not blending into the chaos of a party, but not alone. Mask crispy at the edges. "You said your dad is nearby?"

Clayton says, "He's bunkered up at, uh, some kind of end of the world compound but it's pretty chill."

"How close?"

"Uhh. Hours away. But he's got his helicopter and everything. I swear he almost crashed it."

"Wow," Trianon says. "That sounds scary." The weed is so strong he can nearly hear the helicopter blades. He can't believe he wanted to ride in one. But he has to or he won't get a job, he has to ride the helicopter, hahaha—

"I was literally terrified I was going to die," Clayton says. "The pilot refuses to let him go up in this weather again."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

Trianon looks at the relentless rain. "How did you get the boat in the lake?"

Clayton adjusts an imaginary pair of glasses. "The way the lowland is distributed, you can take a small craft up and down the state for like a hundred miles. Until the flooding stops, it's a whole new road system."

"That's really interesting." Trianon imagines the neo-rivers from a satellite perspective, California before it was mutilated into an arid corpse, natural waters pumped like cadaver juice into hard, monetizable containers. There's something hopeful about the idea of new secret roads.

"Yeah. It is extremely nice. Just driving a boat around with your guys."

“How many are there?” Insul says.

“Me. Max. Everett. And we’re picking up my girlfriend at Quad Valley. She’s GazelleOrb on stream.”

Trianon closes his eyes and floats in the high, the pain in his feet dulling to a manageable throb. “Are you streaming the boat stuff?”

“I have frankly enjoyed being away from my dad and streaming and everything. I think it was kind of driving me crazy. Like I’m grateful for having an audience but it’s also cool having a, uh, sense of self. Like every person who looks at you just shaves something off.”

Trianon nods, vaguely aware of Insul leaving the room. “Yeah. My dad always had these exaggerated reactions, even when he wasn’t near a computer. Like he was talking to this sum totality of people and never an individual. Never to me.”

“Damn. I’m sorry, Trianon.” Clayton puts a hand on the cushion between them, brow furrowed. “You deserved some serious attention. That’s when kid brains are plastic. He was supposed to take care of that squishy stuff.”

Trianon shrugs, embarrassed at talking about himself that much. “Maybe his brain hardened before he learned about squishy brains. It’s like a horizon of neuroplasticity and all you can do is try to be on the other side, just enough to be a little softer than the people who gave birth to you...”

“That is a very weed thought but it actually makes a lot of sense. I think it’ll keep making sense even when you’re not high.”

Fuck. He was talking too much again. His mouth is probably open and stupid looking too. But Clayton seems sincere. “Thanks. Um. Anyways. You’re a good streamer. Chill for falling asleep to.”

The couch sinks between them and Trianon opens his eyes. Clayton takes the vape from his lap and leans back, heating it up again. “That’s nice of you to say, Trianon. But vanilla streaming is kind of boomer anyways. I need to hard eject.”

Trianon smooths his skirt out, flushed at how much it rode up. “Yeah?”

“I want to do that Semi-Novan stuff. I thought it was just a trend like wearing shock collars for the reacts but I saw some and it looks actually deep, deep as DOTA.”

Trianon’s mouth waters. Something smells delicious. Maybe it’s a hallucination. “Almost reminds me of Nordic LARP.”

“Yeahhhh I remember someone saying that. Damn, you know so much about this shit, we need to talk, maybe you could come on my stream and wear sick dresses—”

Something bangs on the coffee table and Trianon flinches. Insul stands above a tray of steaming hot pizza, wearing oven mitts.

*

It’s the kind of A/B testing looking pizza that Trianon remembers his family getting from Grocery Outlet, ordered online during food shortages so the delivery always came back with weird stuff. The boxes were familiar but the text was smaller, cramming in a bunch of random cheeses and meats like the factory was getting rid of surplus, or exotic-sounding fruits disdained by the conservative pizza palette of the American people.

Same situation probably. Seeking comfort as the world drowns. This one is barbecue sauce instead of tomato, with four kinds of cheese, weirdly sweet bacon, and something green he can’t place. “What is this vegetable?”

Insul gnaws on a crust, sauce streaked across his lips. “Are you going to be autistic about your veggies?”

“I just asked what it was.”

“Uh. I think it was called escarole.”

“Escarole.”

“Yeah.”

“They just keep inventing new goddamn faggot vegetables,” Trianon mutters, tugging a slice off the pan.

Insul laughs, the edges of his voice softened by weed. “Are you making fun of your dad?”

“Dunno.”

Insul elbows Clayton. “His dad was a streamer.”

“Yeah?”

“He fucking sucked,” Trianon says.

Clayton folds his pizza into a burrito shape and smiles at it. “Yeah. We are a degenerate species. Scum of the earth.”

“Haha.” Trianon’s mouth hurts from how good the pizza tastes, lab-developed flavorants bursting sweet and salty in his mouth. He digs into it with his fingers, pulling sugary bacon from the cheesy strands.

“So you like wearing dresses?”

“Huh?” Trianon swallows with difficulty, trying to process Clayton’s question through the mass of starch in his throat.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to get personal. I’m just high.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Cool.” Clayton leans back and blows a smoke ring somehow. “This right here, this is the model of an enlightened society. Boat-centric distribution networks. Not giving a fucking about clothes or gender, just souls. Too much water can be a disaster but it’s also the most flexible shape, how people should be. Maybe the rain should keep coming until we get waterpilled. Oh, man. I sound like my dad. I think I got his coke ideas gene. Or got seriously streamerbrained. Just saying shit.” He pauses. “Insul. You’re not participating in the dad-talk. Do you think you’re like your dad, or not like your dad?”

Trianon brandishes his slice at Insul, toppings oozing onto the coffee table. “Yeah, Insul. Are you like your dad?”

Insul narrows his eyes, saying nothing.

“Does that explain it all? One boring backstory—”

“Maybe. In some ways. Different in other ways.”

“Yeah?” Clayton puts down his half-eaten pizza burrito. It slowly unfolds.

“I’ve hurt people too. But it’s not the same.”

“How is it different?” Trianon says.

Insul chews his lip, looking to the side. “It never felt personal. With him. I was just a side effect of fucking my mom. But for me it’s really personal. It’s the biggest thing in the world.”

Clayton crunches a shard of burnt bacon. “Hurting people?”

“Being close to them.”

“So to you, that’s the same thing?”

"They take something. Or you take something. You can't pretend like it's some kind of fairy tale."

"I get that. Or maybe not. But I support you, man."

"Thanks, Clayton."

"No problem, Insul."

Rain beats against the glass as they chew pizza in stoned silence. Trianon catches Clayton looking at him.

"Sorry. That is such a cool dress."

Trianon looks down at the black dress spattered with green paint. "Yeah?"

"I never thought about it before, but most clothes have patterns. You don't see many asymmetrical designs like that."

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Uh. My girlfriend."

"She sounds like a down chick."

"You could say that." Below our feet, making the house stronger like any other piece of its foundation.

Clayton flies his pizza slice through the air in a languid arc, like he's piloting it toward a question. "So are you his brother or like...?"

Insul says, "Does it matter?"

"Dunno. You two seem close." Clayton is silent for some time, then he says to Trianon, "Okay, I'm being extremely rude again, but are you okay, dude? You seem kind of ill."

Trianon laughs nervously.

Insul says, "He has a degenerative muscle disease."

"Oh man. I'm so sorry." Clayton puts his mangled slice down respectfully.

"It's okay," Trianon says. "It's not that bad."

"For sure. At least this whole natural disaster thing gave you a vacation. Are you awestruck at being in the heart of nature?"

Trianon looks out the window. Flashes of dream pass through his head. Something prismatic in the rain.

"I like being close to the water. And everywhere is close to the water now."

"Yeahhhh, Trianon. Based and waterpilled."

"Haha. You don't even know. I keep having this dream about something in the water. When the ice caps melt. The immortality chimerism. Um. Where everyone lives forever and gets animal parts."

"That's amazing."

"You didn't tell me about that," Insul says.

"Hey." Clayton looks at the ceiling like he's trying to remember something. "I know my dad offered you a job, but you should milk this situation as long as you can. He's not leaving the country for like a week."

There's still time? To ride a helicopter and have money? Fuck you, Insul.

"Your girlfriend sounded excited. Like one of those people who gets off on having a career. Are you that way, or the opposite?"

"The opposite, I guess." Always manually doing what came naturally to Oenone.

"Well, follow your heart, Trianon. I heard that in a cartoon once. If I had a degenerative muscular disease, that's what I'd do."

"That's not the only thing Trianon has." Insul take a hit of the vape and exhales like he's making a majestic proclamation. "He also has autism."

Clayton says, "Oh man. I love autism. That's so cool."

Trianon's face turns red.

Insul taps on his phone. "I'm sending you money for the food."

"Cool."

Insul touches Clayton's knee lightly. "Thanks."

Clayton laughs. He takes the vape from Insul and sucks on it. "This ARkStorm weed, I swear. Maybe it's just the historic moment but there's something about it."

"Immortality chimera weed," Trianon whispers, a slice of pizza warming on his thigh, eyes rolling around the ceiling.

Clayton's phone vibrates. "I should get back to the boys. They were playing Street Fighter but you can only fight so many streets, you know what I mean? Literally, though. That parody game people couldn't shut up about. I resented feeling like I had to stream it but the boulevard expansion actually introduced a lot of high level play. Like it was one guy making it but it took off so he hired some netcode guys for that silky smooth rollback."

"I was so bad. I only won if I spammed bikes with Sharrowial Experiments Bike Lane."

"That's legit. She's actually a pretty high skill cap kind of character."

"Like how every third bike is a mountain bike?"

"Yeah, those are good for blocking. Then you attack right after with the faster normal bikes."

"I tried but people kept predicting it."

"Not if you lag the animation and fake them out. You can delay each bike by like half a second if you're holding up, for whatever reason. And if you do some octopus hands shit, you can queue the bikes up and shoot like a million at the same time but it looks like one bike and the other guy explodes. People literally lose their shit."

"Hahaha."

"Yeah. I'm happy to show you sometime, bro."

"Really?" Trianon twists his hands in his lap. "That's very nice of you."

"It's literally zero problem. In fact, the only problem would be if I didn't show you how to destroy guys with Sharrowial Experiments Bike Lane for the memes."

"Haha. Okay..."

"You good?"

"Sorry. I just really like talking about games with guys." He feels ridiculous, he doesn't even know what he's saying. He wants someone to tell him how to build his character, how to grind in these pocket universes of ritual combat so he can enjoy the story and stop fucking dying.

“Damn. We can talk about them more, then.” Clayton stands up. “But I gotta get back for real. It is creepy as fuck driving a boat in the dark through a flooded forest. Primal shit, you feel your spine devolving.”

Insul stands up at the same time. Their hands slap together, grip, release. Clayton brushes past, knocking into Insul’s shoulder. He laughs at his clumsiness, then picks up his clear umbrella.

“Oh man. I love this classic style male bonding. Alright guys, see ya.”

*

Insul lays on the couch, his mask fading into something dead and empty.

“Is he your new friend?” Trianon says, painfully pulling the boots off, exposing his bandaged secrets to the air.

“He’s useful.”

Trianon’s eyelids tug with the drowse of weed, a full belly, not being hurt. His face unfolds along its hidden seams of weakness, an idiot flower. His spine wilts him into the couch, into warm dark nothing. But nothing has a shape now. Insul twitches under him with a sharp intake of breath. The cable knit sweater is soft on his face, but the monstrous bruise is just underneath.

Insul touches his hair, slow and hesitant. Trianon tries to say, don’t touch me, but his mouth doesn’t work. The sweater is a cloud of woolen indica above the clean soap smell of the skin. The smell makes his face melt even more, lips dragged across Insul’s chest, feeling like a lamprey, blind and basal. As he breathes it in, a musky stink insinuates itself, like something that can never be scrubbed away. But it’s okay. The scary thing isn’t outside anymore. It’s here. He can stop anticipating.

*

Dark now, still raining. Insul wakes up, smiling stupid and sleepy when he sees the black hair pooled on his chest, the mouth stuck by drool to his sweater. Then Trianon opens his eyes, cool gray, suddenly lucid, and tears himself away to the other end of the couch.

Pain flashes across Insul’s face. “You were happy.”

“I was tired.”

“I got us food. I got us a house. This could be perfect.”

“For you.” Shame tastes like sweater, smells like him.

"It's a lot of work checking both your emails and figuring out how to type like you."

"Wow, I'm really getting the deluxe kidnapping treatment. Regular maid service."

"Making excuses for you. Getting your weak voice inside me. Makes me sick."

"Good. I hope you're hating this."

Insul gets off the couch, rising to his full height, voice unfolded and full. "I feel so stupid. Trying to be nice to you. Like it even matters."

Rage turns to fear. "I know you're trying."

"Don't do that. You know there isn't a world where I get to be the one."

"The one?"

"I met a guy once. After high school. Said he'd take care of me. Same with the old lady from the beach house. But there's just so many of us out there. They can always trade up."

"Not everyone is as bad as the worst people you ever met."

"If I tried to be your friend, maybe it would have worked, for a second. Until you went back. People like me are just something on the side. And you're the same to her."

"She set me up with a job. That you sabotaged."

"Or maybe she's just sick of taking care of you. This job, she gets rid of you while looking like a good person. Then she hooks up with some guy who has it figured out. A real adult who can knock her up, knock her down."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"It's funny. She was looking at me like that, before everything went down. This psycho shit you hate about me, that's what a real person looks like to them."

"I think anyone would find it difficult to imagine how much of a child you really are."

Insul covers his face, breathing hard. "I almost told her, I want him. Not you. I want that little faggot with no money, no life. I wanted to see the look on her face." His eyes ooze like brown sap between his fingers, nails digging in, pinning the mask like flayed skin. "But he doesn't want me. I fucked up my only chance." The color leaves his voice. "But I had to protect myself." Hard and monotone. "Because it always goes bad. Because people always try to use you."

Trianon's eyes drift apart, splitting Insul into two people. "Something made you feel that way."

And it wasn't right. But now you're doing it to yourself. No one else is around, you're the one in charge, you can stop this."

"Too late. She's evidence. And if you stay innocent you're evidence too."

Trianon puts a trembling hand on Insul's leg. "We can both be innocent."

Insul's lip twists like he's going to laugh or cry. "I told you. I'm not a good person."

"Insul."

"All that shit you believe in, they invented those words so some people would make the weak decision. Like that movie about the guys in jail. With the problem."

"The problem?"

"The dilemma."

"The prisoner's dilemma?"

"What other kind of dilemma would it be?"

"Fair enough."

"I know you see the same thing. That's why I keep holding on like a fucking retard."

"I guess I see it too. But I can't live like it's true."

"That shit kills me. You can see me but you're up in this place I can't get to, with the rest of them, and you're just going to fly away."

"Insul."

"Don't do that to me."

"What?"

"You know what you're doing. Using my name on me. I'm a fucking animal. Sure. You got me. But I'm in charge now. I get to decide what a human is. For once in my life."

Trianon almost says it again, reflexively, then bites his lip. That name was a safe tenderness, the kind a therapist could give while remaining professional. A softer word would feel disgusting, even if the right move is to manipulate, to leverage the only weapon he has, but he knows Insul would see it in his face.

"I'm human," Insul says. "You're not."

"If it was that simple, you would have killed me by now."

"Shut up."

"It drives you fucking insane, doesn't it? How you change around me?"

Insul covers his ears like someone screamed. "I told you to shut up."

"Then go back to being a school shooter. That's why you like guns, right? No talking, no touching, you force the change into other people."

"Get up."

Trianon grips the arm of the couch and pushes himself upright, unbalanced on his bandaged feet. "But you can't change. Because you'd have to admit what you did to those kids."

"Stop talking."

Trianon feels a rush of something hot and poisonous. "You're an incredibly weak person, Insul."

"Only around you."

"A scared, psycho child."

"Get in the basement."

Heavy Crunch

"I don't think I can do it up there. But I can do it down here."

Oenone's hair covers her face, tarnished gold. Her dress shirt is brown with old blood. At first Trianon thinks she's asleep, then she looks up. "Do what?" She sees the dread in Trianon's face and it feeds white to her eyes. Or maybe it's the power drill in Insul's hand.

"Put your head down," Insul says.

Oenone stares up like her gaze could crush the drill bit.

"Let's play for it," Trianon says.

"What?"

"Like we did at the beach house. Let's play a game for it."

"You know I'm not that stupid."

"Scared of losing again?"

