

Just



A Bar

Chapter 1

First Draught: Between Ends and Means

Imagine, if you will, a bar. A bar occupying the top floor of the world's most expensive hotel. Every wall a pane of glass and every seat inviting. The most skilled barkeeps that make the best drinks in the universe, and they even give you the most generous pours, topping your glass with flare and a smile. A beautiful oak stump, the largest you've ever seen, sits in the middle of the room and has shelves cut into the sides. A rainbow of liquors and a menagerie of bottles adorn each and every shelf. Just the right amount of people to be comfortable and just the right kind of people to be having a good time with. Laughs and happiness fill every moment. Everyone perpetually at the best point of drunkenness: light feelings and open hearts. Out the window you can see the city lit up by a million and more lights, a smattering of colors all blurring together to make a rainbow that cannot be explained, only felt. The warm, soft lights contrasting with the cold night sky; their only connection being the pinpricks of stars that dot the blackened canopy.

If I had any say in the matter, that's the bar I'd be telling you about. But I don't.

I'd give ya my name but I don't wanna have it attached to this dingy bar. Folks here call me 'Old Man'. The fact I'm being called Old Man at the ripe age of thirty-three fills my cold, soulless heart with joy; means I must be getting to my death bed early, God willin'.

Now, I got the only joint selling booze on this miserable little rock. That's partly due to the fact that this little asteroid, just like the thousands of other 'homeless relocation complexes' in local orbit, can only hold a small town's worth of buildings. So after the required forty-seven apartment complexes ('Compactors' we call em') there were only three lots up for grabs. That means folks can pick up deliveries, get booze, or head to the public dock and pray for a low-orbit ship willing to take them off this miserable rock.

On account of me having the only bar, most people just call it ‘the bar’. But my regular, Boozie, bless his drunken soul, likes to call it the Piss Parlor... I’d rather not talk about that one.

I set down the glass I’d been cleaning. Still covered in smudges and a bit of gunk left on the bottom. It didn’t matter too much though, this was a ‘two-hours-in’ glass. The drunks didn’t notice and it made less work for me. As I went to take a quick sip of my own concoction, the door swung open.

Now here on asteroid GC 213b (GC standing for the ‘generous corporations’ that relocated us during the machine integration years) every soul was a bit of an odd one. You got used to all kinds of folks with all kinds of appendages coming through your doors, but this one was an exception: one of the few remaining Selkies.

Most of his kind were locked up the moment they touched ground. Apparently some tragic event on their home world led to mass hysteria amongst survivors. I don’t know about all this mental nonsense they’re peddling, but I sure as hell know they can be a nuisance, and I’ll be damned if this fish is gonna wreck my bar.

I kept both eyes on him. He wore a long brown trench coat that covered most of his body. You could still see some scuffed-up scales through the shoddy patchwork and his three fingers looked more like machetes growing out of his hands. Well, hand. The other arm looked like an empty tube of toothpaste that wasn’t left in the fire long enough. Drips of ‘him’ looked like they should be running down what was left of his arm, but they stayed melted in place. He rolled in with a fairly normal wheelchair, the only difference being the lack of footholds. Instead, his single tailfin was curved back and cradled under the seat.

His most striking feature, however, was his head. I’ve seen my fair share of freak-shows, but this was something straight from a nightmare: five tentacles protruded from a stump on his

chest. Four of the tentacles had something akin to eyes, hexagonal shapes filling the entirety of the bulbs that sprouted off of each appendage. The final appendage, the one that sat in the middle of em' all, was continuously waving back and forth. Probably a form of sonar, given that it's a fish and all.

He rolled right in between the two barstools in front of me, "I'll take the hardest drink you have." His voice sounded like a drowned man that shouldn't be talking, maybe cause of that pump filled with water sticking out of his gut.

I grabbed a glass (a bit cleaner than the one I'd been polishing) and poured a taste for him. I went ahead and charged him twice what I normally would and handed the drink over.

He kept his machete fingers to his side and dipped his middle appendage into the glass, the bulb opened up and started sucking in. Heluva sight. I could see the liquid as he swallowed, two feet of tentacle filling up and then intervals of muscles pushing the drink down further and further. The drink was gone in a moment and then the appendage spoke, "You really expect me to pay for this garbage? I should report you to the authorities, this is practically robbery."

I gave a snort, "Authorities? Good luck fish-boy. Tell ya what though, if ya manage to get em' here, the drink's on the house."

Silence

The cops wouldn't come near this waste heap, and it seems like the fish knew it too.

"Another..."

I gave him another pour, a bit more than last time, dammit. I watched him push this down through his tentacle just like the last one. Again, heluva sight.

I decided I'd see if I could shake him up a bit. Hoity toity folk that feel like I charge too much are bound to get this treatment. "So fish, how'd you manage to get kicked off your home

world?” Besides, some of these drunkards have a halfway interesting story to tell. I mean, not many, but some do. The criers, now those are the types of customers that I hate hearing from. ‘Woe is me woe is me’ and all that. If you’re gonna end up coating my bar bodily fluids you oughta at least *try* to be entertaining.

Three of those bulbous looking eyes continued to stare at the empty glass in front of him, he pointed the fourth one at me. This, in itself, was unsettling. But when I finally decided I should make eye contact with the thing if I expected a tip, I noticed something was wrong right away. The actual orb that protruded out of the tentacle was swelling in size, at least double the size of his other eyes. Worse still, if you stared real close you could see a flat plane in the center of the eye, like some kind of support structure, with veins running through it. This eye that was staring me down had a pulsating crisscross pattern of a sickly green color. Every second that passed served to inflate the eye, and the veins, even more. They filled and filled until you could actually see the veins starting to press *through* the eyeball. It looked like what you’d expect to see if you boiled scummy pond water and watched it bubble up.

In short: I work in a bar that smells more like piss and puke than beer and liquor, but my stomach was suddenly on the edge. Barely contained vomit started to build up.

A strained voice that sounded like it was on the verge of violence, although whether that violence would be for itself or for others I don’t know, barely made a sound as its mouth-like tentacle started to open and close, “I wasn’t... kicked off..”

I swallowed my vomit and had the sudden realization that if I didn’t want to get speared through by that hand of his I better put a couple more drinks in him.

I got to work and barely noticed his eye that was staring me down before was starting to deflate. Now any good bartender knows you can’t just fill someone up ‘till they pass out... not

right away at least. Ya gotta ease some folks into it, make sure they stick around long enough to get properly drunk, see? And this fish was holding his drinks pretty well, so I decided to make a sacrifice. I reached under the counter for a bottle of my quality stock and poured him a drink. I hate letting this stuff go, but I also hate the thought of being painfully skewered. I might be hoping for death, but I'd prefer it to be a bit less... excruciating.

Let's just get him eased into a bit of drunkenness. Then we make sure he's practically drowning in drunkenness. And *that's* when we rob the fish. There's an order to things, see?

I pushed the drink over toward him, I'd take a peek in his wallet and get my pay soon as he was out cold, "It's on the house." I lied, putting on my best gravelly voice and refusing to look him in the eyes again. I liked to keep some nicer drinks for myself, I liked *not* giving those drinks to my customers. Damn. A sucking sound paired with much-too-audible gulps told me the thing started drinking.

"My world... was beautiful." His voice was dripping with sorrow, every moment spent thinking about his world seemed painful to him. "A planet of pure water. Not a single rock in sight. Nothing but the blue ocean and the undulating waves. Never a cloud in the sky, only clear, warm days." He took another sip. "Your people know of turtles yes?" I nodded, I think turtles used to live on our planet, though it's been ages since someone saw a real one. "Well, we had things like turtles. Shells bigger than this asteroid. We'd turn them into our tribal homes. Carried by the undercurrents. We used schools of inedible fish to hold it in place whenever we stopped." I couldn't be sure, but I think it laughed at this, bubbles rising from the tube sticking out of his gut while his shoulders shook slightly. "When I was young, we needed nothing. Our worries were so small, so insignificant. But I didn't know..."

I stole a glance at the fish. It was still focused on the counter, seeing something far away, I'm sure. I waited, idly rubbing a glass with a bar rag, probably doing more harm than good.

“We got too greedy. The fish were going extinct. Overhunting. Until then all the clans lived in relative peace. We wandered the world with no need to fight one another. But once the famines started?” His eyes squinted shut. “It all changed. What few hunting grounds remained became war zones. It didn't matter how kind you were anymore, what mattered was strength. If I wanted to protect any of them, I needed to be strong.”

Those 'I's' seemed rather personal. Fantastic, I'm sure this'll be a real sob story then. I settled in with the best sympathetic look I could muster. If this fish doesn't tip me after torturing me with its life story, I think I'll gut it.

Well, I guess he's gonna end up tipping me involuntarily, but still, it's a respect thing really.

“Alright fish, I'll bite,” I grabbed an empty glass from Boozie's nearly lifeless hands and started to polish it, “how the hell is a ball of water a planet?”

“We didn't,” the fish made an odd choking noise. After sucking down the last half of its drink it continued, using that sorrowful voice from before, “we didn't know anything about it. Our lives, from egg to decomposition, were all about survival. Hunting and helping the hunters was all we knew, especially when the famines began. But... it had a core... like all planets do. As you descended, the pressure and the cold always kept us from going too deep. But we adapted. As food became scarcer, we had to dive deeper.”

Now *that* might be interesting, “You swam to the core of your planet? How the hell d'ya manage that fish?”

His eyes lit up for the first time since coming in here and he pulled his tail out from under the wheelchair, “In water, my species is king. We swim faster than you could even imagine, and *I* was one of the fastest. And *I* am not ‘fish’. My name is Mustaqbal.”

Impressive, “But...” with the memory of his barely contained violence still fresh, I tried, for the first time in years, to temper my words, “it all went south and your species went bat-shit.”

Welp, old habits and all that.

But the fish didn’t explode, in fact, his eyes started to dart every which way. Tail shaking uncontrollably. Cradling his maimed claw to his chest. The thing was scared half to death. I poured him some of the cheap stuff and he started to calm down... barely. After a good five minutes of silence I figured that was the end of that; no tip. But then he spoke. Well, more like a whisper,

“The core... we found *it*.”

“Mustaqbal! Wake up already, we’ve only got half our quota. The elder will throw us to the surface if we screw this up, and I’m not gonna go through that torture again.”

“I wasn’t sleeping Raafta, I’m planning. Oh sorry, I forgot, do you know what that word means?”

“Plan when it’s your fins up for dismemberment. Don’t drag me into this rebellious phase of yours.”

“Phase? Come on, you know me well enough to know this is how I’ve always been.”

“I know, it’s just the reason why I wish we weren’t born in the same batch. You’re nothing but trouble... but I guess I can put up with you.”

“I knew you loved me.”

“Shut it.”

“Sure, sure. So, where’s the hunting grounds for today? That tide shift seemed promising.”

“Nah, can’t. Larshom clan already got there. Killed three of ours over barely enough food for a week. Practically scraps.”

Raafta swiped at the water in front of him. He was born a fighter, and one on one I’m sure he could take any of us Selkies, but that’s not how fighting works anymore. Even Raafta couldn’t win three against one, “You’d think with two of the biggest clans surrounding our hunting grounds they’d focus on each other. Yet here we are being torn apart and starved by two groups that barely know we exist.” It was a sobering thought. Our clan was struggling to survive before, but when you add in other clans... well, we’ve all started to speak in the past tense about ourselves if that says anything.

“Exactly, we oughta fight back! Take back our hunting grounds! Damn five-clawed freaks.”

Raafta was an idiot. A brave idiot. But brave people tend to be. They also tend to die pretty quickly. I kept racking my brain, there had to be some way to save our clan, but a fair fight wouldn’t be it. We had to be clever, but it’s hard to be clever on an empty stomach, “So... we’re diving deep again?”

...

Neither of us wanted to accept it. Diving deep meant more danger: cold, savage species, lack of breathable water. It could mean death if you didn’t know what you were doing. But our clan needed food. So, we dove. Every extra fin-span we traveled led us into darker and colder waters. We were looking for a-

“There!” shouted Raafta as he speared his hands forward. His pair of deep-water eyes lit with a green hue due to the extra energy needed to see in the darkness. He threw himself into a frenzy, slashing this way and that, spearing whenever he could see a target. For all the shit I give him, he was damn impressive. Guess I should be getting started too.

Soon enough, the deep waters were getting too dark for us as the twin suns set, so we met back up after our day of hunting.

“Pfffft.” Raafta’s barely contained laughter started to crest when he saw my haul.

“Shut up Raafta.” The long spear-like fingers that protruded from my hands only had twenty fish. Raafta had a hundred and twenty-six impaled on his fingers. Blood trailing out and creating a red cloud around him whenever he stopped swimming.

“Chief’s gonna float you on the surface. Sucks to be you.”

A Selkie could handle suffocation for a while. I’ve gotten quite good at handling it actually, but that didn’t make it any less awful. “I’m going back down. Stay here and watch for other clan’s scouting schools.” Stupid? Absolutely. But, as my stomach continued to prevent me from coming up with any good ideas, I decided getting food was the least I could do. At least for now.

“Come on Mustaqbal, the water’s already too dark. We need to head back up.”

Raafta was right, it was getting too dangerous, but I knew a Selkie could still handle this temperature, it hadn’t become unbearable yet. So, I dove back down.

“Mustaqbal, don’t be crazy! I’ll give you half my portion, just get back here!”

But I wouldn’t accept handouts. I was meant for better things. For bigger things. If I could just gain some respect in the clan, maybe they would be willing to hear my ideas. Ideas I still need some food in my gut to iron out, but still. Our clan was dying. *My* clan was dying. I could help... I know I could. I always had a head for strategy, I just needed someone to take me seriously. I’ll prove to them all I’m more than just a feeder fish.

I swam down further and further. As the hunting parties went about their days the few fish that escaped their claws would retreat deeper to safety. If I just went that extra few fin-spans I’d find a jackpot. A group that wasn’t expecting to be hunted. It was getting harder to breathe, but

my claws were at the ready; poised in front of me and ready to strike the moment I saw something. I shut down my shallow-water eyes so I could use more of my energy for life-sustaining operations. It'd be a tough day tomorrow, reacclimating to the shallows, but it would be worth it if I could show off a big haul.

But then I felt it,
a slight change in the temperature. Not colder...
But warmer.

But even with the warmer waters, it was still unbreathable. My gills, unable to process the water, snapped shut. My body was slowly collapsing in on itself. My hands in front of me were beginning to shrivel up and shrink until whatever muscle I had was compressed so closely to my bone that you could see the outline of bone *through* the muscle. But still, just a bit more. If I could just push myself a bit further...

And then I saw something unimaginable: an outline, almost like a turtle's shell... but far bigger. So big that it extended off into the dark without showing signs of an edge. I tried desperately to fight against the pain and explore this 'outline'. I swam just above it, looking down and trying to memorize whatever I could before my body gave out. As my consciousness faded, I felt a claw stab through my tail fin. This 'outline' did seem to have some similarities with a turtle shell...