"I'm not scared. I'm the one holding a power drill." Insul pauses. "But I am kind of bored."

*

The Zero Heaven board game sprawls across the floor, barely in reach of Oenone's tethered hands.

Insul sets down off-brand energy drinks, clink, click, clack, a tingle of poison on Trianon's tongue. "You played this, Tria?"

"Um. The digitized version."

Insul turns to Oenone. "Was this really your favorite game as a kid?"

"Uh. Favorite board game, I guess. My brother was obsessed with it."

"Are you good?"

She shrugs. Her voice is congested through her punched nose. "What do we get if we win?"

"If you win, I walk out the door. And you can live your shitty little lives."

Oenone strains to pick up the rulebook, rope cutting into her wrists. "And if you win?"

"If I win. I win."

"You're probably just going to hurt us anyways."

Insul looks at Trianon. "Didn't I take you to Spirit Halloween? After you won that game?"

"...yes."

"See?"

Oenone says, "Spirit Halloween?"

"And bubble tea. He loves that shit. He had a punch card in his wallet."

Insul slides a can over to Oenone.

"Drink."

"I'm not thirsty," Oenone says through cracked lips.

Insul revs the power drill. Oenone waits a few seconds, very deliberately, then takes the can.

"Your turn, Tria." Insul pushes the can in Trianon's face and he coughs, spraying the board with chemical saliva. The old cardboard absorbs it, discoloring the Tidal Marshlands. "And this." Insul holds up a vape, Clayton's vape, he must have forgotten it. It's harder than ever to refuse, with all the pain Insul put in him. He reaches for the vape, missing the first time with his double vision. His head grows heavy with ARkStorm weed and he gazes at the board, trying to remember the meta strats.

Insul lays out the miniature figures. "Pick your faction."

Oenone says, "What are they again?"

Trianon mumbles, "Draconic Boys, Chitin Cabal, Cortex Angels, Atlantean Princesses."

Insul says, "Do you like dragons, Oenone?"

"Not really."

"Yeah. It's a stupid animal."

"They're not dragons," Trianon whispers. "They're anthro reptiles." He picks up the Draconic minis and puts them in their starting space, the Desert Citadel.

Insul drops his Atlantean Princesses in the water cities. "Two against one, so I'll control another faction." he picks up the Chitin Cabal pieces.

"Guess I'm Cortex Angels," Oenone says. She puts her single starting piece in the Heavenhole space, just as the contents of her purse are emptied on the floor. "What are you doing?"

Insul holds up a vial of Adderall. "She's got pills too, Tria. Except you need yours just to be a normal amount of retarded. No wonder you can't keep up with her."

Trianon stares into the game box. "Missing some pieces."

Insul spills out the Adderall, orange pills rolling across the board. "Here." He watches Trianon arrange them on the board in place of counters. "I think we all need an Adderall." He sprinkles some on Oenone's chest and they stick to her sweaty skin. "Say cheese or whatever. This is the Adderall commercial."

She stares at him with absolute loathing.

"Swallow," he says, gripping the power drill.

She puts a pill in her mouth.

"Another one."

She picks it off her chest, hesitates, then swallows. Insul looks at Trianon and he quickly puts one in his mouth, swallowing with difficulty.

Insul holds a pill up to the light. "Fucking XR." He eats it anyways, chasing with energy drink.

"You're going to have a heart attack," Trianon says.

*

"Bro. Shut the fuck up. You know there's an Atlantean rule. And a Nobility rule. And they stack."

"Fine," Trianon says.

Their stale, recycled air fills the basement. Oenone's dress shirt is heavy with sweat, bare legs sticking to the polished concrete. She surveys the board, then moves her Cortex Angel to the mountain space in the center.

"Nice move," Insul says.

"Mmhm."

"I was worried you'd be dead weight on his team. It wouldn't have been as exciting."

Oenone picks up the vape and takes a small, controlled hit, exhaling quickly. "If I have to do something, I do it."

Silence, then Insul picks up a long-haired miniature. "I move my Princess onto the Volcanic Beach and engage your mercenary in combat. Tria."

"Huh? I cast Fleischwarden."

"What kind of faggot spell is that. He's a Barbarian. He doesn't even have a magic stat."

"But the base damage on the spell is good and Barbarians get a free action refresh and spells count as an action so—"

"Fine." Insul blows vape smoke across the board. "That's smart, actually."

"It's an obvious loophole if you look at it. Um." Trianon rolls the dice. "I'm immune to damage this round."

Insul looks disappointed. "I cast Sand to Glass and kill this villager, I guess."

"Take a War Crime card."

"Whatever." Insul draws from the deck. "Wow, a reprimand card."

"If you draw three reprimands, you lose the game."

Oenone's turn. She studies the board. "Okay. Fuck. This always worked as a kid." She moves her Angel onto the beach and rolls the dice. "One, two, three hits—I kill your Princess."

"What?"

"She's dead. Remove her piece."

"Your Angel was on the other side of the board—"

"Bonus move from being an Angel. Bonus move from Winged character on an Elevated zone. Bonus move from my Roost upgrade. Bonus move from—"

"Fine." Insul knocks over the dead Princess. When his turn comes back around, he moves pieces rapidly.

Trianon says, "What are you doing?"

Insul has a swarm of mercenaries hanging around the bottom of the board, hired with his Chitin Cabal's steady trickle of influence. So far he's used them to block the roads, the usual safe strat. But now he moves them into the Draconic capital, eyes narrowed.

"That's suicide," Trianon says. "My innate defense—"

"Just roll."

Dice clatter across the concrete. "Your mercs are dead."

"But I got your Draconic Boy. And you can't spawn new units without your capital."

"This is so stupid. Why couldn't we have played an iconic game like chess or something."

"Yeah," Oenone says. "This is an incredibly complicated, nerdy game to play for our lives."

"It was this or Candy Land," Insul says.

Trianon laughs hysterically. "That would be horrible. Just moving around. Waiting. Nothing you do matters. Just like—"

"Keep drinking," Insul says.

Trianon sips the energy drink until Insul breaks eye contact. He's getting used to the taste. Under the metallic burn, scifi sweetnesses and glitched negative-flavors are to be savored, as micro-seconds of reprieve from hell.

"You too," Insul says to Oenone.

Oenone tips her drink back and chugs, staring out the corner of her eye at Insul. She tosses the empty can across the room.

"Haha. You're okay, Oenone."

"Thanks," she says guardedly.

"I used to hate you. But now I'm glad you're an okay kind of person. Glad you're here."

She moves her Cortex Angel to the Goldenblood Plateau. "And why is that?"

"Because I need his choice to be real."

"His choice?"

"Between you and me."

"You said you were going to kill us."

"If he chose me over you, right now, I'd let him live."

"And what would happen to me?"

Insul strokes the power drill. "It wouldn't be a choice if he weren't losing something."

Oenone stares, eyes veined with red. "You're deluded."

"Why? Am I not good enough for him?"

"You're abusive."

"I could be a good boyfriend."

Oenone snorts.

"He needs someone like me. Someone who really sees him. Who'll do anything for him."

"He was doing fine without you."

"Yeah, he fooled you pretty good. When he stands up straight and ties his hair back and talks like he talked when he met me, he almost seems like a normal person, doesn't he? You wouldn't believe the shit I found scraping away at him."

"I think you hurt people so you can bring them to your level."

"It's not like you didn't change him too. So he'd fit your world. He's soft like that, isn't he?"

"I don't see it that way."

"You probably think your boyfriend is a spineless pussy, don't you? He's braver than you think. I beat the shit out of him and he kept talking back."

"I know he's brave. He survived everything you—"

"He makes jokes when he gets nervous. Like, really nervous, like he's about to die nervous. I've seen parts of him you never will." Insul looks at Trianon. "You know one of the first things I noticed about you?"

"What."

"Something else got to you first. Not the way I did. But whatever it was, it made you know

yelling wouldn't save you. Maybe that's why you joke around. Like you know you can't stop what's coming."

Trianon whispers, eyes unfocused.

Insul continues. "When it happens, you're going to let me do it. You're not going to fight back."

"Don't listen to him," Oenone says.

"Fuck!" Trianon twitches, looking at the corner of the room in terror.

"What's wrong?" Insul and Oenone say.

"You didn't hear that?"

"No."

"Take a deep breath, sweetie."

Trianon stares at the energy drink in his hand, sweating. "This shit is making me hallucinate."

"Yeah, haha. Isn't it fun?" Insul cracks open another can.

"I can't believe they sell them in stores." Trianon tries to pick the hair out of his eyes, then recoils at the black strands as if they were spiders. "This is horrible. It's not a hallucination. It's real. Everything that happened. The museum. What you did to me."

Insul says, "I broke your boyfriend."

"I think I'm having a heart attack." Trianon rubs his chest, then feels the scars. He starts hyperventilating. "It's forever. It's forever—"

"It'll be okay," Oenone says. But the talismanic effect of those words no longer reaches him.

"I don't think it will. That's why he cut me. And—the other stuff. So it'll be forever. I wake up. I'm still here. I wake up."

"I love you, Trianon. But we have to get through this stupid fucking board game. We have to live. Okay?"

"Nnh. I don't want to let you down." Trianon sorts through his spell cards without really seeing them.

"You're not letting me down." Oenone takes her turn, wrists chafing as she moves her miniatures around the board, gray and unpainted. Her brother always meant to finish them with

her but somehow they never did.

Trianon hovers his remaining Draconic Boy, about to place it on the Moonfall Meadows.

“Pay attention,” Oenone says quietly.

“What?”

“He’s getting a ton of magic points.”

“I’ll try to do something about it,” Trianon says. He understands what she means. Her Cortex Angel has the strongest stats, but she only gets one factional unit. So it’s on Trianon to control the map and block Insul from the leylines. “It’s hard when he can move through water.”

“Then buy some archers. There’s been an Ice Bane spell in the market for at least two turns.”

“If I don’t save enough Influence, I can’t use the Imperial Road, and I can’t contest his—”

“It’s too late,” Insul says.

“What?”

“I cast Tidal Venengeance.”

“Venengeance?”

“That’s what it says on the card.”

Oenone looks at it. “Wow. It really does.”

“I’m adjacent to a Water space so I get two bonus dice. Then I burn all my mana to get four more. Then I permanently discard Sand To Glass for its Burn effect to gain dice equal to my magic stat, so that’s another three dice. Damage hits the whole map. Except for Winged creatures.”

“Fuck—”

Insul rolls dice repeatedly. “You’re dead, Tria.”

Oenone moves her Cortex Angel across the board, destroying Chitin Cabal agents in a path of spellfire.

“I said, it’s too late.” Insul corners her Angel and rolls until he kills it.

“Fuck,” Oenone says.

Trianon feels dizzy. It's just cardboard now. The basement is back again, along with the bitter smell of the toilet bucket. He tries to shift his feet to a better position so he can stand up, rush the stairs, do something. Bright pain flares through his soles at the slightest contact with the floor.

"I won," Insul says, a smile creasing the dark bags of his eyes. His mouth hangs open slightly, just a hint of teeth, in disbelief.

Oenone's knuckles whiten, fists clenched dense as rocks around the ropes on her wrists. She pulls hard, veins standing out on her neck.

"What are you doing?" Insul says, craning his head at her.

The bracket pops from the wall and slams onto the ground, a screw bouncing and hurtling through the air. Insul jerks back and his boot kicks the board, raining pills and plastic. He gropes for the power drill, knocking over an energy drink.

Oenone grabs the rope hanging from her wrists and swings the metal bracket at the other end. Insul lunges at her and the bracket whirls back around Oenone's head, smacking him down.

Trianon takes a step, board game tokens stabbing like nails into his sliced sole. He collapses, banging his knee on the floor.

Oenone reaches for the power drill. As her fingers close around it, Insul grabs the rope trailing from her wrist, keeping her hand just shy of the drill. She kicks him and he bites her bare leg.

Trianon crawls toward the drill, plastic pieces digging into his knees. The spilled energy drink expands across the floor, glistening dark like engine oil, cold under his palms.

"Don't even think about it," Insul says, voice stripped and shredded.

Trianon's muscles stop working.

Insul crawls across Oenone and reaches for the drill. She pushes it away with her fingertips, so he grabs her hair instead. She punches his chest, right in the car bruise, folding him up.

Trianon says, "Stop. Please."

"We're fighting right now." Insul's voice strains as he untangles himself from the rope, nearly upright. "Just—"

Oenone pulls the rope and Insul spasms as it slides up his neck, the primal reaction choked into him at the museum, almost slipping free before it tightens around his face, caught between his teeth. He struggles to stay on his feet, reeling back, knocking over the bucket. Waste splats

across the floor, instantly staining the trapped air of the basement. Trianon covers his mouth, trying not to throw up, then smells the energy drink stink on his hand. The pizza lurches past his lips, a mess of faggot vegetables and cheese.

“Fucking, help me,” Oenone says.

Through misty eyes he sees Insul stagger forward, knees bent, teeth white around the gag, a screaming growl.

“Trianon,” Oenone says, like searing metal.

Contractions of unspeakable awe, deep in his stomach, that this could be it, the stupid sudden thing that finally breaks Insul apart, that resets the timeline, that terminates the nightmare. He looks for the drill, vision skewing through stimulants and adrenaline and the hundred points of raw scraped agony that make up his body, moving like a splintered scarecrow.

Insul’s fingers fold around the rope. His entire body twists, then Oenone is in the air, over his head, and they hit the floor together. He gasps at the ceiling, rope tangled around his face, webbed to his mouth by strands of drool. Oenone’s face hits the concrete next to him with a crack. Something skitters across the floor, landing next to Trianon. His fingers tremble, pinching at the blurry fragment until it sharpens into a tooth.

Insul tilts his head. “I win.”

Vandal Holiday

"Is this the vacation you imagined, Oenone?"

It's hot down in hell. Insul's sweater is gone, he wears the monster bruise instead. Blood drips from where the bracket broke his skin, like a snake bite in a black hole.

"Nnnnn." Oenone is hogtied with the yellow rope. Her face is stuck to the floor, blond hair matted to the red concrete.

"I can't do that," Insul says. "Imagine things. I don't think it does you any good though. It's not real." He reaches into the container of Vaseline. "This is real."

Trianon crawls toward the stairs, dragging his sliced feet behind him. Insul grabs his ankle and pulls him back. The black dress rides up, exposing Trianon's pale ass.

"Not again, please—"

"Then kill her."

"Anything but that, please—"

His stomach flips as Insul smears his hole with Vaseline, sending waves of aching poison through his guts, even worse than the coconut oil, thick and chunky.

"Bet you've never been in your boyfriend's guts. You're not really using the whole Trianon." Insul laughs, an atonal scrape. Carbonated fluid dribbles from his mouth, cold in the roots of Trianon's hair. "It's so weird to think about him fucking you."

Insul tosses the can. Trianon twitches as the vibration rings through the floor into his ear. "Fuck you," he says, more a tic than conscious speech.

Insul kisses the back of his neck. "You can barely fuck her. You'll never get inside me."

Oenone opens her mouth to say something but blood spills through the gap in her teeth, down her busted lip and battered chin.

Insul says, "Hard to talk in that position, right?"

"Ughhh."

"Don't worry. I know what you're thinking."

Oenone's wrists tense in the rope, trembling then giving out.

"You think I don't deserve anything nice."

Oenone's voice is clogged with thick dark snot. "Please stop."

"He's mine now. My little cripple."

"Nnnhh!" Trianon struggles, muscles soft and barely responsive. He manages to twist his hips, slipping Insul's cock free. Insul laughs and hooks two fingers under Trianon's upper teeth, pulling his jaw open. "Hhhhhh!" Drool sprays the floor, tongue hanging pink and wet. It feels like his jaw is going to rip off if he keeps moving, so he lays there, lungs swelling against the hard concrete, as Insul inserts himself again.

"How does it feel, me fucking your boyfriend?"

"The cops. Are going to shoot you to death. You're going to die in your own shit. It's going to smell like this room."

"This room smells like you." Insul thrusts hard and deep, each movement lifting Trianon's bruised ass off the floor.

Something burns like an ember in Trianon's palm. He tries to focus on that. It must be his soul. Tiny, almost extinguished. He has to keep it alive. Insul's fingers dig into the gums behind his incisors and suddenly he has no soul, only saliva spurting from his mouth, coating Insul's fingers.

"Fuck," Insul says, voice shaky.

Trianon feels Insul's balls tighten, then hot wetness sprays his innards. He gags, drool running down his chin, dripping from his strained neck cartilage.

"Hey Oenone, check this out." Insul holds Trianon around the stomach and pulls him upright, limbs hanging like a marionette. An incoherent sound comes from Trianon as his belly is pressed. Insul grabs an ankle and pulls it back. Dirty cum squirts from Trianon's hole, getting in Oenone's hair. He thrashes, falling to the hard floor with a slap. As he lays there, other sensations intrude, now that the obliterating fullness is gone. That thing he was holding, stinging in his sweaty grip. He opens his hand and looks at the alien bone deposit cutting into his palm. His girlfriend's tooth.

Insul pulls him back, fingers digging into the softest parts of his hips. "Fuck, I'm getting hard again."

Dark and wormlike pulses invert Trianon, rupturing his guts into the void. "Too big," he gasps.

Insul pulls out, rubbing another gob of Vaseline in. "See? I'm nice to him." He slides back inside with a squelch and Trianon's legs spasm, sphincter flashing like a red ring. "But it doesn't

matter if he hates me. His myasthenia lets me in. It's like I'm dating his disease." Insul holds on tight, his caffeinated heartbeat kissing Trianon's spine. Slap, slap, slap, like a metronome to Oenone's yelling.

Trianon says, "Oenone, please, I know if you don't say anything it'll make you feel, hhh, like a bad person, but there's, nhhh, nothing you can do. It's too loud, too overwhelming—"

"Yeah, Oenone, respect our boy's autism."

Oenone lowers her face to the concrete, neck too strained to hold itself up.

Insul continues. "She's never seen you like this. You can hide your retardedness, hide your jank muscles, and on a good day, you fit in. But then something happens and you start sliding."

"Nnrrgh."

"You're not in cripple world, not in her world. You never lose, you never win. That must be torture for you."

Oenone unsticks her face from the floor. "Holy shit, you talk a lot for a guy fucking someone in the ass."

"Shut up."

"Do you understand how bad you're hurting him?"

Insul stops thrusting.

"He's never going to forgive you."

"Doesn't matter. It was too late when I met him."

Trianon feels something drip warm and wet on his back, sliding down his spinal groove. Did Insul cum again? Please let it be over. But Insul is soft inside him. Trianon stares at the wall, eyes wide, heart pounding.

Insul picks up the power drill and his weight shifts toward Oenone. "Stop looking at me." His voice cracks.

"I wasn't," she says.

"Shut up. Fuck." He makes a retching sound, then vomits on the floor, acid sprinkling Trianon's cheek. He wipes his mouth. "I can hear you. Thinking about me." The drill spins up.

Trianon's ass trembles into Insul's hips, hardening what lays between them. "Inss..." Insul pulls

his head back, choking the name. The drill whines with insectile hunger and Trianon's hole shrinks to the size of a drill tip, pushing the cock out.

"That reminds me," Insul says in a drugged monotone. "I always wanted to know. What it felt like. Being inside someone while you poke their brain."

Oenone is begging, apologizing, bargaining, but Trianon can only hear the drill, so close it tingles in his hair. "You like me, don't kill me, please—"

"She's right. You'll never forgive me."

"No no no—" Trianon convulses, the bones of his feet knocking into the floor.

Tears run in clear paths down Oenone's bloodstained cheeks. "I love you, Trianon." She shuts her eyes, teeth clenched as she sobs.

"Take her not me take her not me—"

The drill spins down. "What?"

"Her not me take her not me I'll do anything you want please—"

"You're just saying that." Insul spins the drill by Trianon's head again, almost clipping an ear.

Trianon slips off Insul's soft cock. He crawls like a crippled dog, cum dripping from his gaping hole, leaving a wet white trail, myasthenic hands slapping limp-wristed onto Insul's legs. He looks up, eyes floating in different directions. "I hate being so fucking weak, anyone can do anything they want to me, please protect me, please—" He laps at Insul's greasy cock, crying into it.

"Okay," Insul says, as if speaking to a hallucination. He tilts the drill 90 degrees and extends his arm. As Oenone screams, he stares into Trianon's eyes, watching them like two little fish in a stream. Trianon's mouth is slack, teeth brown with shitty Vaseline.

Room Service

She's emptying out on the floor. Trianon can hear the tap of her blood on the concrete, where she used to play boardgames with her family, those pieces now scattered across the sanguine paths their bodies painted. He feels like he can never move again. But the stimulants keep his heartbeat non-diagetic and he rises as if written, blotting the holes in her with his dress that is her dress. One in the shoulder. One in the thigh. Maybe she's supposed to bleed out slow. But maybe she's still leverage.

"Can I help her?"

Insul, arms folded, head down and dark, sucking on the tip of the power drill. "Sure."

*

Oenone is bound to the glass coffee table, a trapped insect of yellow rope and gray duct tape. Her white dress shirt is missing a few buttons, exposing her black bra, and skin that glistens sickly under the overhead light.

Trianon holds a bottle of mineral water to her lips. Strawberries litter the floor, one bite out of each, along with the water that spills through the gap in her teeth. He opens the first aid kit. "I can pack that with gauze," he whispers, too ashamed to look at her face. She won't open her mouth, so he inspects the holes in her. They look so small, once you clean the blood away. Antiseptic. Bandages. She doesn't say a word. He edges away, feeling gross like he was molesting her.

Insul draws on the floor with a black marker. Chaotic spirals, not regimented like the illustrations for his school shooter manifesto. The power drill and kitchen knife sit like ritual tools amid the jagged, worming sigils.

Trianon feels himself separating, in a silent centrifuge, between her and him. He always became who he had to be around other people. He knows who he is with Oenone, and who he is with Insul. But around both of them, he's vibrating, torn apart, atom smashed. Maybe Insul was right. There's no such thing as identity. Only pain.

"Pain shaped blobs," he says. Shaped by whoever presses hardest.

Chained to the toilet, forced to type horrible things to Oenone on his phone. At the aquarium with Insul looming like a shadow. Seated at the table with them, Insul's foot rubbing between his legs. In the penthouse bathroom as Oenone pisses in the toilet, unaware of her boyfriend in Insul's grip just behind the shower curtain. Sitting in the passenger seat as they begin their road trip, knowing who held the wheel. It's like Insul said. Can't win, can't lose.

Still haven't won. Not even after slamming a car into his enemy. But maybe he's finally lost. Perfectly lost. Slumped into the lap of that hard, evil body, huffing marker fumes. And worse. His

eyes water at the smell of the knocked-over bucket. He wiped up as much as he could with Insul's discarded sweater and sprayed some air freshener, but the stench keeps intruding like burns in the film of whatever movie they're in. Air freshener doesn't eliminate the odor. Just smothers it with molecules. Prevents the nose from detecting it. The way he dealt with all his problems. But the poison remains, even when the smell is gone.

Insul places a hand under Trianon's head, lowering it to the floor so he can stand. His fingers linger in the black green hair as if soaking strength, then he's up, across the room, staring at the spot where the TV mounting bracket used to be. "I can't believe you pulled that out of the wall."

"My dad was always a shitty craftsman," Oenone says.

"Are you sad you'll never see him again?"

"Fuck you."

"I have a power drill."

"Crazy piece of shit."

Trianon says, "Um, he's kind of got a point, you know." He makes a face like whaddya gonna do. A corny, vintage expression he probably saw in some old movie. "I don't agree with his general platform, but you have to admit, he's uh, got a power drill." He coughs and reaches for the water bottle he fed Oenone from, tinged rose pink with her blood.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Tri?"

"Don't blame me. I took a shot at him." He picks the vape off the floor and wipes blood off the tip. "Should have helped me piss on his grave. Raise the water level." He laughs feverishly, vapor passing over his face like a ghost's hand.

"I didn't get us into this."

"Huh?"

"I don't know what you were doing out there." What you brought back with you.

He almost says something angry, but the weed disperses the heat through his body. "Me neither," he murmurs.

Insul's marker hisses on the floor. Trianon sees the shapes in the black noise now. Lines radiate from the museum, connecting to boxy, childish buildings. Houses built on sand. Spirit Halloween. Bubble tea.

A tower. The penthouse. Lines thick with rape.

A winding road through West Coast wilderness, plummeting into the hideous Tehom of that flooded ravine, a madness of marker through which no concrete shines. And then out again, the Dantean eruption back into realspace. A house surrounded by trees, on a mountain top. A character arc, rising above the flood.

"We were fine," Oenone says. "We had everything."

Trianon comes close enough to whisper. "You're always searching for something. And I always try to rise to the occasion. But it's not in me. I'm always off. And it's always me being compared to you. Not the other way around. So there's something going on. Someone has the power. He has the power over us, but you have the power over me. And it's soft power, so soft that I can like it, that I can love you, whatever that means, but I'm so scared of going back out there."

"I tried to make it equal."

"I know." He rests his head on her bound body, rope and tape harsh between them.

"Good."

"Maybe this isn't so bad."

"I know you're just saying what you have to. In this basement. But you're scaring me."

"It was kind of like a vacation. Didn't have to think about the groceries, my job, my future, the shit that gave my parents ulcers, we were just going to turn into them, weren't we—"

"We were never going to be like them. Never."

"The thing is." Tremulous laugh. "I don't believe I'm that exceptional."

Oenone's chest rises faster, tape taut across her ribs.

"But I don't know exactly how it happens. That's why I'm so scared. Did my parents, did their brains subconsciously evaluate the economy, culture, weather, career niches, and decide, being a shitty boring person who doesn't see their own kid, like really see their own kid at all, being that person is the only way this brain can mentally survive, and then snap, the neurons shift into place and harden and you're that way for the rest of your life and I don't want to go back outside because I'm worried I'm going to freeze a certain way and never be like water again, um —"

"I'm tied to a fucking table."

"Sorry. I just never got to tell you these things. And I don't know how much time either of us have."

"Well, that's not very comforting."

"I know."

"We have something, Tri. It's not perfect. But it's better than what most people have."

"Yeah. I was nothing before you. Right?"

"We had a life."

"I was just living in yours. And now he's living in my mine. A parasite of a parasite. It's so fucking sad."

"Not for me," Insul says. Trianon jerks away from Oenone and a hair snaps from his head, stuck to exposed tape. "It was nice. Looking at your phone. Texting your girlfriend. Opening you up. Knowing I could leave whenever I wanted and no one would know I existed. Like what you said about guns. One way."

"Doesn't seem one way anymore," Oenone says.

Insul puts an arm around Trianon, rubbing their heads together, hair and skin and sweat. "Yeah," he says, his voice resonating into the cartilage. "I came out of your TV. You fucking cunt." He bites Trianon's ear, just light enough to keep the body from spasming, breaking no skin, only sweat.

Oenone says, "You're just going to let him treat you like that?"

Trianon's voice wavers delicately. "It's very difficult to avoid, being treated like this." Fingers dig into his belly, pulling the dress up. Soft fabric ripples between his legs and they knock together, twinging with nerve heat. "I'll always be too weak to protect myself. That job was a fantasy."

"You're letting him get to you," Oenone says, her voice weakened by having to conduct this conversation in front of Insul, deprived of any intimacy or subterfuge.

"I'll always have to work harder than everyone else. I'm so tired of it. I just want someone else to take care of me."

"I was taking care of you."

"As long as I justified my existence. I'd rather be a fucking toilet if it means people stop expecting things of me." He feels Insul listening behind him with hungry silence but he can't stop talking. Doomed currents rave through his heart and he can't disperse them, his fingers too mushy to make that stroking, scrolling motion Insul says he does, that he stopped because someone made fun of him once, said he looked like he was fingerbanging someone. "I spent my

whole life obsessed with trying not to annoy other people. But the second I fucked up, the second I was too cringe or talked a little too long, people shat on me. Once you're weak, people don't let you stop being weak. And you're so nice to me, Oenone, most of the time, but I live in constant fear of you getting that look in your eyes, like you know I used to be a burnout, a weird shut-in, or just a look, the one people keep giving me and I never know what it means, it's always them eyeballing me, I'm never the one who decides what's normal, I'm always the one who has to walk the fucking line."

Her voice is like glass trying not to break. "I didn't know I hurt you that bad."

"You didn't. You really didn't." Trianon scratches the edges of his irritated feet, itching as they scar. "I get it, I was so passive, it must have been frustrating, it made sense to push me, and you pushed based on what you believed in. Except Insul pushed a lot harder."

Soft horror in her voice. "You sound like you've given up."

"People aren't going to stop pushing. At least with him he'll be the only one doing it."

"That's right," Insul says, sheathing his fingers in Trianon's oily black hair. "Can you get me some food?"

"What do you want?"

"Protein, I guess. And energy drinks." Insul seems uncertain, now that he has what he wants. Almost embarrassed.

"You haven't slept for a long time." And you're slurring your words. Where is the machine I met, input/output, a daycare of causal violence?

"I need to finish this drawing," Insul says, fingers poised between the marker and the power drill.

*

Trianon drags himself up the stairs, knees bumping and bruising, feet burning behind him. Rage, rage, no, not safe (knifeteethdrillfingers) it's okay, you deserve this (the crack of her nose, her tooth, drill screaming she's screaming, you did this to her) and if you deserve this, you don't have to be angry. An immense weight leaves him and his face relaxes, bland and docile.

Rain warps the window of the kitchen, wobbling, bunching, splitting, slashing down, like processes of his brain removed to safely feel what he cannot. Maybe if he waits long enough, the problem will go away. One of them at least. The triangle will collapse, and his life will be a straight line again.

Noise grows from below, muffled enough to pass for TV in another room. Shut up. The basement

is another universe. He can't be responsible for its problems. He lives in the kitchen now. Aiding and abetting again. Is bringing snacks to the killer a crime?

A scream from the depths of the earth. Then it's gone. Nothing but the tap of rain at the glass, blind and wet. He searches the grocery bags. Have to make food. Just like his mom did. But even better. The way she should have made it. So special. And so delicious. The secret ingredient is love, she'd say, as if she was expected to say something like that, voice never matching the sentiment. He's sure he can do a better job than her. Because love isn't real.

*

Insul picks up the glass. The brownish-green fluid quivers, betraying his jitters. "Energy drink? In a cup?"

"I thought it'd be classy."

"The fun part is drinking out of a can."

"Oh." Trianon's face weakens with disappointment.

"Hey. It's fine." Insul takes a sip. "See?"

"Okay."

Insul kisses him and Trianon tastes the sweet chemical additives. Rain fills his head, streaking past his teeth, wetting his tongue, a muddy brown rain.

*

Trianon brings a water bottle to the altar of Oenone. Can't see any new wounds. Maybe she was just yelling. The water trickles out the side of her mouth but she doesn't seem to notice, thirsty and dull as vegetation.

Then she looks at him, eyes suddenly clear. "Can you do me a favor, Tri?"

"Yeah. Anything. I mean. You know."

"Can you wipe this shit off me?" Mascara like a black wind across her face.

"The makeup?"

"Mhm. I don't want to be that bitch who looks like she's about to be raped and murdered."

"I'm the one getting raped. You're the one getting murdered. Kind of egalitarian."

“Very funny.”

“The modern couple.” He pours bottled water on his dress and dabs at her eyes. “Um. I think I’m just smearing it around.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I think you look good.”

“Thanks.”

Marker fumes intrude. Insul says, “I never thought I’d get to talk about it. This secret.”

Oenone stares back, her face glistening and wet.

“It’s like having a therapist. Or uh, couple’s counseling.”

“You should probably go to an actual therapist because—” she spits pink saliva. “—I’m bleeding.”

“I think this is way past therapy. And I’d probably get mad because I’m insecure.”

“Have you even tried?”

“The last time I was in therapy, it was the high school counselor telling me it must have been traumatizing when my friend shot up the school.” He sniffs the marker. “I wanted to say, yeah, it was. When they shot him.”

“Why do you think they shot him?”

“You think we’re monsters, you’re the monsters, you need us to feel good about yourselves, we’re what you read about when you get bored. I saw what they did to Blake, to his name. I checked the sites every day, every single mention of him. They jerk off to these kids frying in the electric chair, or jerk off to the thought of fucking someone dangerous. Yeah, I don’t feel dangerous, I feel fucking shitty. I—” He trails off as his voice starts to break. “I know what you’re doing.”

Oenone sighs. “What am I doing?”

“Trying to make me sound weak. Traumatized.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Yeah, it fucking hurt.”

“Do you ever think about it?”

“Of course I think about it. He was my friend. My only friend—” He covers his eyes. “Why are the lights so fucking loud?”