But turtles were never found this deep.

I awoke to see the Chief and Raaftha speaking near me. My shallow water eyes could barely make them out, and I only saw a blur of motion for anything further away. Seems like I really burnt myself out.

“Ah, I see you haven’t gone belly up on us quite yet?” The old man had a reputation as a hard ass, but deep down I was sure he cared about his clansmen. “Well don’t worry, after what Raafta just told me I’ll make sure you wish you *did* die before the water’s dark.” Hmm, on second thought maybe he is a bit cruel.

“Chief,” my voice came out garbled, obviously some of my internals weren’t working as well as I’d like, “I know the depths are forbidden but-”

“Dammit Mustaqbal! Would you just think of others for one moment? What would happen if the clan lost you? There aren’t many of us left, we can’t survive more deaths. Especially meaningless ones. If we’re going to survive, we need *living* clansmen, not *dead* fish.”

“Chief, please. There was something down there. I don’t know what it was, but I saw an outline like a turtle’s shell that stretched in every direction.” Honestly, it sounded just as crazy to me as it probably did to them, “Some odd wavy substance was sprouting out of it. Like the fungi that grows on corpses, but far too long to be that and, and…” He still looked away from me.

“From now on, Raafta hunts. You can tend to the turtle shells.”

“But Chief… we need to do something. I think what I saw could help us, I mean it’s worth a shot isn’t it? If we’re all going to die anyway, why don’t we at least struggle!?” I couldn’t stand it. I didn’t want to lose our clan. I loved them. Dammit, no, I *love* them. We’re not dead yet but… the Chief has to understand, he loves us all too… doesn’t he?

He continued staring at something far away, he looked tired. “Rest son, when you wake again, I’ll have Raafta oversee your punishment.” He swam toward a blur in the distance, by the red tint I guessed it was where they were preparing our catch from yesterday.

“Raafta, you saw it too, right?”

Raafta looked to me, he seemed tired as well. I guess it's to be expected, being our clan's last great warrior, he's had to take on a lot of responsibility. "Mustaqbal... you're smarter than me, you know turtles don't swim that deep. I think it was a trick of the depths, a trick of a starving stomach. Let's not spend what little time we have on false hopes." Two of Raafta's eyes swung behind him, watching one of the Chief's bodyguards who was standing guard nearby, "Like I said though, you're smarter than me," his vocal appendage snaked closer to me, making sounds almost too soft to hear, "if anyone can save our clan, it's you. I don't believe what you saw, but if you do... that's a much more valuable opinion." His tentacles retracted back to him, all eyes on me but no longer speaking so soft, "We're tired Mustaqbal. We all need our rest so we can think clearly. I'll go grab us something to eat for when you wake up."

He... he believed in me. Maybe he didn't believe me, but he believed *in* me. My heart felt light, but my mind was still heavy. I closed my eyes; he was right, if I was going to save us, I needed to think clearly.

As I drifted off, I began dreaming about the outline... I dreamt of waving green tendrils sprouting from a shadowed *thing*, fish galore hiding amongst it. Enough food to make things right again. Someone would save our whole damn world from this starvation and these endless wars... that someone would be me.

Chapter 2

"You're shitting me, that 'outline' was some covering for the core of your planet?"

"Yes, and the 'green tendrils' are what you would probably call vegetation, barkeep."

"Hm, 'Barkeep'. Can't say I like that fish, sounds a bit too professional for me. Folks call me 'Old Man', so you can do the same."

"Maybe if you stop call me 'fish'. I told you my name's Mustaqbal."

“Meh, guess I’ll just live with ‘Barkeep’ then.”

For a moment the fish seemed irritated. Looks like I was pushing him a bit further than he would’ve preferred, but he just downed his drink and ordered another. Seems like maybe I’m a professional after all. Selling water to a fish, there’s gotta be a prize for that. Now I know, I know. No good barman should water down his drinks but think about it this way: least I’m not putting him out cold and robbing him blind.

Well, not yet anyway.

“And just so you know, I’m not quite drunk enough to ignore the fact you’re selling me swill. Maybe I should-”

Just before I started to sweat bullets Ol’ Boozie, oh sweet and pure Boozie, released a belch that shook the very ground beneath us, “Is thish still a parts of the story water man?”

“Oh, yes, sorry. Where was I?” Seems like Boozie spooked the fish a bit.

Times like these are when I remember why I don’t beat Boozie unconscious every time he pukes on my counter. The fish remembered his place and continued.

I tried to do nothing but sleep and eat for the next few days. It was tough. Every day that passed, nearly every hour now, I would hear some news about the fate of our clan. The enemy was closing in on us. Soon enough, we’d be just another battlefield for them to pick the scraps from.

Raafta was falling apart. But for him, it wasn’t just rumors of our soon-to-be demise. All the other hunters had been called for defense, so Raafta was our clan’s only source of food. The other hunters were trying to ward off the slavers that were moving in on our territory. Taking our clansmen in the night. Slavers were common company when war came. They were monsters, sure, but at least they weren’t starving to death.

On the third day I felt like I could think clearly for the first time in ages. Raaftha had been sneaking me extra food from his hunts. He was too kind sometimes, but it helped me think. I started to form plan after plan. Something would work. Something had to work.

I started by talking to the Chief again, but it went nowhere. His mind was unchanged. How the hell he could just carry on like normal as his clan fell apart was beyond me. I wonder if he's already given in. Maybe he's planning on surrendering and trying to have us assimilate into another clan. It hardly matters now. I don't have time to waste on 'what ifs'. Not anymore.

After my failure with the Chief, I decided to speak to the council.

Although the Chief carries most of the power in our clan right now, in times of peace the council made the important decisions. Most everyone still held them in high regard.

I told them about what I'd seen. Of course, they didn't believe me, but that's not what I was there for.

"You're right, it does sound unbelievable," stroke their egos a bit, let them know I trust them more than myself, "but, it's more than what the Chief is doing." The council members stared wordlessly. Agreement was in their eyes. The council and Chief were always at odds. I rose my claw to them, a sign of respect, "I can't help but wonder why the Chief was ever given power, especially after all you've done."

Not too much longer into the conversation and I was able to convince them to let me work as their assistant, not a terribly important role, but one that would get me in the public eye and help me gain trust. But time was moving forward so fast these days. The war was nearly on top of us. Damn, if only I had more time. But my current plan was working too slow. To replace the Chief with the council wasn't good enough anymore, it would simply take too long, there had to be another way, a faster way. For the good of the clan.

“Mustaqbal, you look awful.”

“Should someone who can barely keep their eyes open be telling me that, Raafta?” he looked nearly dead if we’re being honest, bone peeking through where muscle use to be and three of his eyes were shut, conserving what little energy he could, “How are things?”

“Aside from only catching a tenth of what I was a week ago? Fantastic.” Truly, the embodiment of sarcasm. “My tailfin’s been acting up lately too, I can’t move like I use to. Wish I had your speed, maybe we could rip yours off and give it to me, not like you’re using it for anything very important in your council work.”

“That’s a good point. My loss of a tailfin, and likely death, is less of a good point.” We laughed. It’s been so long since we’ve laughed. It felt odd. I wonder if I use to enjoy laughing before all this. Now it’s nothing more than a calculated move in some stupid game of wit. Damn, I’m losing it. “Sorry Raafta, I’m trying to set you up, forgive me friend, please.”

“I thought I made it clear before, I trust you Mustaqbal. You’re smart, smart enough to work for the council. I’m a tool, and I don’t mind that. I want our clan to survive too, but you’re the only one who can make that happen.” he swam closer to me, it looked like every movement caused him pain, “So, set me up.”

It was so strange. Sometimes I forgot that not everyone is plotting.

But I need to be.

“You’re popular with the younger warriors. Tomorrow, I need you to bring them all to the center of the clan. Hopefully your presence will be enough, but there may be some... danger.”

“... we’ll be leaving the clan almost entirely defenseless. Larshom scouting parties have been inching closer to us.” Raafta sighed, his gills throwing off red mist. Probably from breathing in the blood during his hunts, hard not to when you were hunting as often as Raafta. “Dammit, I

already said I trusted you huh? Well, alright. I'll be there, but I can't make promises on how many follow me. Anything else I should be aware of?"

"I'm almost certain that with this we can save our clan, our people, but... it won't look pretty getting there."

"Saving our clan sounds like the best thing the tides could ever bring us." He slapped his claw against mine, something we used to do as children. It meant 'good hunting'. I hope he looks at me the same when this is all over. I hope he can still look at me at all.

I woke up early the next day. The morning sunlight was just beginning to reach its warm rays into the shallows. I dragged the body behind me, being careful not to wake my sleeping clansmen. The trail of blood-red mist slowly rose to the surface. Tainting the sun's rays red. I stopped in the middle of the clan. Raafta was already there with six of the eight younger warriors.

Those six stared, uncomprehending. A sort of horror was in their eyes as they looked back and forth from me to the Chief's lifeless body. Raafta hid his shock better, "Well, 'won't look pretty' huh?"

I looked away, toward the council's shell. They should be heading out soon, they're supposed to give a speech today. I barely had time to be thankful Raafta seemed to not be too revolted by what I'd just done, I had to keep the gears turning. Plots were everywhere. I needed to know them all. I needed to make sure mine played out first.

The council began to exit their shell. Some looked surprised, others horrified, and one looked like she already knew what happened. So, only one council member to worry about, "I, Mustaqbal, have slain the Chief in a trial by combat! By way of the old laws, I hereby declare myself Chief. Are there any here that dispute this?" At my last word, at least three of the council members looked about ready to speak, fire in their eyes, I'll need to have some *incidents* arranged

for them later. But, of course, I didn't expect things to go quite as smoothly as my fantasies. Raafta raised his claw in respect, pledging himself, and his warriors followed suit. With nearly all of the warriors now backing me, the council members lowered their heads, and raised their claws as well. Their razor-sharp fingers reaching toward me in submission, although I'm sure many wish they could've made the final thrust and skewered me. Ah well, hunger has made them weak and docile. I'll have to make an impact before I feed them, might be dangerous otherwise.

I think I'll go ahead and start on the council now.

A few days after my rise to Chiefdom, I made my way back to the council's shell. The tides were strong today. Most everyone was in their shells that stayed somewhat in place thanks to those fish anchors, but, luckily, my speed meant I could make the journey without too much trouble.

I entered, admiring the bones of fish that adorned the walls, walls made from ripping apart turtle shells of other clans and using the pieces. Those kinds of conquests were ancient history for our clan nowadays. It always hurt me to see what we once were, what we should've been.

I took my time with this. The council could plainly see me from where they sat, but it would be best to let them have their thoughts. After all, two had recently disappeared, it would be good to let them imagine what that meant for them and their future on this council.

However, *she* was still there. The woman who looked so unsurprised during my usurpation. Akilah, that was her name. Old, feeble, and far too smart. She was at the head of the council during these great conquests that adorned the walls. Even when the Chief would take power, I've heard that she was apparently controlling things from behind the scenes... far too many things.

She was never without her guards. Guards that could not be swayed. She rarely even ate, making poisoning nearly impossible. She let herself waste away so she could give food to others.

She'd become quite the popular figure, and I needed corpses, not martyrs, so getting rid of her had become quite the challenge.

I approached them soon enough, picking debris from my scales, polishing myself up in the middle of their home. This confirmed my suspicions: only Akilah showed open disgust, the rest hid their revulsion. Sometimes I wished our clan had enough strength for me to just purge the whole cowardly council, but Raafta's warriors were far too few, and Raafta was still reluctant for such jobs. I'd been hiding some of the... 'disappearances' from him, but I'm sure he was catching on. I'll have to deal with him soon enough, too much of a bother. I've already met at least two warriors who could replace him, with enough help-

"are you listening Mustaqbal? Is cleaning yourself in the middle of the council's home really all you came to do? You may be the Chief, but this behavior is completely unacceptable." Akilah's voice broke me out of my trance, what the hell had I been thinking? Murder my best friend because he's a 'nuisance'? What's happening to me?

Damn, damn, damn. I need to focus on what's in front of me. I need to focus on winning, no, *saving* our clan. Yes. Yes, this is for them, "Unacceptable? Of course, forgive me esteemed council member, I'm still a bit unfamiliar with being Chief. In fact, I came here to ask a question of you, Akilah." Using her name obviously threw her off: a quick flinch, almost like a blink, but I'm sure it was nerves. I needed to keep her on the defensive for this to work out.

"Your 'unfamiliarity' doesn't excuse you. What do you want?"

"As you well know, hunger is only one of the issues we face as a clan. Enemies surround us and our fellow clansmen have been disappearing as well."

"And I suppose you have some sort of solution, right? After all, there must be a reason why the old Chief is dead."

Ah, already bringing him up, trying to make sure nobody forgets how I got to where I am. No matter, “Yes, I do. Before anything, we should deal with these disappearances. Starvation is a slow killer, we can wait it out a bit longer, but these abductions are losses we can’t stand.” I let my anger show through, it was important they realized I wanted to save the clan. Whether they themselves were necessary to saving the clan... well... they don’t have to know that quite yet, “My warriors have told me slavers have moved into our waters recently. We need to strike, but such an act requires the council’s permission. Please, let me save our people.”

“Slavers...” there was a silence amongst them, slavers were bottom feeders and looked down upon as scum, it was an easy way to get some common ground, “Yes, this does require action,” Akilah swam her way up beside me, she touched her outstretched claw to my scaled chest, “and I think we’re all in agreement when I say that the honor of leading such an attack should be given to the new Chief.”

“Well, it is my belief that our warriors are more than capable of dealing with the threat. Involving myself would only slow them down.”

“Nonsense Mustaqbal, you’re the fastest swimmer in the clan. Not to mention, you did slay the Chief right? The strongest amongst us? Or are you saying,” she paused as her eyes burned holes in me, then raised her voice, “it wasn’t quite a *fair fight*?”

“... it will be an honor to lead the charge Akilah.”

“Of course it will. Now,” she turned away from me, not even a scrap of fear as she swam away, “*good hunting.*”

I left the shell, making my way to Raafta and the other warriors. Of course I’d be leading the charge you old hag, how else could I expect to have a conversation with them? It was almost

hilarious, she thought she was sending me off to my death. No, not quite my dear Akilah. But thank you for making things so easy for me.

Truly.

As I approached Raafta, waiting with a few warriors, something did bother me a bit. ‘Good hunting’. Not exactly a rare phrase, but the way she said it. No, Raafta is with me. How could he betray his friend? How could he betray the only Selkie in this clan that could save it? He was well aware the council would have saved the clan by now if they could. I was the only chance we have left. Raafta wouldn’t forget that. I tried to leave my feelings of paranoia in the back of my mind. Making plans to kill my own friend? No, that’s a step too far. Too far...

One of the scouts discovered traces of the slavers in the depths far beneath us. Those cold dark waters, it felt like a lifetime since that hunt. I wonder if this is some message? Some sign? The same waters where I thought I found our salvation, and now I’m going down there to become a monster.