The basement is dimly lit. Oenone blinks in the silence, her hair insinuating itself into her eyes. She shakes her head and the blond tresses flurry, stained red at the tips. A pale terror tics through Insul’s face, as if radioactive pollutants were dispersing from the hair. He swallows more energy drink, fast and noisy, bagged eyes staring over the rim. He puts the glass down and the gravity of the room flows back to him, centering, hardening. “I missed my chance. When I stopped being a teen. Couldn’t be a school shooter anymore. College shooter, that’s cuck shit. So fucking lame.”

“Insul...” Trianon tries to take his arm.

“I hope the cops don’t shoot me. I just really like you, Trianon. I like you a lot.” He picks up the kitchen knife and turns toward Oenone.

“Insul.”

“What?”

“You’re having a psychotic break. You might also have a concussion.”

“Are you worried about me, or her?”

“You need sleep. Or it could get really bad.”

Oenone laughs darkly, airlessly, a friction in her larynx, a smile that rides the throb in her jaw.

“You’ll hurt me if I sleep,” Insul says, voice shrunken, staring at the wall.

“I can barely move. We’re not going to escape.”

“I don’t care. I want to sleep next to you.”

“You can.” Trianon puts his hand on Insul’s wrist.

“I wish I could believe that.” Insul grabs the hand. “But I need you to show me.” He folds Trianon’s fingers around the knife. “On her.”

Trianon stares at the knife, huge in his grip, like something growing out of him, stronger and harder than what it came from. It makes sense for a kid to worship something like this.

“Don’t worry,” Insul says. “I figured it out.”

Trianon's eye lingers on the logo of the knife manufacturer, something bland and domestic. Don't think. Don't be. As long as he isn't a person, he doesn't have to be responsible.

"The problem is, you know how bad it feels. But you don't know how good it feels."

"Good?"

"I should have shown you. But things got crazy like this."

"Shown me what?"

"How it feels when you don't have to be scared anymore. Getting them out of your head. I know it's hard at first. I forgot how hard it was. I'm sorry. But you'll see when it's over. We have to get it over with. Because you're mad at me right now. And the only way I can fix it is showing you." Insul guides him closer to Oenone, step by burning step.

"Wait," she says.

"I'm glad you could talk out your issues," Insul says. "It'll be easier for him now." He puts a finger on the knife, guiding it like a planchette until it hovers above her face, the steel blade fogging with her violent breathing, nostrils quivering and black. "I think your boyfriend is finally hard enough for you, Oenone."

The knife shakes in Trianon's grip like it's trying to leap from his hands.

"Come on. Do your best."

Hot tears drip down Trianon's nose, landing on the knife. "Please. Not her."

Insul's finger slides along the knife, down the inside of Trianon's wrist. "I can trust you, right?"

"Uh huh," Trianon says, staring into Oenone's eyes, Insul's reflection in them like a seed waiting to grow from her.

"We can both sleep after this, okay?"

Trianon's throat cracks. "Um."

Insul kisses the back of his neck. "Show me," he whispers. "Show me you I—

Dies Caniculares

Insul exits the back of the supermarket onto a stagnant lake of concrete, the employee parking lot. Trees line the edge unnatural as hair growing from a machine. Overturned carts litter the zone like fallen soldiers.

There he is. On top of the slope. Insul climbs after, dirt sliding through the holes in his sneakers, then chases the blond torch of Blake's hair through the forest. The senior swings his machete, leaving a trail of branches. Eucalyptus bark crunches like brittle paper underfoot.

They enter the clearing. Cigarettes and beer bottles surround a rotting couch. And something Insul didn't expect to see, tied to a tree, restless and alive.

"Remember my sister's dog?"

"Yeah." Insul drops his backpack and puts his hand out. A wet nose squishes into his palm from the tip of a dark, sleek frame. He likes dogs that aren't small and deformed. When he sees those sharp ears standing up, he thinks of Anubis. Need to do a drawing of Anubis enfolding an entire page, cradling the whole town in its arms, maggots raining from its mouth...

Blake cracks open the can of Steel Reserve that Insul let him walk out with. "Help me drink this?"

"Fuck yeah."

Blake takes a sip, then hands it over. Insul drinks deep, savoring the bitter, carbonated taste, and how he can suddenly feel his emotions. He watches the dog wander at the limit of the leash, sniffing some putrid old French fries.

"Are potatoes poisonous to dogs?"

Blake shrugs. "You know, I keep forgetting which things are poisonous. I just know chocolate."

Insul hunches down and runs his hand along the dog's lustrous black hide. "Don't eat that."

The dog looks at him, then licks his face. He laughs, almost dropping the can, spilling some on the ground. The dog sniffs at the coagulated threads of beer and dust.

"No," he says, waving his hand. The dog laps at his fingers. He closes his eyes, enjoying the mouth hot and toothy on his skin.

"Trade you." Blake holds the machete out, handle first.

"Really?"

Blake laughs, that melting laugh that means Insul is doing something good, even if he isn't sure what. "Yeah, really."

Insul swings the blade, hacking his way through some bushes, fuck yeah, so classic.

"Feels good, right?"

"Yeah..." Thwack. Crack. Chnk. He pulls it out of a dead tree.

"Hey, Insul."

Insul swings his gaze through the inebriated air, smiling dopily. "Yeah?"

"I need you to do something for me."

"Like what?"

Blake scratches the dog behind the ears. "This is a gift for you."

"To keep?"

"Nah."

"Then what?"

"To prove yourself."

Insul remembers the Aztec pyramid he drew last week. They were up all night talking as the colored pencil scratched deeper and deeper, red fluid crashing in thick slimy waves down the steps.

I'll drive you upstate some time. Get us some rifles. Then you'll know what it feels like.

"I thought you meant like. A deer."

"You said you'd have my back if things got real."

"I wasn't lying. I just..."

"It's not like I'm doing this for fun."

"I know."

"You're the only person I'd steal my sister's dog for."

“Blake.”

“Maybe this was a mistake. Thinking a fifteen-year old would get it.”

Insul tries to say something, but his lungs barely seem to work anymore.

“How can you pull the trigger on something with a face if you can’t even do this? There’s no way you’ll—”

“It has a face,” Insul says, looking at the wet brown eyes that track every move he makes.

“Then it’s good practice.”

The machete handle is slippery in Insul’s grip. “I thought we’d be using guns.”

“Too loud.”

He keeps forgetting. The rest of the world is behind those trees. This isn’t a forest. It just feels like one when he gets drunk.

The dog sniffs the machete and Insul hides the blade behind his back. “Won’t your sister miss it?”

“It won’t matter soon. Right?” Blake hesitates. “I mean, she’s a kid. She probably won’t even remember she had a dog. She’s going to, um. Grow up.”

“I still remember my old cat.”

“I thought you couldn’t see stuff in your head. Just the word CAT, right? Like a kid’s book?”

BLACK WHITE GREEN—

“Black and white. Green eyes. Something was wrong with its tail.”

Blake turns away, hair falling across his face. “Fuck, man.”

“Can’t we just—”

Blake looks to the side and says something in a different voice, low and terse. Insul glances but no one is there.

A distant siren fades. The sun is leaving, dark enough for the trees to feel like a forest again.

“Blake.”

Blake's blond hair hangs down, a tunnel staring at the ground. He whispers repetitively. Insul feels dread. He touches Blake's shoulder and the older boy looks up, startling Insul. "What?"

"You okay?"

Clouded eyes. "You're still here?"

"Yeah. I'm still here."

Blake smiles down at him, a hollowed version of that easy grin. "I have these dreams where I'm at school. In the middle of everything. And you run away. And I'm alone. And my soul isn't protected anymore."

"I'd never do that."

"I can trust you. Right?"

"Yeah. Fuck. You know you can."

"Then show me."

Insul takes the can of Steel Reserve and drinks until he coughs it up. The dog blurs into the world, like something he'd watch on his phone. It's just hunting. People do it all the time. The pounds are full of dogs waiting to be euthanized. Slaughterhouses grind a million cows a day into billions of pounds of meat and the world is full of meat and it isn't special and everyone should know how unspecial they are, because he had to learn and the only way you learn is if it happens to you and if he isn't special then it doesn't matter what he does they'll have to call his bluff they'll have to say his fucking name—

Don't look at its face. Look at the neck. Fast. So it won't feel anything.

He lifts the machete. The dog looks up at him. He covers its eyes with his hand and it licks his palm. He starts crying. "Do I have to?"

Blake slings his backpack over his shoulders. "You don't have to do anything."

"Where are you going?"

"I thought we had something."

"We do—"

"I thought I was sharing the most secret part of myself with someone who understood me. But I guess it's just a fantasy to you. I feel like a fool."

“Blake—”

“I’m serious. Just give me back the machete and fuck off.” Blake pauses at the edge of the clearing. Beyond is the rest of the world. Forever.

Insul lifts the machete again, not thinking much about it, just wanting to keep those eyes on him. Blake stands there like he’s waiting for the bus.

Insul bites his lip until it burns coppery, trying to keep the sobs from bursting out of his chest. He feels something snap in his brain, meaty, fibrous, metallic, like the sounds your head makes when you’re underwater.

*

Blood runs into the dirty sink. His hands sting from scrubbing, shiny and raw under the faucet. His stomach feels like it was removed. Dungeon Star blasts on the other side of the wall, rapping slowly over a screwed sample of some death metal riff. Blake’s walls smell like weed, old paint, fried chicken, poor ventilation trapping the heat of the house.

“I think I got some on the stairs,” Insul mumbles.

Blake pisses beer into the toilet. “So?”

“Your parents—”

“You’ve seen my house, right. Blood only makes it cleaner.”

*

He watches Blake crawl across the bed, searching for a pipe, ash and papers rustling on the sheets like volcanic debris. The walls are covered in printer paper collages, red and black and white, low-res real gore and thorny metal logos and deep fried hentai demon girls. The first time he got to visit Blake’s room, it felt like the inside of his brain. It’s the only way he can see what it looks like.

His phone vibrates. He checks it then puts it away immediately. He rubs his face, looking around, not really seeing anything. He picks up his backpack. He knows he’s standing there like a freak but it’s hard to think with his heart pounding like this.

“You good?”

“I should get home.” He needs to hide his face from Blake, like he’s contaminating the room somehow. When he gets to the doorway he lingers, backpack straps cutting into his shoulders. He should adjust them but he doesn’t.

Blake is silent. Then he says, "Your dad is back, right."

"Yeah."

"Hey."

Insul doesn't turn around. "What?"

"You can sleep over. If you want."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about it."

Insul lets the backpack drop to the floor, heavy with textbooks. Blake hunches on the bed in his chaos of bleached hair, packing the pipe, a glass spoon striated satanic. "You know something?"

"What?"

"I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." A flush of warmth. But not enough to get unstuck.

"I know that wasn't fun."

Insul shrugs, avoiding the older boy's gaze.

"Sacrifice is the oldest, most potent form of human expression," Blake says. "It exists when all other tools have been taken away."

"I know."

Blake holds the glass pipe to Insul's lips, the flame from a plastic green lighter burning between them. "Time for some ritual medicine."

Hhhhhh.

Blake turns the music up, evil and exultant. "Do you see it now?"

The smoke in Insul's lungs is thick and hot, primordial altar smoke. He should draw a picture. Poinsettia High heaped with heads like Aztecs, Mayans, whatever, a ziggurat breaking through the gym roof. Cough cough. He staggers to the bathroom and drinks from the sink. The sound of the faucet blurs into this song's DSBM sample, hissing like steam in his ears. His heart is racing again. "Feel weird."

"Hey. Look at me."

Insul looks. Blake is glowing, cheekbones burnished by the yellow bathroom light. A contagious radiance. "Do you feel stronger?"

Suddenly he does. "Yeah."

Blake grips his shoulders. "You never have to be scared again."

"I don't?"

"When you sit down in class, look around, ask yourself, how many of those kids cut through reality like that."

"None of them."

"That's right. You've been through shit they'll never understand. But they will."

Insul thinks of throwing bottles from the back of Blake's truck, untouchable demigods, screaming FAGGOT at the clean kids hanging out in front of a party he wasn't invited to, wind slicing through his hair, cold and cleansing. "Can we go for a ride?"

"I was thinking something a little larger scale."

"Yeah?"

"My friend said he'd sell us some guns. I can teach you."

"Fuck yeah."

"You'd look really good with a gun."

"Haha."

Blake lights the glass pipe again. "Fuck those plastic cunts. Fuck that kapo valedictorian. Fuck those geriatric prison guards. Fuck everyone but us."

Insul takes a hit, looking into Blake's eyes like yeah, fuck 'em, desperate to be worthy of the other boy's brilliance, these profoundly adult ideas. The pressure in his head, the void separating him from all life, counseling and meds can't fix that, but people act like it's the only thing you can do and if it doesn't work they give up on you, it's your fault, like these soft mass-produced things can exorcise a fucking demon. Blake is the only one who even acknowledges the possibility of other solutions, the only one who will do what it takes. Cut school, cut work, cut yourself, black out, scream slurs, scare the people who scared you, learn how to clean and

load an assault rifle even if you've never touched one. This intoxicating permission feels like magic, actual magic, the world peeled back. "Trepanation works, if you do it on someone else."

"You're a poet, Insul."

Insul's face burns. Must be the trapped heat of the bathroom, making him sweat in all kinds of places. "Yeah, my English teacher doesn't think so."

"That's because she's a PMSing HOA cunt who reads Jane Austen and writes psychotic Goodreads reviews broken up by GIFs of whatever Aryan Impossible Burger the government wants suburban white females to masturbate to."

Insul laughs even though he doesn't really get it, when you laugh you can be close to people, you can lean on them, you can grab their shoulder, you can lose control, you can be close enough to smell their hair—

Blake's voice cuts through the time distortion. "—they put this damage in us. They tell our parents to mutilate us. If that doesn't work, they do it at school. If that doesn't work, they get us at work. If work doesn't work, they do it through our girlfriends. They want us to think we're crazy. They want us in the system for the rest of our lives. Trapped in the satellite."

"Yeah." The pleasant heat becomes charring, an oven, he needs air, he sinks to the bed, trying not to let Blake see how fucked he is.

"Hey. Listen to me. You're never going back to a place like that. Fuck your dad. Fuck them for thinking you were the problem."

Insul nods, lips sucked tight.

"I know what you need." Blake reaches under the bed and his shirt pulls up, displaying the downy hair on the small of his back, running into the band of his boxers.

worming and grubbing
worming and grubbing
i don't feel like anything
i just feel like—

Blake slaps the binder on the bed. The keeper of the List, normtard grimoire, strategy guide to the destruction of Poinsettia High. "Want to draw something for me?"

Insul tries to sound casual. "Yeah."

"Draw the school."

Somehow it comes out of him, room by room, even though he's so stupid, so slow, so retarded,

the in-joke of every class, somehow, Blake can pull it out of him. It feels good to recite it through his muscles, to control those halls, perched in the paperverse, safe from their eyes, from their mind control.

“That’s beautiful, ‘sul.”

Insul smiles shyly, full of something he can’t describe, unexpected as the greasy fingers of acne punching through his cheeks, as the dark hairs growing around his crotch. An unspeakable feeling builds, the kind that never comes out but maybe with Blake, the fundamental rules of the universe don’t apply. Then, in the slow motion of the high, he sees red on his wrist, a faded spurt of blood. Why didn’t it come off? Is this a secret they censor in movies, that no one tells you, that a fifteen-year old could easily miss, that blood is very difficult to take off, and can be tracked and detected and used to punish you? His pen slips, ruining the drawing, he feels fur in his hands, writhing and straining, taut muscles, confused, whining, biting.

“You okay?”

Insul isn’t used to being listened to, he barely knows what to do with it. He picks at the blood and it catches under his fingernails and he tries to scrape it out but it hurts—

“No more dogs.”

“Don’t worry. Next time it won’t be dogs.”

“Yeah?” Heart beating fast.

Blake gives him a smile, serious and tender. “Because I know I can trust you for anything.”

And with that, Insul pushes through the sick, scared, crazy feeling, into something naked and clean and free. He’s not doomed. He’s not going to Hell. He’s already there and it’s okay. He’s one of the demons. He just has to let this heat burn through him, cauterizing and complete. He finds himself singing, somehow, the music loud enough to blend in.

*ration out the graves
to feed my colony
cuz I give a shit
about the human race
I give it all of me*

He has to piss, a different song comes on, the bathroom mirror catches him.