Bah, get a hold of yourself Mustaqbal. It doesn’t matter if I’m a monster, that’s not the point. The point is saving my people. The point is leading the Selkies away from certain starvation.

Our tiny group began moving down toward where the slavers were stationed. We knew we were getting close when our gills began to burn. The slavers used toxins from Rilta fish. The same fish we used to hold our shells in place, but slavers had no need for shells, and since the fish were inedible, they realized a wall of poison could stop a weakened Selkie from escaping. Not enough to kill, but enough to bring you back into their claws. Horrid stuff... ingenious though.

“They must be nearby Mustaqbal. You there, head back up to the clan and bring half our warriors, we’ll crush them in an all-out attack. They’re just *slavers* after all, not true warriors.” Raafta spit the word ‘slavers’ out as if it was made of the same toxins floating in that cloud in front

of us. Surely, he'll grow to understand what must be done here? Things aren't so simple anymore Raafta. Our people can't feed on honor.

“No Raafta, call him off, we don't need any more reinforcements.”

“I believe in my warriors Mustaqbal, but only four of us won't be enough.”

“It won't, but even all of our warriors couldn't pull this off.” The lie came easily, one of the perks of power I think, “I'm the Chief, Raafta, remember?” I winked at him, however, at this depth, I only had one eye working, so I may not have gotten the gesture across. “I have other tools at my disposal. I'll have this sorted out soon enough, you just head on back and keep your eyes peeled. Those Larshom clan raiding parties have been getting bolder. We can't lose anymore to them, and I'm sure you can do it, good luck my friend.”

“Mustaqbal, are you sure? Maybe you do have other ways of dealing with this, but I know my warriors and I can finish this quickly. Let us at them, we'll tear them apart before the tide shifts and be back in time for rations.”

“What happened to trusting me Raafta?” This wasn't the response I was expecting from Raafta. There's no reason why he shouldn't trust me. “I'll take care of this Raafta, but the clan needs you protecting it from those raiding parties right now. I promise you; I can handle this.”

That should seal the deal.

Raafta looked torn. He wanted to serve his clan, but he wanted to serve me as well. Leaving me behind to deal with something this serious wouldn't sit right with him, but he trusted me nonetheless, “No... you're right. I'm sure you're right Chief. Good luck and make it back alive. You haven't gotten us that promised food source yet.”

And with that, he and his warriors were gone, and I was left alone in front of the slavers' cloud of toxins.

Perfect.

Not too long after Raafta left, the slavers approached me. Well, approached may be putting things lightly. They burst through the toxic mist, closing the gap between us far too quick. I barely had time to react as five slavers surrounded me. Their attention was focused on my fins; it seems like they're looking for a new slave then. If they land a hit and manage to tear my fins up, I'll be at their mercy. But I hardly needed to worry. I was still faster than these slavers, maybe not more powerful, but I shouldn't need power for the next step.

“Wait! Hear me out, I think we can help each other.” they stopped their attack, although whether that was because I could outrun them or because of my offer, I don't know. “Good, if we stay calm, I think we can all come out ahead.”

But of course, convincing slavers to join my side wouldn't be so easy as just asking. They wanted to see results. They wanted to see this food I was promising.

Chapter 3

“Nowsh just waits a minute.” Boozie flung most of the contents of his glass onto Mustaqbal's lap. ‘Contents’ that were probably more bodily fluid than alcohol this late into the night. “Hows comes you join the slavers? Wasn't they slaving... slaved... making your people work for them?” Sometimes the drunk sack of trash can make a decent point.

Mustaqbal stared into his drink, not even registering what was just dumped in his lap. He didn't seem properly drunk yet, but he did seem to be off in a different place. I think this story was getting a bit difficult for him, “Everyone dies. There are always sacrifices. I... I wasn't quite myself back then, but I think I was tryin-”

“Absolutely pathetic, fish.” Huh, normally I don't get so worked up, especially when I figured I could get him to buy a few more drinks, but customers like these disgust me. He's too

worthless to even own up to what he did, instead he hides behind a part of him he just doesn't want to accept. I spat in his next drink and pushed it over, "If you wanna try and convince me you were hoping to save your people, at least own up to the mistakes you made in the process fish."

He stared at the glass in front of him for quite some time. Hands at his sides, appendages waving slightly. The only sound in the bar was the bubbling of that breathing apparatus hooked into him. My mind was already racing, trying to figure out what I should do if he gets violent. I have a pretty quick draw, so I figured I wouldn't be dead by the end of it, but how should I cut those claws off so I can sell 'em?

Before I could start thinking about potential buyers, he started drinking, spit and all. "You're right, you're right. I'm just running away. I don't think I ever cared for my particular clan outside of Raafta. What I wanted was to preserve my species. We were going extinct, and if we needed slaves to prevent that, I didn't care where they came from." He focused all four eyes on Boozie, who was trying to get the last drop of alcohol out of his glass, "If slavery was necessary to save my species, I would use it."

Now, if you're askin' me, I'd say slavery is wrong, but I guess that doesn't make it any less profitable. Before the machine integration years, almost all the raw materials for our planet were gathered through slave labor, and the constant wars made for plenty of POWs that could be put to work.

Maybe his reasons aren't so bad though. Maybe, in his mind at the very least, it was the best choice. That's gotta count for something, doesn't it?

Boozie managed to coax the final drop out of his glass, then he turned to Mustaqbal and seemed surprisingly lucid for the briefest of moments, "Just cause it's necessary doesn't make it

right.” He then proceeded to hold eye contact with all four of Mustaqbal’s eyes while he switched his empty glass with the fish’s full glass.

Mustaqbal seemed to be thinking this idea over.

I wonder if I should too? I mean, is my own goal worth doing so much wrong? Robbing customers and getting them to damn near drink themselves to death, I’m not so stupid that I don’t view that sorta stuff as bad, but... I don’t know. Maybe Boozie’s right, and no matter what the end goal is, bad stuff is always bad. Maybe the counter is to just try to do more good than bad in the process, but then you’re still doing bad nonetheless. Huh, why am I giving this so much thought? The man just stole a drink, didn’t he? Hardly a paragon of saintly virtues. I’ll just chalk it all up to the cost of surviving, doesn’t warrant anymore thinking than that.

The fish seemed to reach his own conclusion, but since I was happy enough with mine, I tuned him out as he explained his views to Boozie. Boozie, of course, was more focused on his free glass he’d swiped. Mustaqbal finished explaining to two people who weren’t listening, and then continued his story.

The slavers were already camped so far into the depths, it wasn’t much of a journey to get close to where I saw the ‘outline’ from so long ago. With a slave in tow, we continued descending until breathing became difficult, and then we told the nameless slave:

“Dive.”

And so he did.

The slavers and I waited, trying to peer into the dark waters and see where the slave, or their body, would begin to float up. It wasn’t long before one of the slavers spotted something. They rushed as quickly as they could, thinking the slave was trying to escape. The slaver’s claw

pierced through the slave's tailfin, capturing him. I approached the body; he was already dead. But, there had to be something down there... I had to be right.

I saw the body and tried desperately to hide my revulsion. Showing weakness in front of these slavers wouldn't help my case, especially if we intended to move forward with this plan for a new hunting ground. The body was... well... it wasn't really a body anymore. There were a few species I'd seen that would shed their skin periodically, leaving behind a wispy husk. This looked much the same, the only sign that something wasn't quite right was the cloud of red still floating up toward the surface; some misty shape with some more... *solid* pieces still floating within it. It was horrifying.

But the claws were still intact, and on them? More fish than even Raafta could catch in a day. My bet paid off. My intuition was right. *I* was right!

This will show everyone. If they just believed in me we could've been feeding the clan already. Ah well, the past is the past. All that matters now is that I've found the food source that will save our entire race from starvation. Of course, there was a price to be paid, but don't sacrifices always need to be made?

They do.

They must.

The slavers pledged their services as long as they were fed first. Easy enough. Now to explain my findings to the clan. Well... the good parts at least. I think, for now, it will be best to just let them enjoy the benefits. Although, I can imagine someone who may end up asking some bothersome questions. A few more words with the slavers and they assured me Akilah would be hunting in the depths for them soon enough, provided I could get her alone. Well, I'll have to

handle this quickly. If anyone could convince a starving clan that free food wasn't a good thing, it was her.

I waited for the twin suns to set before I made my return to the clan. Sure enough, Raafta was already rushing toward me, "Mustaqbal! I was just about to send out a war party to recover your corpse." His eyes were already at work trying to find wounds from my 'battle' with the slavers. "You look... fine." There was a wariness in his voice. Questioning.

"Of course I'm fine Raafta, I'm the smart one, remember? I wouldn't put myself in a fight without you if I thought I'd be hurt. I promise, you'll always be my personal shield." I laughed. Why was it that this time I didn't feel the need to come clean about using him? Why was it so easy to fake a laugh?

There was a slight pause, not something you'd normally notice, but I noticed it, "But... what *was* your plan Mustaqbal?"

This wasn't right. I'm sure if I could just show Raafta what I've accomplished I could convince him.

Couldn't I?

Obviously I could. I was about to make our clan powerful. I was about to save our race. I was about to save *him*! A few Selkies die in the process? So what? A few of them were our own clansmen? So what? They were going to die anyway, at least now they'll be dying for a cause. A just cause! The cause of saving our species from certain death! Surely Raafta would see things logically. Surely Raafta would understand.

But he was hard to convince of anything, and I was so busy, and I'm far too tired. I wanted Raafta to look at me the same when this was all done, that's all I wanted from him. But I can't take the time to get him to understand every little thing.

Ah well, I suppose I can just rip out his eyes.

Yes, that does sound easier.

“Well I’d love to tell you Raafta, but it’s a long story and I’d rather not tell it twice. I’ll need to relay the news to Akilah and the rest of the council... so how about you come with me? The council always needs some sort of guard anyway, this will work perfectly!”

Raafta’s eyes lost a bit of that wariness from before. Good, they’d look better without that, “I know I’m the muscle in our little operation, but I didn’t think you were so weak you couldn’t even tell a story a few times.” He laughed. Genuinely, joyously, just like the old days. What the hell am I doing? What the hell am I thinking?

Raafta’s my friend. Even now he’s beside me.

... but... am I still his friend?

No.

I joined in his laughter.

That’s right,

monsters don’t have friends.

Akilah, at this time of the night, was sleeping alone, however she did have her guards posted nearby. Luckily, Raafta already knew them well. Raafta was more than willing to take their place during this ‘top-secret’ meeting.

Raafta was quick to ask me why we weren’t gathering the rest of the council members. I continued to play my roll, responding with how much of a pain it would be to gather them all up when we could just tell Akilah and have her handle the rest. A quick wink to seal the deal and Raafta shrugged and went on to tell me how lazy I’d become.

Akilah wasn't so quick to follow along. She trusted Raafta, she knew he was a warrior first and foremost and would do everything to protect those he served. But me, well, she still didn't quite trust me. She seemed set on waiting for the rest of the council before we could go anywhere.

What a bother, how can I play this? I need this done tonight.

“Akilah, what I found will soon make me very powerful. Even those holdouts like yourself will soon be supporting me, but that's not what I want. I've always wanted to rule side by side Akilah, combine our skills. You're far too smart to lose to political squabbling. If we keep this between us, I'll take the credit for making the discovery, but you'll get the credit for sending me out. We'll be equals Akilah. We'll rule together and bring the prosperity this clan has always deserved. Like the old days Akilah, you'll rule again! You'll allow us to prosper again! The things you've accomplished are extraordinary Akilah. You brought strength to our clan. This shell of ours tells stories of what we once were, under you Akilah! I want our clan to rise back up, and *you* know how to do just that.”

The promise of power can make some things hard to see, and so Akilah followed along, with delusions of grandeur and magnificent speeches running through her mind, I'm sure. But she kept at least some doubt in her, insisting she remain close to the incorruptible Raafta, and as far away as possible from me.

Three of the five slavers were waiting beneath our meeting spot, far below. But, once we were in position, they shot up like spearfish. Akilah's fins were ripped to shreds in moments, thick trails of red blood poured out from savage cuts. It didn't matter how close Raafta was if he was too slow to react.

Raafta, brave Raafta, was quick to assess the situation though. He had me behind him in an instant, already seeing Akilah was a lost cause. One claw attempted to push me away, signal

me to run, while the other was poised and ready to strike. Even against three, Raafta would probably win this fight.

I didn't care for these slavers one way or the other, but more of them meant more slaves in the depths bringing up food. So I reached my claw toward Raafta's back. Even as weak as I was, it wasn't difficult.

My razor claws punctured his tailfin. I started to yank down, feeling the meat parting around my claw-tips. Barely a quarter way through his fin, my claw was caught up on something hard. Careless, I'd cut too deep and hit bone. I ripped my arm back and stabbed again. To make things easier on myself, I used my own tailfin to propel me down, helping my claw to cut through whatever it came into contact with. It was a jagged, awful cut. It was far too deep and far too long. Raafta's entire bottom half was cut into four strands, waving in the water, quickly being shrouded by the gory mist pouring out of him.

One of the slavers approached, berating me for cutting too deep 'we need slaves you fool' or something like that. But he stopped talking pretty quickly due to Raafta's claw separating all five tentacles from the slaver's body.

I wondered how long until Raafta turned around and did the same to me. I waited.

And waited.

The two remaining slavers took Akilah and said some words I couldn't make out as they left.

But I just waited.

Then the twin suns rose, one right after the other. It was then I realized Raafta's corpse floated to the surface quite some time ago.

I thought there should be something more. Final words or gestures or some dramatic ‘my life for yours, old friend!’ followed by my death, but there wasn’t. There just... wasn’t.

“I can’t remember anymore, is this how you always used to look at me?” I asked the four eyeballs I had skewered on my claw.

I took a large haul of fish from the slavers and made my way back to the clan. I waited in the center of our ring of turtle shells until my clansmen gathered around me. They looked as if they couldn’t believe what was in front of them. They held back, in disbelief, until I motioned for them to come closer. They ate. They ate, they ate, they ate. They ate until it was all gone. For the first time in ages, my clan wasn’t hungry. Mothers and fathers didn’t waste away for their children’s sake and nobody died of starvation that day. It was good.

And they didn’t ask questions.

That was good as well.

After that, the days all blurred together. Things happened so fast. Or maybe it was just the days that were fast. I don’t know. I don’t remember.

I didn’t speak very often. I think everyone had a suspicion about where the food came from, but they probably enjoyed it enough that they didn’t want to have their now full stomachs sickened by the truth of it all. So they avoided me. They still paid their respects and raised their claws in approval as I swam past, but there were always whispers: ‘Where did Akilah go?’ ‘Who are those people that bring the food each day?’ and of course ‘Where’s Raafta?’.

That last question, of course, was silly.

Where’s Raafta? He’s right where he’s always been: *by my side*.

I talk to him every day, in fact he’s usually the only one I can talk to.