The dog really didn’t want to die. He had to get on his knees and hold it down and use the machete at the same time and it wasn’t instantaneous like a game, it was broken and slow and awkward and he kept slipping and having to grab it again and each time he cut the sounds changed, wet and ringing and wrong—

He was so scared on the way back, hands stuffed deep into his hoodie pockets, scalded with blood. A cop car rolled past and he felt like the world was about to end. And then it was gone. They always want to see your hands. Get against the wall. Empty your pockets. Your backpack. Got anything you want to tell me about? Is there a reason you're hanging out behind the strip mall? Like a fifteen year old in a hoodie in this shitty little town is a threat to national security.

Not like they ever find shit. He dumped his ninja rocks the last time he saw a cop tailing him, and he keeps his drawings with Blake, happy to know they're under his bed, a binder to bind them. But they still run you through the system, leaning on their car in those sunglasses weighing your soul on their chunky laptop thing. And they give him that look like, so you're that kind of kid. The dirt under our shoes. And they let him go but he knows he'll never be able to erase that shit. It's in the satellites now. He'll never get clean. And if he can't get clean, what's the point of playing their game? Of begging them with his eyes like he used to, hoping they'd see, that anyone would see.

He stares into the mirror through a haze of toothpaste spittle, at his wet brown eyes. What a useless configuration. He needs to be a perfect weapon, strong enough for Blake to hold.

They dry up, hard as marbles.

*

Trianon grips the knife, a blur of tears hiding Oenone's face from him.

Insul watches those bare arms, pathetically tensed, biceps sunken and hollow. In the corner of his eye, rain flows down the basement windows, more blurs on hard glassy surfaces.

"Trianon," he says.

Trianon swings the knife. Oenone's scream turns guttural, blood dripping into her mouth, exploding on the back of her throat.

He shakes, but the knife doesn't move, stuck in flesh. She lays still. His tears scatter with a blink, dripping meaninglessly onto her, a lesser, clearer salt, obsolete and unforgiven. He forces himself to look, following the knife from his white knuckles to her face, where Insul grips the blade, blood seeping through his fingers, just above her uncut skin.

The Teaching Emotion

Insul drops the knife and it clangs to the concrete. Blood falls after it, dripping from his hand.

Trianon sags, the life ripped from his face. "Why are you torturing me like this?"

"Go lie down."

"What about her?"

"Don't worry. You don't have to do it."

"Just let her go."

"Both our lives end the second she walks out of here."

"Please. I'm begging you."

Insul tears a strip from Trianon's dress and wraps the black fabric around his sliced hand. "You don't have to watch. You can go to the bedroom. You can sleep."

Trianon looks at the stairs, and the promise of their soft light. Oenone dying would be the worst thing that ever happened to him, and it might be pretty bad for her too. But at the same time, what a drag, what a fucking drag to be involved, too tired to barely react anymore.

Insul says, "I'll take care of everything."

"You're shaking."

"Just go. I'll fix this."

"You're going to hurt her."

"When I shot them in the cafeteria. They were gone. I know how to do it."

"That was a long time ago."

"He said I did a good job."

From behind them comes the sound of adhesive zipping off skin.

"You really peaked in high school, didn't you?"

Insul turns and something rends hot across his leg. Duct tape hangs from Oenone's arm, the knife dripping bloody in her grip. She swings again and he jerks back, the tip whipping past his

naked belly. The rest of her is still tied down, so she flings the knife. He moves again, slower than he expected, leg weeping and heavy, but he's not losing that much blood, he shouldn't feel this way.

The knife bounces off the floor where he just was. Everyone stares at it for a second, then he picks it up. The coffee table rocks back and forth as Oenone struggles in her web. Then she stops. She's not looking at the knife anymore. Insul looks back. The power drill is in Trianon's hand, hulking at the end of that skinny arm.

"Put it down," Insul says. Each step he takes, Trianon takes one back.

"No," Trianon whispers.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"What's the knife for?"

Insul licks his lips to respond, then looks down. His black boxer briefs are soaked, piss running down his legs, smearing the blood from the cut. "Shit."

"Close."

"You're right, I think there's something wrong with me, maybe I should—" Insul collapses. His face hovers a few inches above the ground, held up by the knife in his grip, then it pops from his hand and his head slaps to the concrete. He stares at Trianon sideways, drool glistening on his lips like glue.

Trianon limps toward the stairs on bandaged feet.

"Wait," Insul slurs.

"Tri," Oenone says, voice breaking from dehydration. But Trianon can tell that was meant to be a yell, meant to be urgent. He turns and something shoots past his head, invisible but curving the light. It shatters, the glass that held the energy drink, and Insul is right behind it, knocking him into the stairs, just below where the glass broke. He tries to keep the drill between them, but Insul's knee jams against his arm, knocking the spinning bit into the wall, spraying white paint dust between their faces.

"Stop," Insul says. Like he needs Trianon to stop, because his control is no longer absolute. That familiar weight is off, pounds eroded, an unhealthy tremor in his limbs. His head hangs, burning with sick heat, saliva and mucus dripping salty onto Trianon's face.

Trianon says, "You know, I thought there would be something in you."

Insul's eyelids flutter. He tries to respond, tastes acid instead.

“Like if I crawled through all your broken glass I’d find something nice. But instead you broke through and found this evil thing in me.”

“What evil thing?”

Something whines and Insul looks down. The drill is in his ankle. A beat passes, no reaction, then his face changes, eyes bigger, teeth wider, and he bangs into the walls of the stairwell, trapped between his long limbs.

Trianon feels the drill slipping out. Once Insul gets unstuck, he’ll drop into the open area and have his full range of motion. So Trianon grabs that brown hair, slippery with sweat, and jams their bodies together, just like the car, the only way to kill something stronger than you is to merge with it. Insul thrashes, crushing Trianon into the steps, grinding them into the slots of his spine, and he feels the reflex to let go, to keep his eyes shut, to beg for mercy like he was trained. But the tip of that drill, exactly where it is, for the next two seconds, is the only configuration of their bodies where he has control.

So he doesn’t scream *don’t hurt me please I’m sorry* and he doesn’t look away and suddenly eye contact isn’t difficult for him at all, blue or dirty gray, it’s all the same, he opens himself to Insul’s fear, carried in drool and sweat and most of all the sound Insul is making, whining so pathetically next to the stop-start of the drill’s pulse-width modulation, not loud enough, so he squeezes the trigger harder, so hard he feels everything, the way it slurps through fat, gnaws at tendon, screams on bone, and laughs on, what, the soul? Laughter from where? The mouth that holds the drill.

Insul arches back and his foot pops free, blood spraying Trianon’s bare legs, shooting hot across his thighs, soaking the black dress until it sinks and clings. Trianon gasps, the drill still spinning, Insul shaking in his arms, fingers dragging across his chest, a twinge of scar tissue, strumming the X, then Insul falls back into the basement.

The drill whirs to a stop. Trianon lowers himself down the stairs, trying to keep his feet from touching the ground, ass dropping to the bottom step, where he takes a look.

Insul has one leg curled to his stomach, the other pointed across the floor, twitching, haloed in glistening red. Trianon pushes against the wall and manages to stand up, adrenaline numbing the pain in his soles. He hobbles over, drill swinging from his scrawny arm.

“You, looked at me,” Insul says.

“Like you said. The car wasn’t very personal.”

“Was it good? What you saw?”

Trianon revs the drill, making Insul flinch. “Why don’t you show me again?”

Insul crawls away, dragging his leaking leg until he can't anymore and the blood trail turns back to a puddle. "I d-don't understand why I'm so fucking weak."

"Call it retouching."

"Rrr? Retouching?"

"When I was learning conservation, I was terrified I was going to get cancer, because I'm a hypochondriac. Maybe from one of the chemicals we used or some boomer metal in the old paint. So I researched everything. One thing we used was butyl cellosolve. Paint solvent. An ether of ethylene glycol. The same thing in antifreeze. Which I put in your drink."

"Fuck. It tasted really good."

"You would like the taste of antifreeze."

"Nnhn."

"I think they put something bitter in it now. But this was an old container. Nice and sweet."

"No wonder I could see him. Every time Oenone moved her head."

"Your friend?"

"Mm."

Trianon surveys the body below him. Zombied eye rims. Cosmically-bruised torso. That cut hand wrapped in black. A maimed, spurting leg. And other things, invisible and sweet and toxic. He squeezes Insul's ankle and feels life pulsing into his palm. "Put pressure on this."

Insul curls up and manages to grip his ankle.

"Harder."

"Nnh."

"Why did you grab the knife?"

"Because you didn't have to do it."

"Why not?"

"I already did."

"What are you talking about?"

"I killed the dog."

"Why?"

"He told me to."

"Your friend."

"Yeah."

Trianon is silent.

"Tr...?"

"Yeah?"

"That thing you dreamed about. The immortality thing. Is it real?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

"Do dreams feel real?"

He allows Insul's fingers to reach his hand. "When you're in the dream, yeah. It feels like the only thing there is."

"What happens when you wake up?"

"You forget."

"Then what's the point."

"Some of them stick. If they hurt bad enough."

"Trin. Trian."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe it's out of me."

"What is?"

"Puked. Maybe got the poison out."

"It absorbs fast."

"Fuck. No hospital. So. There's no way to fix this."

"You know what cures antifreeze poisoning?"

"What?"

"Alcohol."

"I hate booze."

"Can't believe you made fun of me for being a picky eater."

"Haha."

"Alcohol and antifreeze. That's an alcopop, right?"

"We don't have booze."

"There's some upstairs."

"Lying?"

"Maybe."

"You're looking for it."

"For what?"

"My face."

Trianon stares down with cold fascination. "It looks scared."

"Stop."

Insul grabs his wrist, clammy and wet and desperate. The texture is so unsettlingly slimy that Trianon's heart beats fast again.

A weak voice calls from the coffee table. "Help."

Trianon slips out of Insul's grip and the hand slaps to the floor. He walks over. Oenone is still picking at the knots with her free arm, fingertips rubbed raw.

"You did so good, Tri."

Silence.

"Untie me," she says, in a firmer voice.

Trianon surveys the basement. Oenone stuck to the coffee table like a turtle. Insul perforated on the concrete. "For once in my life, everyone has to listen to me."

"Tri?"

"You thought I was weak. But maybe I just forgot why I tried so hard to be nice in the first place."

"I don't think you're weak."

"You weren't just saving me, were you? You benefited too. A physically attractive partner around all those art fags. Someone you could mold."

"I'm sorry I was a bitch. But I never tried to use you."

"The earliest thing I can remember is being a fucking burden. But they literally created me, it wasn't my fault. I didn't ask to be born."

"Please. Let's talk about this upstairs."

"I think we should talk right now."

"In front of him?"

"I fucking hate him. But I know why he did those things. And I can never, ever talk to you about those things."

She stares at him through the mask of Insul's blood. "Can't you?"

"You'll call me crazy, but now that I'm ruined, I remember why someone would do this. Once you get marked as weak, people never let you forget it. You become invisible. No one sees you. No one listens to you. One day, you start to believe you don't exist. The only thing you can think about is that little seed that started it all, they make you stare at it like you're in timeout. Alone with your weakness for the rest of your life. So you do the opposite of that. Or you never catch up."

"You're not like him."

"Guess we'll find out."

Silent and watching, through the red and gold of her wet hair.

"Everyone is eating each other. But you think there's something safe out there. Which means you're not safe."

"I know it's a shitty world. But if you'll go crazy if you think like that."

"People want to enslave each other. That's the world. All the time."

"Tri. He fucked with your head. But he's just one person. He's an outlier."

"I'm not even talking about people like him. I'm talking about the invisible rape clawing out of their fucking eyes. They're eating my soul and you don't see it."

He turns away so he doesn't have to see her face respond to that.

Insul's arm shakes. "Finger's getting numb."

Trianon points the drill. "Are you going to stop hurting me?"

"Um."

"You can't say it, can you?"

Wet sticky eyes, sticky stupid.

"Even after you told me you didn't have anything else in you, every time you were nice to me I wanted to believe."

"Wanna be nice."

"But not enough. Right?"

"Nnh."

"That really is you. Deep down inside. You can't even lie about it to save your life."

Frustration and rage work through Insul's face, finally coming out in a slow sequence of words. "My dad used to do nice shit for me. When he wanted to make up. I hated that. More than anything."

"Yeah. The first time I saw how pathetic mine was, was when he was nice to me. Bribing me with fast food. Pretending like he hadn't been yelling at me and my mom for twelve hours. Fuck. This is better than therapy." Sweaty, manic breathing, flashing hot and cold.

Oenone reaches for him, the kind of soft touch people do when words aren't enough, when communication becomes hopeless, like if they could touch you a spark would pass between your brains and fix everything.

He steps back. "Who loves me the most?"

"You know I love you," Oenone says. Her fingers are bleeding, but the rope is still tight around her.

"What about you?"

Sweat pours down Insul's face, teeth gritted. He watches Trianon walk away, until only the backs of Trianon's legs are visible, red spiraling down the calves, the torn edge of the dress licking like inky tongues. He strains to turn his head until he can't, and Trianon is offscreen. "Wait."

Trianon's step hitches, but it might just be the limp. He reaches the stairs, looks down at the glass, thinks about how to clear it, which is the problem, it's clear, and his eyes are out of sync.

Insul waits in three beats of silence, then opens the hand that was squeezing his ankle. Blood spills across the floor bright and eager.

"What are you doing?" Trianon says, looking back, coming closer.

"I wanted to see your face."

Trianon grabs the bleeding ankle, hot blood spitting into his hand. "You're so fucking stupid." He worms his finger into the hole without thinking about it, just trying to push the life back inside. The body attached to that hole twists and whines. "Shut up," he says, pushing down hard, pinching the artery into the bone. "If I can take it, you can take it."

Insul starts crying. "This really hurts."

Trianon laughs, then his throat kicks and a hot tear races down his face. "No shit." He tears another strip from his dress, strapping it tight to Insul's ankle hole with duct tape.

"Why are you helping him?" Oenone says.

Trianon feels his gums flood with kerosene, sparks raining from his brain. "Shut the fuck up. Do you go around kicking crazy dogs in the street?"

She's silent. Rain boils on the window, but he can't hear it over the throbbing in his ears.

"Tri."

“What?”

“I love you. But we’re going to die if we don’t get out of here right now.”

He blinks and looks around. His heat is suddenly gone. He feels empty and afraid. “We will?”

“The floor is covered in shit. We could get an infection.”

Blood and shit everywhere, practically clouding the air, infesting him with bacteria...

“We’re seriously fucked up. If we don’t walk soon, we won’t be able to walk at all.”

“Fuck. Oenone. Do you really love me?”

“I love you so much. And I’m sorry I ever did anything to hurt you.”

He goes to her and starts untying the rope.

“Good,” she says, putting her free hand on his cheek and kissing him, like a goddess reaching from her web of fate. With his eyes closed, it’s just her and him, that familiar comfort, soft and right. He wants to stay there, in their apartment with the stocked fridge and the AC, with everything exactly where it should be. But the smell of fresh copper intrudes.

She covers her mouth, hiding the gap in her teeth. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I just got my life back.”

“I know. We’re free now.”

He steps out of range of her arm. “You could take it away forever.”

“Trianon. I swear. I will never tell anyone.”

“Maybe you could forget the museum. I really want to believe that.”

“I can. I really can.”

“But it’s not like you’re going to forget I swung that knife.”

“Wait.”

He picks up the drill and walks back to the stairs. His legs tremble and he braces himself against the wall. The basement blurs, a nightmare of atmosphere, waiting to be purged by fresh air.

"Anyone have anything they want to say?"

Oenone rips off a piece of tape and it sticks to her hand. She stares at it dizzily. "Don't do this."

"Stop wasting our time," Insul says. "I know you'll pick the hot fucking girl."

Trianon looks down at Insul, eyes wide. "I don't have to pick anyone."

Insul's face is pale and glistening with sweat, undermining the hardness of his mask. But he doesn't say anything.

"Now you know what it feels like."

"I always knew what it felt like. That's why I'm so good at it."

Trianon is silent. Then he points the drill like a gun. "Look at me."

Insul stares at a point next to Trianon's head like he sees something dead floating there. The void of his face fills with something terrible.

Trianon's finger slips on the trigger. "I said, look at me."

"I can't see."

"What?"

"I think I'm blind."

"Oh. Yeah. That can happen."

Insul's pupils flick back and forth rapidly. "I can't see your face."

"That's funny."