Whenever I have... bad thoughts I suppose, I look to Raafta. Raafta, whom every Selkie should aspire to be: brave, kind, strong, loyal, and altruistic. All I have to do is look into his eyes, and I'm sure I can see approval there.

Clans around us fell one by one. I didn't even have to lead my own army after the first few victories. As it turns out, it's not very difficult to bash around starving fish when your own stomach is full.

The enemy warriors, and any others who proved to be... problematic, would be sent off in exile.

Well, that's what my fellow clansmen decided sounded best. In reality, they were sent to feed us. Down to the depths. They die so we all can live. It's simple, really.

I don't know what I felt. I wasn't sure anymore, but I knew what I should feel: pride. Pride that I saved my people from extinction. Were sacrifices made? Of course. But we all would've been dead otherwise, right? We were starving and there wasn't enough food to keep any of us alive. *I found the food, and if Selkies had to die for Selkies, better they die feeding the rest of us than die fighting over scraps.* Yes, I'm sure I'm right. I have to be sure.

"Chief! Something's happening in the depths. They say you need to see it." One of the Slavers' guards broke into my thoughts. I didn't like that. I thought I made that clear to the last one that interrupted me in the middle of the night. I suppose this one will have to be punished as well. I made a mental note of it and told the guard to wait for my return. Don't want him running off and escaping his punishment. I had to hunt the last one for two days. Tiring stuff.

I swam down, weaving my way between the slave staging areas. My own species corralled by clouds of toxic mist. It was probably horrifying, but the mist did a good job of hiding the difficult-to-look-at bits. The sounds however... those still came through.

As I reached the edge of the hunting zone, my insides beginning to protest against the pressure, I looked to a warrior standing watch, “Well?”

He looked to me with wide eyes, unblinking, as if the act of closing any one of his eyes would lead to some great catastrophe. Ah Raafta, why was I left with such idiots? Why can't they just be like you?

Finally, he decided to speak, each syllable dripping with something, “It was hard to tell, since I think it's been real gradual, but don't you feel it Chief? It's like the water's gotten... warmer.”

I wonder what that something in his voice was? What do you think Raafta? Please speak to me. Why is it that I must always lead our little conversations? Or... or is it something so obvious that you don't think it needs saying? Well, of course it's obvious, no, yes, of course I knew that. You're talking to the smart one Raafta, remember? It's um... it's... ah, yes, there it is.

It's fear.

He's afraid. Dripping? More like soaked in the stuff. Stuck in a cloud of it. Yes, I'm sure of it Raafta. This little whelp is afraid of something, unlike you. Pity I couldn't have an army of you, Raafta. Oh if only you... if only I... if only...

Wait a moment, did he just say warmer?

“Warmer?” Warmer? How the hell could that happen. It was still dark as night down here, no, it was *darker* than night down here. How could it be warmer? That first visit I remembered some sort of warmth, but nothing this pronounced. It was warmer than the surface. That didn't make any sense. What would make the waters down here warmer? My mind was racing while the warrior continued to speak, I didn't bother paying attention, I'm sure he wouldn't have any helpful opinions, but then he raised his claws and showed me something: it looked like a dismembered

claw but... it was damaged. Our claws were the toughest thing in the world. But this claw was misshapen. The tip looked like it was turned to mush and then hardened again. How was that possible? How could it change forms like that?

“Chief, I... us warriors... our claws are our lives. We’ve been talking and... maybe it’s time to go back to the old ways. Warriors shouldn’t be treating their own kind like this.” His eyes refused to meet mine, but I think his voice still sounded afraid, “I’m done Chief.” I turned to him and saw his claw twitch. Interesting. That’s the same thing my claw did before I tore my best friend apart.

But I was just talking to Raafta.

I wonder if I’m going mad.

No, no. I’m not mad, silly me. I forgot, I’m a monster. I guess it’s hard to be a monster and self-aware at the same time. I wonder if that’s even possible.

Then he swiped his claw at me, but I was already gone. Swimming as fast as I could straight down. I couldn’t die yet. There was still half a world unconquered. We wouldn’t have real peace and prosperity until everyone was dead, put to work, or under my control.

Whatever morphed these claws... *that* was power. I don’t know if it will be enough, but I think it’s my best shot at survival, right Raafta?

My survival doesn’t matter?

No, you’re wrong Raafta, I’m not doing this for selfish reasons. I never wanted to save myself, I wanted to save our people! I’m necessary if that’s going to happen. I’m the only one! No one else can take this challenge Raafta! Right? Right!? Answer me dammit!

But he didn’t answer. He never answers. I continued toward the ‘outline’ in the depths that had become our hunting ground. My eyes barely functioned this deep, so I reached out my claws

and swiped. I could see the mass before me, but it was devoid of the vegetation that I remembered from so long ago. My claws scratched some hard surface, harder than a turtle's shell. It seemed as if the slaves had been scratching deep into it; taking parts of this 'outline' off with every pass. I guess it made sense, it was almost impossible to see down here.

I could feel my insides being squeezed out with each passing second. If I could just find the source of this warmth and use it, surely that would get me out of this. Then I could truly say I saved our species. I could say it.

I didn't have long down here though. The slaves were sent down and told to come back before they could count sixty breaths. Sixty would always kill them, without fail. I'll need to do this quickly.

I dug and dug and dug and dug, every pass serving to reshape my claw into some unruly mass. My claws soon looked more like shattered bones; splinters and fragments shooting off in every direction: breaking, melting, and reattaching. It was so hot down here. Too hot. My gills continued, unsuccessfully, to try and take in the water. Everything inside me began to leak out, everything. Vital organs and blood, it was all the same. Pouring out in a constant, condensed, stream: I didn't have much longer.

I put all my energy into one final swipe. The warriors would be waiting for my body to rise to the surface, so if this final swipe could gouge in, if this final swipe could rip out whatever was inside, then surely I could use that power. Surely I could survive all of this and carry on my vision.

A rush of unimaginable heat turned my claw into a mushy substance that drifted away, forming little fragments of claw in the water; forever lost as they became one with the depths.

For the briefest of moments, as my insides continued to be squeezed out of me, a gout of hot liquid shot out from the patch I'd been clawing at. If I hadn't already recoiled, I'm sure the rest

of me would be looking far too similar to my now-disfigured claw. But just as soon as it started, it stopped. My consciousness faded and my mind was lost to the pain that engulfed me, I took one last look to see what could have happened. I was this close, something in there must be able to fix all of this.

Wait, all of this? All of what?

What does that mean? To fix this coup attempt, right? To carry on saving my species, right? Why does it feel like I need to fix something else? What the hell needs fixing?

Is it me? Raafra? Is it me? Am I broken then? Will this fix me too?

Can anything fix me anymore?

But before I could go on pretending monsters could change...

It came...

The tiny crack I made suddenly erupted as some sort of appendage forced its way out. As wide as a great white shark of old and the length... longer than the largest whale... no... even longer. It reached and reached, thrusting forward into the waters. Four other appendages, practically identical, reached out from the cracked mass, pushing forward, destroying more and more of the 'outline'. I barely managed to work my fins and swim away from this horror. I shut down all my eyes but one, one eye that I pointed back, hoping to avoid this abomination's wrath if it tried to follow me.

What a joke. It didn't need to follow me at all. It was so large. So large. It just continued expanding. More appendages leaked out from the 'outline' that used to be our hunting grounds. It grew in every direction, as if it was going to fill our entire globe of water with its wretched, twisting shape.