"Funny?"

"Because I see you all the time."

"You do?"

"You made it that way. I'm afraid of your voice, your footsteps, I'm afraid of fucking salad. You're everywhere. Yeah, don't smile. There is nothing I could do to you that you wouldn't deserve."

This red-hot hate, heavy and molten and suffocating. But lighter now. Lanced by the drill.

Stripped by the antifreeze. By Insul's broken body. He's carried the hate for so long, he's not sure what lays beneath it.

"I know," Insul says.

"Stop crying. You can't trick me that way."

"I'm not crying," Insul says angrily.

Trianon watches the tears run down Insul's face. "You can't even tell you're crying. You fucking retard—"

"If I was crying, it would feel different."

Insul reaches for Trianon's face. Trianon grabs the incoming hand. "Are you crying now?" He bends Insul's hand back. "Does this feel *different*?" He feels the bounding pulse of panic that Insul holds back.

"I can't see you in my head." Insul's hand fights his, slowly, without power, bloody fingertips touching Trianon's face. "This is the only place you are."

"Cringe."

"You're different now."

"Not a soft target anymore?"

"What?" Insul is incoherent again, or a different kind of incoherent.

"One of the first things you said to me. Soft target. Museums. Schools. Me. Because I'm open to the public."

"Sorry I made you have to kill me."

"Don't say that." Don't make it real. Can't be someone who killed someone. On paper, or at a distance of years, it's easy to say, most people would say, without hesitation, he's better off dead. But the feeling of the blood, the artery, the weakening, fading breath, makes him shudder, is a second that keeps repeating, that he can't theorize outside of.

"Thinking?"

"I can't be someone who killed someone," Trianon says, dead and flat, like it's already happened.

"I was supposed to be the one who killed the dog."

"Yes." A whisper.

"My foot feels bad."

"I drilled it."

"Am I bleeding out?"

"I duct-taped it."

"Man card. Fucking. Something. Man card bestowed."

"The fuck."

"Psycho card. Bestowed."

"Thanks."

"Hey."

"Yes?"

"You know what you have to do, right?"

Silence.

"Make sure you. Clean up. So they don't find you."

Trianon picks up Oenone's phone. The cracked screen scrapes his fingers. Battery at 7%. No reception. He tries to stand but his feet blow out like Christmas lights. He watches Insul stare blind at the ceiling, making small throat sounds, each one like the start of a sentence he can almost completely intuit. He wipes his eyes and looks at the steps, littered with broken glass, too clear to see in the dark, inside and out. It's all broken and he can't put it together. Phone battery at 6%. Red. Red. Red.

He picks up a splinter of glass, a hard, translucent nothing, how bad can nothing hurt? He closes his fist and squeezes.

Lowest Lethal

Trianon wakes up, warm skin under his cheek. The bedroom window faces him, trickling with raindrops, glimmering with sunlight. He had a dream, but can't remember what it was. He doesn't move, but something about his breathing must have changed, because Oenone strokes his hair. He can't tell if she's awake or not. He's sunk into her breasts, and her heartbeat sounds the same.

He stays there until she stops, then rolls off the bed. She sprawls out to fill the warm space he left behind, her hand swiping across the nightstand. It comes up empty, a reflex.

"Dreamt about my brother," she says.

He waits, listening.

"He was at the beach. He was standing there and I was trying to tell him something. Then he went into the ocean."

"Is that good or bad?"

"I think it was what he wanted." She stares at the window, blue eyes bright and still.

"Has to count for something."

"Maybe."

Laundry is scattered across the floor like wilted petals. He grabs a lime green hoodie, pulling it over the criss-crossing scars on his chest. He leaves the room, his feet only hurting a little.

"Wait." She moves toward him, and something rattles at her ankle.

"Yeah?"

"I'm hungry."

He stands in the hallway, just beyond the limit of the chain. "I'll cook something nice tonight."

She leans against the frame, blond hair long and greasy and uncut, eyes rimmed like his, some hidden natural makeup within human beings. "Sounds. Nice."

"Guess you don't have to worry about being the crazy one anymore."

"Haha," she says.

"Sorry."

Her face fights itself, then clears, except for the swell in her lip where her tongue traces the gap in her teeth.

*

Trianon lays on the couch. Light pours through the glass wall of the cabin, flowing across his bare legs, licking his scarred shins, his notched knees.

The shower turns off. Drip drip drip. Insul comes out of the bathroom. He pauses like he's seeing Trianon for the first time, that eternal moment of re-recognition. His hair is slicked dark with wetness, almost to his shoulders, a fresh bruise on his hip from not asking for help. He limps over, dragging his foot.

Trianon looks up at him, lips parted to show the smallest sliver of black. "You looked tired."

"I'm fine."

He puts his foot on Insul's knee. "Come on. Sit down." The knife scars on his sole hum with pressure, but it hurts Insul worse, making him sink to the floor, breaking his fall with his hands. Trianon reaches down. "You understand, right?" His finger circles the hole he drilled in Insul's ankle. "I needed to keep up with you."

"I know."

"It's worth it, right?"

Insul looks up at him painfully. "Yeah."

The sun gets a degree hotter. He touches Insul's face and it relaxes, still in pain, but lost in the touch. His own softens in response. "How's your vision?"

"Better than last week."

"Good."

"Do you think it'll get better?"

"At the dose I gave you. Probably. Although it would be cute if you had to wear glasses."

Insul smiles weakly. "What dose did you give me?"

"I don't want to say."

"Come on."

“Shut up or I’ll poison you again.”

“Haha.”

Commercial Break

It seems impossible that anyone will answer. Stochastic machinery grinds, empty, empty, empty, nothing can manifest in that phone, a broken air hose to an underwater cell. Blood drains and is not replaced, and what remains is sick, in that body he can see through the floor, the floor that holds the phone, because his hands cannot, in the kitchen's shade.

Then he hears the sound of water sloshing on the other end of the line, and a "Sup."

"Clayton?"

"Is this...Trianon?"

"Yeah, um, I don't know you very well, Clayton, but you seem like a really nice guy, so I thought, maybe you'd help me, please?"

"What kind of help?"

"Your dad's rich. And old. Does he have a medical guy? Like some sleazy unethical kind of guy?"

"Uh. I'm pretty sure the compound has someone like that, yeah."

"Can you please have them come here right now. In the helicopter."

Silence.

"Please. I'll do anything. Please. You can kill me, anything, just please fly them here."

"I don't want to kill you, Trianon. Shit."

"I know, I know," and then Trianon is crying too hard to speak.

"Hey. What happened?"

"There's a hole in his foot."

"Who's foot?"

"Insul. He lost a lot of blood. And I think he, um, drank antifreeze. By accident."

"What the fuck."

"I think he's really hurt. Like really, really hurt."

Garbled sounds.

“Clayton?”

“Hey. I’m calling my dad right now, okay, Trianon?”

“Please. Now.”

“Okay. Hang in—”

The phone dies. Trianon takes a deep breath and rolls the vodka bottle across the floor. He crawls after it, his legs dragging trails of blood, with the occasional red chip of glass.

*

Vodka spurts from Insul’s throat, body writhing. “Fuck you,” Trianon says, cramming his fingers between the teeth, prying them apart, shoving the bottle past, click-click of the teeth on the glass.

*

“Hnhh.” Words still come out broken, but those eyes are hunting again.

“This is it,” Trianon says.

“Hhk?”

“This is the Adderall commercial.”

He feels Insul twitch with laughter, too weak to make any sound but a staccato release of air. In the background, someone on a table is trying to get his attention.

“We need to get upstairs. Okay?”

“Mngh.”

“The doctor is coming. We can’t let them see.”

The Other Color in the Box

Trianon opens a vial of pyridostigmine. "What are you looking at?"

"You were with her."

"We're a traditional family, Insul."

"Okay." Insul watches the pill go down.

"You know you're the only one who can hurt me." He says it calm and dry like explaining the rules to a game.

Insul comes close, a lock of wet hair sticking to Trianon's cheekbone. "I know. But it would be easier if she were. Gone."

"She doesn't deserve that."

"It's dangerous. Sleeping in there."

"She knows I'm the only thing protecting her from you."

The breath between them gets hot, another strand of hair falling down, trembling in the volatile air. "People get crazy."

"Maybe we go on a road trip. Drop her off somewhere. Disappear."

"Then she calls the cops." His hands slide under Trianon's hoodie, tracing the scars, creeping up to the throat.

"I don't want to think about it right now." Trianon grips the fabric, keeping the hands in place.

"Today is a nice day."

"It is?"

"We're going to get high and listen to the new Dungeon Star."

"Sounds stupid."

"You like getting high with me."

"Yeah."

Trianon rolls up his sleeve. "These haven't even healed yet." Bruises cloud his arm, storming up his shoulder, bandages where the skin was broken. "Tomorrow can be a bad day. Okay?"

"It can?"

"Mmhm. But today is a good day." He pulls Insul into his chest, into the soft material of the hoodie.

Insul lifts his head. "It has her smell in it."

"Tomorrow you can make it smell like anything you want."

Insul shivers, his face distorting with something animal and diseased. Trianon feels his own body tighten in response, in all the places that keep his insides inside.

Music drifts from upstairs, then disappears, like headphones were plugged in. Insul looks up. "I don't hate her."

"I know."

"But people are going to find out about me."

"No one is going to find out about you. Because I'm not going to say anything."

Low and weak. "Okay."

"You need to use your notebook tonight. Okay?"

"You'll do the writing?"

"Mmhm."

*

Insul's drawings grow with Trianon's words like vines on a lattice. Conceptual guns, blood to rain, rain to blood, a chronology of wounds, scars graphed along a line. Trianon smiles at how stupid the drawings of people look. But people are stupid. So it's perfect.

"Can you draw me?"

Insul looks at Trianon's face and his eyebrows furrow. "I'm not good enough."

"Try stylizing it."

"Hhh."

"You don't have to get technical. Just draw what you feel."

Scribble scribble.

"Looks good. Can you draw yourself?"

Two vaguely human-shaped blobs. One is a cluster of colors. The other is a noise of black, so deep it grinds lines in the paper.

"What if you gave that one a color too?"

Insul hesitates, then looks through the markers. As he does, Trianon checks his phone. Supply drop in three days. Maybe Clayton can stay for dinner. That would be nice. And it's kind of interesting keeping Insul from destroying another human being.

The marker box spills across the floor. Insul's breathing is different.

"Insul?"

"You can't act like it's over. Like you just forgive me."

"Did I say I forgave you?"

"No."

"Then maybe it doesn't matter."

Insul twists away, mouth barely visible in profile, eyes covered by hair.

"Hey." Trianon cups Insul's cheek, speaking with quiet, close intensity. "I know you're crazy. But I'm still here. Right?"

"Yeah," Insul says, voice barely reaching out of his throat.

"You said you can see everything in my face. So what do you see now?"

Insul glances, then wraps his arms around himself like he's keeping his ribs from tearing free. He finally manages to say, "Am I dead?"

Trianon grabs his face and kisses him, so hard their teeth click.

Insul flinches, blinded by tears, sucking snot back into his nose with surprise. Trianon stretched so far for the kiss that he can't support himself anymore, he slides off the couch and knocks Insul on his back, landing where the car hit, pain echoing into his thighs, but Insul doesn't push him off. He takes Insul's hand, squeezing the knife scar, making Insul's mouth weak with pain, forced to take his tongue, making him harder, stabbing into Insul's bruise, almost invisible by

now, the faintest corona of yellow, but it still hurts, hurts like a heart.

Trianon reaches under the couch and touches the orange parka, still encrusted with dried mud. He pauses, tasting acid rain. Then he finds the condoms. He tears open a wrapper and Insul tenses under him, mind-blind and nervous. An entire life, stored in the skin, and with each touch, mnemonic pain rearranges into a new constellation, from foot to hand to heart. Trianon places his palm between those stars of pain, on Insul's belly.

"You're not going to die."

He goes down, his tongue touching the slit, tasting a tear of precum, licking until he gets hard. He puts a condom on himself, a dimple of air at the tip. "Lube," he says, not wanting to get his hands sticky. Insul rubs it into his cock, looking up at him, fingers pulling harder each time. "Give me that," Trianon says, gripping his cock and holding it to Insul's ass. He feels where the hard body lost muscle and fat, but there's just enough meat to cup his glans. He pushes, then stops. "Still too tight. You have to spread wider."

Insul gives a look like he's going to throw Trianon off him and walk out, then he pulls his ankles back. Drops of shower water glisten along his perineum, blending into the lube.

Trianon rubs against the opening, letting it adjust to his pressure.

"How much?" Insul says, voice tight.

"Like an inch."

"That's it?" He starts tightening up.

"You can try to relax. Or I can take it out and do something else to you."

"Okay, try taking it out."

"Relax." Insul's sound of pain makes Trianon harder, forcing another inch inside, and with it, more pain. "Sorry." He pulls out as slowly as he can, watching Insul's hole gape for a second, then blink shut. "Okay, it's out." He peels the condom off and throws it under the couch.

"Fuck."

"Don't worry about it. I'll get in there soon."

"I want you to."

"I know." He puts Insul in his mouth so suddenly that his last syllable vibrates the tip, swelling it inside him. He stares up the shaft, eyes heavy and dark-rimmed, uncut hair engulfing Insul's crotch, fangs of green gnawing from the greasy black. He feels the legs tensed around him like

a trap, the same legs that crushed his body in the dark.

You're scary now. But you didn't used to be. When you were soft and small, they separated themselves from you, to prove they were human. To prove you weren't.

They acted like you were scary until you were.

I think there was an age where someone could have done whatever they wanted with you. And they did. And now I'm going to do what I want with you. But not like they did. I hope it's different enough to end another way.

Maybe they could have changed your life. Your dad. Blake. If they hadn't abused their power. Maybe not. I know it's not that simple. Some people don't know what to do with other people's kindness. They take it until it's gone then move on. Love is a game that adults play with you to get what they want, and you can go decades or your whole life before meeting someone who isn't playing that game. So why would you act otherwise?

Blake should have kissed you on the mouth and driven you out of that town. Loving you would have been the revenge he was looking for.

But you grew up. You're a terrible person now. I know you don't deserve this. But I don't have to make things line up. Balance out. Calculate to the last decimal place.

Because the truth is. Not everyone can do better.

And I'm one of those people.

We're both missing something. We marked each other. This link is bad but it's not broken. To be close, even terribly, is something I can't give up so easily, in this world without connection.

Oenone would never have been on my side. Not the way I need. Maybe if she'd succeeded at killing you, things would have been different. She'd have been complicit too.

Or maybe not. I don't have a rich family. I barely have anyone. A lot of people survive that way, if nothing goes wrong. But things went very wrong for me.

If only a few days had passed, I would have been a victim. But I was with him too long. Things got murky. If he dies, I'm the load-bearing support for all those bodies. No one will ever be able to put together exactly what happened, but they'll know I was there. Even if I don't go to prison, I'm marked, deeper than the scars on my chest. Back to apologizing for my existence.

So I needed someone for me. Someone who didn't have family, friends, culture, ideals, anything more important than me. Even though he hurt me so badly, he was the only one in that room on my side, irrationally, insanely, completely.

*

He looks down at those tight and distant features, that mind retreating inside that black box brain. The version of Insul that doesn't hurt anyone, isn't a person at all. Just an absence.

"That's it?" Trianon says.

Insul looks up, eyes wide.

"I'm weaker than you. But look how scared you are."

He recoils at the change in Insul's face, trying to stand up, but Insul straddles him where he kneels, gripping his cock like a dildo. Insul looks away with something furious and flushed in his face as he lowers himself onto it, the tip hitting his perineum, slipping on lube, punching the delicate flesh around his hole, then the head goes inside and he shuts his eyes, teeth gritted. They stay like that, not moving, rage and fear pulsing between them, his violence contained to this point of penetration.

He sinks another inch, fingers digging into Trianon's thighs, but his whole body is still tight, Trianon can feel it, how easy it would be to slide off and shut down, so he spits between them, his saliva trickling down their chests, onto his hand, onto Insul's cock. "It's easier when two things are happening at once."

The tight jaw resting on his head starts gasping, hot through his hair, until sweat glues him to Insul's skin, small against that chest, heart beating against him like a buried mouth.

I'm inside you, safe from you. This hostage meat, forced into your sickness, from my sickness. We will never be well. I will suck it from you, and you from me.

"Thinking some stupid shit?" Insul says.

Trianon bites his chest, small teeth closing around a nipple, and Insul grabs him by the hoodie, other hand going under to claw the scar, twisting the skin that will never heal. Trianon cries out sudden and awkward like a bug crawled in his armpit, cum screaming from him like blood, shooting up inside Insul's guts.

A halo of white, fizzing nothingness. Like surf falling back to the sea.

He clings to the damp chest pounding under his ear, feeling gravity leak the mess down his thighs, the blast of sensation resolving into individual fragments of tears, lube, semen, irritation.

"Over. Overstimulated," he says, pulling out.

Insul sits on the floor, the stone under his ass dark and wet. He takes Trianon's hand and bites it

softly like he forgot how to talk. Trianon watches those eyes sink, then flick open, trying to stay awake. "I'm still here."

Insul's eyes close, and his erect cock starts to flop, leaving an erratic strand of precum across his belly. You don't even want to cum. You want it to burn inside you as you hurt me. You want to keep going, and never stop.

*

He lays on Insul's slumbering chest, stuck to him by cooling sweat. One sleeve of his hoodie is pulled back to expose his bony arm, the other flopping to cover his hand. He rests in the hood, shielded from sound, watching Insul breathe. There's a serious look on Insul's face, so he holds his hand, hoping he'll feel it inside the black box.

With his other hand, Trianon picks up the notebook at an awkward angle. The pages fall loose and he sees the portraits Insul drew earlier. The one with all the colors. And the dark figure. It has a green X across it now.

He curls up in the crook of Insul's arm, listening to the warm rain, with the entire universe spilling from his chest.

Now, here is what I had wanted to happen: I loved the dog now, and I wanted him to love me. I had tried to love, and I had tried to kill, and both had been unsuccessful by themselves. I hoped...and I don't really know why I expected the dog to understand anything, much less my motivations...I hoped that the dog would understand.

-Zoo Story

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*

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BULLET WIFE

The day Trianon was captured he was hiding in the execution bleachers, dried blood caking the machinery around him. Other students were captured too and their heads cut off to keep them from regenerating. Every mouth is competition. And it feels good to shoot people.

He had died twice before, once in Quad #28689, his corpse missed in the dark shade of the trees where he fell, listening to the sound of birdsong from a hidden speaker that had not yet been stripped for copper. The second time he bled out in a janitor's closet, too small to be seen behind the bucket and mop. The last time he came back, it was with animal ears and a long tail and teeth sharp enough to bite Insul's leg, ears folded back in feral panic.

Insul stared down the barrel of his AR, pupils big, not moving, showing no reaction to the pain. Trianon let go, teeth bloody, eyes scared. Someone was going to shoot him but Insul said no, he's mine.

They cut his clothes off and took him to the branding of the Bullet Wives, where Shooters consecrate their new acquisitions. Bullet Wives burn out fast, worked to death on starvation rations if they don't get killed and decapped first.

Each Shooter has a gun modified so the tip of the muzzle forms a brand. Insul's brand is an X radiating from the circle where the bullet comes out. Traditionally the gun is fired repeatedly until it glows red-hot, and this is done by the ears of the Bullet Wives to deafen them, make them weak and docile.

Insul refuses, saying, I need him sharp. Doesn't need another idiot mule trudging behind him, slowing him down. He's revolutionizing a whole new theory of Shooternomics. The Neuro-death-scribe subclass of the Bullet Wife, an autistic boy who can map the infinite hallways and kill-quads, go Etrian Odyssey on this bitch. A hyper-sensory detection unit for environmental shifts.

At the gathering, a Shooter is revealed to have animal parts. He is shot until he turns completely into an animal. They watch the furry piece of shit scamper away, slipping on its own blood. Not enough meat to be worth the slaughter, but next semester they'll return to hunt the animals that survived, the ones who slurped the

blood and fat from the floors, filtering out the toxins.

Trianon staggers naked under the weight of magazines, an emaciated Bullet Wife sick with propellant fumes, an X branded on his cheek, catching the tears that fall, splitting them into twin rivulets of warm salty water. His ears are of unknown breed, his tail flicking with fear and sensory overload.

Oenone's blond hair is cut to a bob, her rifle as tall as she is, a strap cutting between her chest to support it. She's a Valkyrie, a Shooter-Medic, her first aid kit adding to Trianon's load, a heavy pack full of painkillers too valuable for him. His blood is drawn to fill plastic bags for emergency transfusions. As he grows weaker, the medkit gets heavier, he feels his blood sloshing around inside.

Insul wears cargo pants and a layered shirt, long camo sleeves under a Dungeon Star tee. His acne oozes and drips, scarring his otherwise smooth skin. He wonders if he'll crack open and become something else. Crack through the black room. The school has acne too, cratered pitted pocked with countless calibers. Everything has a faint pink tinge, even the air.

"I'm hungry," Trianon mumbles.

Oenone says, "We're almost to a cafeteria."

"That's what you said a mile back." No one responds. "I think they've been replacing them with anaerobic lagoons anyways." Reservoirs for the hot dog puree of student byproducts suffusing the air with pink.

Insul says, "The anaerobic means it's good for you."

"I don't think that's what it means..."

*

The quad is dark and torchlit. Shooters are reenacting renaissance paintings with captured students. It is believed this will generate some kind of "extra credit" which, if, accrued in sufficient but unknown amounts, will lead to a cessation or terminus of the present circumstances, a break in infinite time, at least for the few

who achieve the critical amount.

Oenone is in charge of making sure they keep their color until the exhibit is over. Sometimes the piece changes and she has to retouch a student, make a live one look dead, or a dead one look alive. Certain changes require the application of ligatures or splints or fire. Currently she is injecting a syringe full of magenta food dye into the eyeball of a spinally paralyzed sophomore. She gets nauseous but doesn't let the others see, just redirects the feeling into a crazy smile or a serious expression like she's too smart for everyone.

Insul huffs inhalants from a paper bag. His white sclera laced with red is like a distorted reflection of Trianon's bulging abdomen, the boy trembling in a position he's held for two hours, muscles raw, joints popped.

The next day they're creeping through an overgrown football field and Trianon is blown away by AR rounds. Seniors fire from the bleachers, hidden in shadow. Insul drags Trianon's body across the wet grass, wetter from blood, a red trail. Oenone sprays back suppressing fire and rolls behind the tumulus mound where the others disappeared. She crawls through the tunnel, bullets raining at her heels, darkening the entrance with dust, dirt hissing from the walls. The tunnel is stacked with skulls, bigger than hers, with advanced dental decay. After years of only seeing other students, it's a little disturbing to see the grotesque proportions of teachers.

*

They emerge in a quad where the trees are burnt black and desks are stacked high as hills.

Trianon comes back to life in Insul's arms, wounds closing sloppily, immortality chimerism coursing through him. His nose is darkened and his eyes seem bigger, the irises slit like a cat. One of them droops as his immune system rebuilds, nerves glittering with myasthenia.

"Look at this little freak," Insul says. "Makes me want to shoot him again."

Oenone pans her rifle back and forth, looking for threats. "Don't get attached."

“I take care of my gun, don’t I?”

She comes over. “This is what we could become. If we screw up.”

“Not everything has to be fucking symbolic.”

“Fine.” She touches Trianon’s black hair stained green by grass juice, friction burn on the back of his neck. “He is kinda cute.”

Trianon says, “I’m a person...”

Oenone says, “Classic not-a-person thing to say.”

Insul nods seriously. “Super not a person shit.”

Trianon wipes blood from his mouth. “I have interests. I have a class schedule. I have a...what’s supposed to take care of you.”

Oenone says, “Wasn’t there a word for that?”

Insul looks at the flat blue sky, his fingers in Trianon’s hair like ladybugs.

*

They find a library to hole up in for the night. Shelves provide flexible escape routes, even if they smell like mold and freshman guano. The corner of the YA section has a wide display table fanned with decayed paperbacks and behind it they are concealed from sight.

Trianon lays on his back, dissociating with his favorite characters. Oenone rides him, keeping her skirt pulled down so no one can see between her legs. She rises and falls with medical or yogic regularity, expression dignified. “His small dick is good for my vaginismus. Clearing my Gunmind.”

She turns her head and covers her mouth like she’s coughing, flushed behind the jelly-bracelet wrist, the glossy nails. Her contractions grind around Trianon’s cock

and he thrusts weakly into her, trying to build enough friction to spurt before she pulls out. Then her walls relax and she slides off as elegantly as she can, smoothing her skirt down. He lays there, crotch burning with her acidic juices, sensorily overwhelmed, cock hard and red and desperate.

When she rolls over to sleep, he sits up and tries to finish himself with his hand, but the skin on both palms is raw from gripping magazine straps and burnt from handling Insul's overheated AR. Finally he gives up, head falling forward, cock sticky and wilting.

Heavy arms drop over his shoulders. His spine goes erect.

"You're warm," Insul says, barely awake, clinging and sluggish, pulling them both to the floor. His chest, dirty shirt over hard muscle and bone, swells and collapses against Trianon's skin. At some point it slows down. Trianon edges away, careful to let Insul's arm drop slowly. He waits a few seconds to see if the boy wakes up, then drags himself across the rough carpet.

Halfway past the LITERATURE shelves, crawling through a shaft of moonlight, something pins him to the floor by the base of his spine, limbs radiating in helpless agony, an X of bruised arms and legs. He looks back with teeth exposed by muscle fatigue, eyes slit and wide at the same time. Insul grinds down harder, making the tips of Trianon's fingers point up and his toes spread like fat petals. "Why are you running?"

"Immgh. I'm hungry."

"You need protein."

"No shit."

Insul finds a strip of freshman jerky in his backpack. "This is the last I got." It takes so long for Trianon to chew the dry meat that Insul gets out his canteen and shares his water. Warm, acrid, but Trianon desperately drinks it. "Anything else?"

"Can't sleep."

Insul takes him by the bare shoulders, thumbs occasionally tensing as if about to become violent, then easing as if it were never a possibility. “You have to sleep. They’ll hunt us in the morning.”

“I can’t. Sleep.” His heart pounds in Insul’s hands, background hypervigilance bass-boosted.

“It’s because her tight vagina was squeezing your dick and you didn’t get to cum. Are you too stupid to jerk off?”

“I tried,” Trianon says.

“Is the jerking off part of your brain broken? Did your dad never tell you how?”

“My hands hurt.”

“You don’t have the will to survive. Like Nietzsche said. You fucking suck. You have no power.”

“If you actually read—”

A gunshot in the distance. They both turn their heads to listen. But whatever happened, it happened to someone else.

Something metal is being unscrewed. Trianon looks back to see Insul’s finger dip into a tin of gun oil. “What are you doing?”

Insul holds his finger out, glistening with oil. “Do you know how to do this?”

Stupid. The implication burns awkward as acid reflux, coming up in caustic tones: “Maybe you can explain exactly what you mean.”

“You know. The trigger back there. I used to do it to fall asleep.”

Trianon pauses, shy about the word he’s about to use. “Masturbation seems easier.”

“I can’t see pictures in my head. And all the porn got burned.”

“That sucks.”

“If you jerk the trigger it just happens. You don’t have to think about it. It’s efficient.”

“I think I read about it. Somewhere.” An old book, before he was captured, dull historical fiction except for a fascinating scene buried in the back where the school censors missed it, probably not even lurid by adult standards, probably briefer than he remembered, a trivial crumb of bawdy flavor, but it was enough to annihilate his understanding of how bodies worked and how many secret parts were actually inside them, parts none of his peers could agree on, nebulous as rumors about secrets areas in games. And Insul’s body this close to him is even more confusing, looking nothing like his existing stockpile of images. It smells funny and has too much detail.

The sky is clouding. Only the edges of Insul are visible, softened by diffused moonlight, a little glimmer on his slick finger, shaking with the excitement of the offer. Heat like candy, melting in the dark. It makes Trianon’s rigid brain hurt. Is this all there is? Justifications based on scarcity? Lies are so warm. But the distortion between them feels obscene, the distortion that will return with the morning light. This is a boy like him, or roughly equivalent. Very rough. Bruising. Aching. Looks like assigning Lord of the Flies to your English class doesn’t do shit. Not when food gets low and the exits go infinite.

Insul drops a knee forward in the dark between the stacks. “I want to see if it works.”

Just another stupid guy playing with combustible objects. Trianon is like a cherry bomb to him. You thought it was something more? No one could ever feel that way about you. Say something. Stop him. But the only words Trianon has are canned monosyllables, apotropaic masculinities aped from real boys stronger and faster than him, or a stilted, risible vocabulary that no one uses in real life; pearls of arrogant, defensive intellectualism. Those words don’t fit in the tight space between them. All he can feel is his body, for the first time, a rifle to be checked, chambered, reloaded. Oiled.

Is this what girls feel like? He relaxes slightly, a subtle roll of vertebrae, but it's enough for Insul to grab him with hands tense as if unready for this outcome, like it was just about to be laughed off as a grotesque joke. My finger in your ass, faggot.

Insul breathes heavy and stupid like he needs to move faster than his awareness of the situation. He flips Trianon over to expose the reddened curve of his back, the skinny ass that doesn't need spreading. His finger pushes between the cold bony slopes, into the soft ring like pink flesh from a healthier mammal. Trianon's tail straightens, then twists. Sticky discomfort turns to a weird warble of nerves. Whining sounds, an exhausted heat like fever rising and breaking with each thrust.

"I think I found it."

"Nngh." His tail is sticky with gun oil.

"Did I find your thing?"

"Ummm—"

Trianon gasps as the finger curls inside him, hooked, compacted, flush, solid, it brings him to a queasy calm, like he can suddenly breathe underwater. No longer fighting on the surface, his sensitive body exposed to the air, the hypersensory universe. Part of the current now, warm and rolling with that boy's knuckle. He follows the arm up to the tensed shoulder, the collarbone with a single dark hair growing from it, the acne-scarred neck, the dead face attached to a piston finger, trigger discipline all the way inside your starved asshole. For some reason, he feels incredibly sad. "It's okay."

"What?" Insul looks furious, and a little scared.

"It's okay," Trianon repeats, softer this time. He doesn't know how to express whatever this is, this emotional clot foreign as the boy's finger in his rectal cavity. There is only the pain and weakness of this blind sympathy. You're not supposed to cry during sex. Not supposed to lay there with a huge, throbbing sadness. Is this

sex? He never considered the possibility. Sex is a real and authentic event waiting to transpire in a future that will give birth to itself without human intervention, or at least the intervention of someone as ordinary and inconsequential and victimized as him, a future that will sculpt itself along a truth so obvious it cannot be defined. And until then, lay back and tell the other person, you aren't real.

The finger fucks faster, but with surprising clarity, none of the rapidfire ruin Trianon had expected from a guy who talks about holes in porny terms, floaty as looter shooter blasts, interchangeable 10s and 7s like the last numbers of the user names you frag, gank, pop, dominate, rape, exploding vectors of vaginal status for public performance. Insul does this to himself, right? So he knows how bad it can hurt back there.

The insistent milking pressure builds until Trianon doesn't know what to do, a flushed tight face with a red scrap of mouth.

Then it stops, sweat burning down Insul's neck in the moonlight. "Your ass is going to cut through my finger."

"You wanted this," Trianon says, squirming with shame, which makes him even tighter.

"You want it more."

The finger is moving again. Trianon's tail goes stiff. "W-what?"

"You're like one step away from killing yourself. Your shit is stupid and pointless. So I bet you'd let me do anything to you."

Trianon's ears press back against his head. He wants to grab the survival knife from the backpack and stick it deep, he wants to bite down hard on that greasy throat, he wants to claw the boy until nothing but a finger remains. Then he sees Insul glancing in the direction of Oenone's sleeping bag.

"Because she'll think you're gay?" It comes out automatically, one of those emotionless observations his dad would hit him for. The way Insul looks at him is the way Insul looks before shooting someone in the head, except this time the

trigger finger is inside his ass.

“Because everyone will hate you? If they find out about us?” Insul grabs him by the tail, jerking his ass back into the finger, two fingers now, thumb digging into the cheek hard enough to bruise. “Because you’re an animal fucker?” Insul wraps the tail around Trianon’s neck and pulls hard, forcing his head back and his ass up, lifting his hips from the floor where a puddle of slime gleams. Trianon digs his fingers into the furry coil but his nails are too sharp and the pressure too tight, trapped in a collar of his own screaming vertebrae. “Because. Hhgkk. You’re, scared, of dying?”

Insul releases the tail and Trianon’s head bangs into the carpet, coughing up saliva. He rolls onto his side, guts warping around the fingers in him, starting to burn, and he opens his mouth for air and Insul pushes his holographic NZ 85B handgun inside, sharp teeth clicking around the barrel, tongue plugging the muzzle. “Don’t tell me what I am. I see you looking at me, better than me, dumb violent freak, that’s what you think. You have no idea. The only way for you to understand me is this thing in my hand. This is how I feel. Every fucking day. Do you get it?”

Trianon’s asshole tightens with fear around the finger plugging him up, a shit-your-guts-out death rattle contraction. As he chokes on the gun, cum spatters Insul’s sleeve, adding new spots to the camo, patterned for lunar invasion. The little fountain of his cock dribbles and dies down his thighs, then the fingers slide out and he spurts one final time, matting his dark tail pearlescent.

Insul wipes the sleeve off on Trianon’s sharp ribs, his bruised flank. His teeth click together as the gun slides from his slack jaw, trailing a strand of drool and the taste of oily steel, and for half a second he thinks, that’s the taste of a weapon that works right.

Insul drops to the floor behind him and wraps an arm around, still holding the gun, shiny and wet, pointed at the dark. Drifting in a warm nightmare, muscles slack, breaking apart like food matter separating in a bowl.

“Hey.”

Trianon mumbles, “Hey.”

“Sorry for scaring you.”

“It’s okay, you’re a dumb violent retard, you can’t help it...”

“What?”

“I said something that’ll make you hit me if I tell you what I said.”

Silence. Long enough to seem like sleep. Then Insul says, “You know we’re getting out. Right?”

“Yes,” Trianon whispers. He doesn’t believe it, but anything else would be too ugly. Yes like the nails digging into his palms, sharp hard concealed. Yes like one foot in front of the other. Yes like bad water you drink anyways.

He feels like a rifle in Insul’s arms, a rifle the boy is trying to conceal with his whole body. The cold zippers on the cargo pants warm to Trianon’s skin and he fades into the clothed chest on his naked back, the stink of dog and burnt adrenaline, lost in the camo sleeves, hidden from the eyes of death.

*

Insul wakes up. A black box sits on his chest. He can’t see it. It crushes his lungs.

He lays in the wine cellar, listening to footsteps on the ceiling above.

Radiant Muscles

They leave the forest for the first time. A party Clayton invited them to. Insul was getting restless and he had to be taken outside before something bad happened.

Trianon lingers outside, hiding in the shade of a garden trellis. Nervous, panicking even, which seems absurd after everything. It was easy to feel normal in a contained environment, in the warm aquarium of his routine, that he forgets how easily he gets stuck. Like a machine part happily humming in its case, which becomes alien and awkward outside of its concealed, interlocking purpose. He wants to cling to Insul, his reference point, the adjoining part in the machine. It makes him realize how much he's been doing it back at the cabin, automatic and animal, at a rate unacknowledged to himself because no one was observing. But here it seems babyish, animal, retarded, this repetitive clinging urge, companion to his mutinous muteness.

"I can't do it," he says.

"I'm going to hit you," Insul says, relaxed but otherwise emotionless.

"Why?" Drifting along the side of the house, batting flowers with his fingertips.

"Because I want to."

"Why?"

"Because you're small. I can't stand seeing you looking so small like I could just hit you."

"Perfect logic."

Insul slams him into the wall. The soft flesh of his back screeches, then fades to a warm ache he knows will change color. His breathing struggles to catch up and his heart beats fast and his shoulders twist and cower, but his hips tilt toward Insul. Don't hurt me. Please hurt me. Touch me. Break me. Crush me back together.

Insul holds Trianon's jaw in his hand, the delicate cup of bone. Like something he could drop from a kitchen table and watch it crack in exactly two pieces, maybe three. The door roars as it slides open, people coming outside to smoke, he steps into smoker's distance himself, like he was just chilling outside like anyone else, an anyone else distance from Trianon. Waiting for Trianon to walk back toward him.

*

They swung by a bar in the living room or one of the living rooms, Insul has an energy drink and Trianon has a sugar-free soda, he didn't know it was caffeinated but he's getting jittery and needs to find a bathroom, but Insul wanders into someone's home office instead, poking around in a way that makes Trianon follow him nervously, like a dog he's responsible for.

They look at a bookshelf of New York Times bestsellers and classics of traditional publishing, along with gems and highlights of various small presses arranged by subject matter, safe and captured flirtations with dark and dreadful things. The accumulation makes him sick. Automaton reenacting passion without feeling, things that worked once or, like the Disney-ass movies he was doing bit parts in, a perpetual slurry of signifiers that were already false and black holed at the moment they were created. If it claws at his soul, what must it feel like for Insul, who stood in that archetypal space with a warm gun, smelling the blood of other children, deprived of his own crime, condemned to live. What else can one do but vandalize the bureaucracy of aesthetic?

Plaques, awards, tchotchkes, degrees. Trophies from a safari of ghosts. I am alive, he thinks. I am alive and this repels me. I cannot describe how or why but the life in me is made sick.

"Let's find a bathroom." He stops at the look on Insul's face. "What?"

"You hate that stuff."

"Yeah."

"Piss on it."

“Haha. No.”

“Do it.”

“No. Come on.”

“It’s the perfect. Time. To do this.”

“The perfect time...”

Insul walks into him, propping him against the room like a wall, unzipping his jeans. “Come on.”

Soft parts exposed to open air, an obscene worrying sensation in this unfamiliar place, like part of his subconscious extruded through a nightmare or a drunken ramble, cock held by the most dangerous person he knows, so much of him under that thumb, weirdly weaponized. “Stop.”

“Really quick. Just do it.”

He can’t hold it back anymore, fear splitting his bladder open. As it shrinks, relief comes, then liquid exhilaration at producing this chaos from his own body, ruining what it touches, ruining worse than water, because it comes from him, from his life, melting the pages together, seeping through the keys of that laptop. The rough denim of Insul’s jeans brushes his small, tight ass, dimpling at the sides as he strains to empty his bladder. The stream weakens but doesn’t die, he feels tethered by a pale yellow chain, it rattles each time people walk past the door, laughing as if they could see right through it. He tucks himself back in quickly, smelling it everywhere, danger signals going off.

“What if someone finds out?”

“They won’t find out.”

It’s my piss.” Trianon stares at the mess as if each drop has his face in it.

“Yeah, the national piss crime database is going to send someone to kill you.”

“Shut up.”

Insul pushes him out of the room and down a hallway. “They have no idea whose piss it is. You got away with it.”

“It’s okay?”

Insul looks into the backyard where animals are racing around, the sun cooling as it cruises into late afternoon. “They’ll think it was a dog or something.”

They circulate some more and Trianon gets recognized by some people from the museum and others he doesn’t remember, from a bloodless past life. He says various empty things in exchange for their empty things, tensed for someone to accuse him of murder or public urination. But everyone is on rails, no one speaks of death or piss or disappearance. The dead pay no one to love them.

“I’m bored,” Insul says.

“Yeah. Feels weird.” Fucking day party. No wonder he was scared to piss. There isn’t enough night in this day.

“Clayton said he’d be here.”

“Maybe he got tuberculosis.”

Insul looks at him, then laughs. “Yeah. He got tuberculosis.”

“He got tuberculosis...”

“Shit’s fucked.”

“So fucked...” Trianon laughs small and goblin-like and Insul grabs and pulls him outside down the steps to the car parked in the nice big parking area that curves around the front of the house with fountains and trees and shit all lit up. Rich people walk past, voices pitched high with playful teasing or mumbling with false

ironic ease.

“I really pissed on their stuff.” Heart beating fast.

Insul pushes the seat down and straddles Trianon and starts kissing him just under the rim of visibility. A nervous gasp as his jeans are pulled down, bare ass touching vinyl seat. Like the house, it feels strange to be exposed with so many people nearby. There are infinite nakednesses, he thinks, at least to my retard skin that has to feel everything, drinking up the world through little hairs and overstrung nerve cells.

Now his legs are being pushed back, boxer briefs peeled up to join the jeans tangled awkward around his ankles. He looks up and sees his sneakers floating past the rim of the window, visible to anyone outside, so he tucks his legs back quickly, which spreads his ass to Insul, makes his balls slip free from between his thighs, cock shrunk up small and anxious.

“We don’t have a condom.”

Insul pulls his own pants down and starts rubbing himself. “It’s not like we’re fucking anyone else.”

“But it’ll get all messy...”

“Shut the fuck up you fucking germ freak, we’ve literally had each other’s blood all over each other and fucking poisoned each other and shit. Is your ass ready?”

“Um. Maybe.”

Insul spits on his hole and rubs his finger on it then spits and rubs and spits again, pushing a little deeper each time. “I used to feel bad about only having a medium dick. In high school I thought it was like a micropenis.”

“Yeah. That’s how people talked about it. It was always some crazy size you had to be...”

“I don’t feel bad about it anymore. Your ass couldn’t handle anything bigger.”

Trianon jerks his head up and down, unable to respond. Insul spits on his cock and tries to position it while staying below the window, pressed close into the body under him. "It's the exact perfect Trianon-size."

"It's still a little big for me..."

Insul starts pushing, same rhythm he used with the finger. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Um. Fuck." Teeth clenching lip biting eyes rolling, he feels Insul respond to the slightest movement of his face, slowing down, speeding up, pushing all the way inside. "Oh fuck." The world outside the car disappears, replaced by the weighted blanket fucking him, the brown hair that Insul keeps swept to the side so it doesn't fall in his face, the arms piled around his head in the cramped space, hard fingers threading his black strands and touching his mouth. Each thrust fills him with sun, like one of those old retro game explosions, a white-hot concatenation of orbs rimmed with red and orange. He licks Insul's face, needing to offload the hyperstimulation. It feels good, so good, he keeps thinking he's going to cum, then the warmth turns to burning.

"Wait, I feel, a little sick." And the spit dried fast, terrible lube.

Insul waits for Trianon's guts to stop suctioning him, then slides out but doesn't get up, cock still hard, breathing still heavy. "Fuck."

Trianon tugs on his shirt. "I want to make you happy."

"You make me happy."

"I want to make you happy with this." He lays there, shirt pulled up, pants down, feeling soft and needy and desperate. He reaches for Insul's cock and pulls it closer, between his legs, pressing them together, rubbing his thighs on the taut hardness, feeling it twitch, still sticky from his guts, germy, germy, he pushes past the thought as Insul spits and saliva trickles down the insides of his legs, friction turning slick, balls slapping together, their cocks touching at the end of each caffeinated thrust, a hot jeweled pulse, agonizing, boybreath steaming the windows.

He thinks how he never sees Insul masturbating, doesn't smell it or find the stains. Insul only cums with him, on him, in him, like the boy can't feel his own cock unless it's connected to Trianon, circuit complete. But even now he barely looks he's enjoying himself. He looks like Trianon used to look. Afraid. Like he's carrying a blade between his legs and trying not to cut himself with it. And then he does.

A germy mess spurts across Trianon's belly, clinging to his X-scar like the ghost of the blood it bled. He feels proud of his body for being able to make this happen.

Insul looks down, still hungry, like he needs to paint every part of the body under him. He reaches between Trianon's legs.

Trianon says, "Your hand is dirty."

"What?"

"It was on your cock and your cock was in my ass."

"It's not dirty. Fuck. Whatever." Insul pushes Trianon against the back seat and puts his mouth on the boy, eyes closed, eyebrows serious with concentration, rough insistent sucking.

"Angh. Mm. Can my balls...can they..."

Insul uses his clean hand to push them up and roll them in his palm until the cock attached to them fills his mouth. He thrusts his jaw steadily, then grabs the energy drink he put on the floor, a small can of some pussy fancy label he's never heard of, doesn't feel the same, too sweet, not enough can to really get your chug on, but whatever. His mouth returns with a cold carbonated tingle, making Trianon hard again, but getting hard makes it harder, like he's flipping through a million timelines unable to slow down, unmoored from reality by the inside of that mouth, his boyfriend's mouth, he uses that word for the first time in his own head, feels weird, but the *my* part feels good, but distractions percolate like the settling bubbles of the energy drink, sensory incursions and flashes of violence. So many people live in his head, yelling and second-guessing. Insul is total enough to push them away most of the time, a super-presence containing all the things he hates but purer, feeding his ego, transformed by attention and loyalty, sweet as the grip

of any weapon.

“Would you kill someone for me?”

The cock slips from Insul’s mouth, glistening with taurinated drool. “Did you have a. A specific uh. Person in mind?”

“In general.”

“I’d hold them down and let you do whatever you wanted to do them.” He starts sucking again, staring up seriously.

The first suck hardens Trianon up again, the second feels very good, and the third hits the back of Insul’s throat. He feels his lower body detach, rocking and shuddering. He squeezes Insul’s head with his thighs, still sticky from spit and cum, then spasms, feet hitting the sides of the car, sneakers leaving dark skids, socks soaked with sweat. The car traps his noises, muffling the world and its shitty people and their shitty voices and their shitty fountains that spit up like he spits up, surprising Insul, getting in his mouth and blobbing down the side of his chin. He looks up stupidly and Trianon pulls him in, kissing the softest part of that face, where his own cum is, clinging to that chapped lip.

*

At the aquarium, glass glowing in the dark. It’s sleepover night so it’s open late, kids screaming on the other side of the building.

The shark tank is still empty.

“Good.”

Insul looks at him.

“I’m glad the shark isn’t there.” He leans on Insul, feeling the hard body above him, the curling trap, tense until it remembers to put an arm around him, that it can put an arm around him, that they do that now.

He finally gets that aquarium corn dog.

“It tastes shitty.”

“We can go look for a better one.”

“It’s supposed to be shitty. It wouldn’t be any good otherwise.”

Insul is ravenous enough that it almost seems like he’s enjoying his food, two hot dogs and two buns, eaten separately. Trianon watches with a little smile, sleepy from cumming.

Insul makes him order a second corn dog, and something absurd and rainbowy, cod-Starbucks holiday special for a holiday that ended a long time ago, or perhaps never existed. Super Splash Day.

Walking again, infodumping about jellyfish and anemones and other retard animals, until the sugar drink turns cloying in his mouth, and it’s probably caffeinated too, so stupid. “I don’t know if I can finish.”

“Come on. You lost a shitload of weight.”

“Why was that, Insul? Why did I lose all that weight?”

The other boy looks at an animatronic penguin, avoiding his gaze. “It’s funny. I used to be small as you.”

“You’re not that fucking big now.”

“Big enough.”

A fake, not fake punch, bouncing him off the glass. He manages to keep his drink from spilling by tilting it back, a few drops hit his shirt, foam down his wrist. “Fuck.” Hard to think, sticky, messy, cold. Then warm as Insul picks up his arm and licks it clean. The gesture doesn’t parse as seductive. It’s more like something a parent would do, a reflex of maintenance, not worth mentioning. Keeping the autism from overflowing.

The immortality chimerism is all around, even in these caged waters. A feeling Trianon allows himself where he never would have before, with that rationality that seemed inescapable, the insistence on hard, inviolable truth no matter how miserable it made him.

I can feel my tail, it has five fingers and connects to the base of my spine, and at the end of it is a very cruel boy with a head like a black box. It was encrusted with screams and char and shrapnel, and bodies were wrapped around it. But I picked it clean, the flight recorder, the fight recorder, and now he is mine.

Thinking again. Thinking is violence. I was hurting myself the whole time. Thinking is like fighting by shooting through your own head. This is why I need power. So I can think outside my head.

He thinks of the Weil quote. *Unless you possess a radiance of which the energy (that is to say the possible effectiveness in the most material sense of the word) is equal to that contained in your muscles...*

His muscles feel radiant. He had his pyridostigmine. And he has his external muscles, his bonus muscles. And when he touches them, they radiate.

We should strive to become such that we are able to be non-violent.

The arm that cut me open is now connected to my veins.

This depends also on the adversary.

This way I know exactly where you are.

Insul says, "What are you thinking about?"

This innocuous question, so common in past relationships, holds greater weight here. Hunting his face for thoughts, searching for an insight the recipient does not feel he himself is capable of producing. Trianon feels like an augur who learned the art first-hand.

“Please tell me.” Insul is lost so easily. He’ll even beg for it.

But the thought has passed. Trianon can’t remember what he was thinking. Only what he is thinking right now. He looks up, the dirty glass of his eyes glowing with aquarium blue. “If I lost you, I would lose part of something that happened to me.”

Insul grabs him, a scared shadow, answering him the same.