I saw the massive ‘outline’ glow as more cracks formed, illuminated with that burning and melting substance that was sitting inside it. I never truly knew the size of the ‘outline’ until now... it was massive. Stretching... an indescribable amount on all sides. I couldn’t even see the edges. But it was hard to appreciate the enormity of this sphere at the center of our little world of water, because the *thing* didn’t stop growing.

And then I saw something, something nobody was meant to see...

To call it a face would be to give it too much credit. It was a living horror given shape. Craters sunk into it, appendages grew out of it, teeth surrounded nearly everything. Some of the appendages covered something that looked like an opening that pulsated, silently, in agony. A crisscrossed pattern of tentacles that seemed to be desperately trying to keep that hole covered, as if something even more horrifying would be birthed from it. Veins coursed across every last bit of it, pumping and pumping and pumping. Oozing a myriad of colors from every cut given to it by its cage. Some eyeballs floated: only attached by a single cord, while others were buried inside the craters: only visible due to the contrast of milky white to the black shadow that was cast over it.

Its mouths opened, a few of them falling off and sticking to sections further down the daemon. And then those tentacles that were holding something back so desperately lost their battle as the hole ripped open. The ripped tentacles falling down and reattaching themselves onto the beast wherever they landed. Out of the mouth, came a scream. A scream that pierced my ears even as I neared the surface. I swam faster than I ever had, hoping to escape. Somehow, even at the surface, this beast could still be seen clawing its way to me. It was too big... too big to imagine. The scream turned me deaf in less than a moment. I couldn’t hear a thing as the world lost all sound. But the fates of those closer to the beast were far worse: a cloud of red surrounded it. The scream created so much power that it compressed every surrounding being until they popped. And

still it rose toward the surface. I thought about how I should be saving my people right now. I thought about how I should swim back down and face this nightmare. I thought about the inevitable extinction of my species as this *thing* continued its onslaught. I was trying so hard. I gave up so much. I just wanted to save my people, didn't I? I wanted to do good, didn't I?

I wanted our survival...

but instead I've damned us all.

Chapter 4

“So... saving your people wasn't actually at the top of your list huh?” I asked absentmindedly. The longer I kept him talking the better the chance he ordered another drink. Maybe I'd charge a bit extra for the nightmare fuel he just gave me.

“No... you're wrong. It wazsh.”

“Oh? Then why'd you run away?”

“I,” some greenish brown substance poured out of the fish's center tentacle, “I shwas torn away before I coulda made up my mindsh.” the fish held up a claw, as if to pause time and stop the puke that was about to continue to pour out of it. It didn't work. “Ughh. I waszh carried off. That... thast thing WAS da core of the planet. Aghhhh. The gravity washn't there no more... I floated aways in a bubble uh watersh. Then I was travelings through spacsh, like some sortuh comet.” The fish fell onto the counter, all five tentacles reaching over the edge toward my side. Some sorta slime oozed out of them too. Disgusting stuff, and more cleaning for me. Then the fish raised up its one claw and its other stub and tried to press them together in a sort of praying gesture. He tried to compose himself as best as he could. A slight whisper could be heard if you listened close enough, “Please, please. Just tell me it wasn't my fault... tell me I didn't become a monster for nothing...”

Personally... I don't care to listen that closely. Or at least, I prefer to pretend I don't. You come to a bar to get drunk and drop your worries on the floor along with a puddle of vomit. I give shots, not absolution. I ain't no priest, and my bar sure isn't tax exempt so... screw 'em... After about ten seconds of holding that pose the fish finally collapsed. Slid right off its wheelchair. I hoisted it back in, careful so I only touched the clothing and not the actual fish. I walked it to the door and pushed it right onto the sidewalk. It was closing time and I don't work late unless I'm making real money, and this fish seemed to be tapped out, given his empty wallet.

With the bar closed up, I finally collapsed into my bed. I substituted some whisky in place of my mouthwash, hoping it would help me forget that horror show of a story. Thank whatever god you can believe in that I'm on a man-made patch of dirt in space and not a planet with a potentially daemon-filled-core. As I turned off my lights, I heard something from outside.

Ah, I forgot... those fish weren't just mentally scarred and jailed on sight for their outbursts; they were also popular in menageries of the underworld's rich. I peeked out my window and sure enough... the fish was gone, wheelchair and all...

I... I got my own life to worry about y'know...

I didn't sleep that night... damn fish...

The next morning, at seven on the dot, I heard some knocking on the door. Boozie came rushing in ordering a pint.

"I wuz nearly sober dish time you shun of a bitch. Buzz iz almost gone. Set me up!"

I sat him down at the counter in the spot the fish was at last night. Ol' Boozie wouldn't mind the vomit... or whatever it was.

With a quick sip of my own private stock, I looked to the door.

I'm losing it. Customers come and go. My hands were shaking. Damn drink. I took another sip and went back to pretending to polish a glass, my mind stuck somewhere between ends and means.

Second Draught: Raison d'être et un peu plus

“You know, if I knew my prick from my pinky,” Boozie gave a quick snort... followed by a stomach-turning gulp, “I'd say the glasses you give me are absolutely filthy.”

“Honest with ya Boozie?” I asked, setting down his next glass I was pretending to clean, “I thought you'd gone alcohol blind weeks ago.”

“Well this augmented liver's been doing wonders for me Old Man.” Boozie started coughing... well more like screaming in bursts; trying to force enough air out to dislodge whatever was getting him in a fit. After some black sludge splashed onto my counter, he continued, “Well, I guess the oil ain't so good coming up as it is going down!” he laughed as if he'd just said something funny instead of something brain-numbing.

I'd love to skin the man alive and sell the bits but, tragically, Ol' Boozie's the best customer I got... hell, some days he's the only customer I got. I turned around to find, ah, there it is. I grabbed the glass some sentient canine was just drinking from, slobber and more coating the thing quite nicely. I poured a bit of Boozie's choice in and mixed it thoroughly with whatever was piling up on the far counter.

He took half the glass in a single go and gave me his best gap-toothed smile, “Now this here's a drink!” Yeah, well... most of it's a drink I 'spose.

The steel door to the bar swung open. Now, normally this would be followed up by some sort of 'lovecraftian horror' sequence. The dim lights of this run-down bar mixed with the night sky from beyond the door meant my customers had a fair bit of anonymity walkin' in here.

Shadows hiding shadows, forms unknown beneath tarps of cloth. Crawling, sliding, rolling. Impossibly long legs or none at all. The distance of thirty feet between my counter and the door covered in seconds or eons depending on the monster that walked through. Speaking loud or soft, quick or slow, high and low; growls, guttural grunts, words, and songs. I even had some sort of psyker beam his order straight into my damn head. If the people in charge were askin' me, which they aren't, I'd make that a quartering offense.

So, needless to say, whenever that door opened I took a quick drink from my own stock and steeled my stomach.

But this time, well... it looked like a normal human.

Two legs, two arms, one head, and, thank whatever unholy god was in charge of this, no miscellaneous appendages. Least that I could tell. What stuck out to me though was what he was wearing. A silver breastplate with intricate inlays of gold peeking out from under the brown tarp he had tossed over himself. Holes in this outer cloth gave glimpses of even more of the armor, all beautifully etched and inscribed. I could barely suppress the smirk that was growing from ear to ear: rich boy thinks he can hide his wealth eh? I was already making plans on how to get that silver off him and have him on a deep space cruiser before the night was over. Customers like him really make this god-awful job worthwhile.

The man's face was worn beyond repair. Wrinkles and scars intertwined to form what looked more like some crushed up ball of paper bleached by the sun than actual skin. Not to mention the hunk of metal nailed into his cheek. Seemed like his limbs were augmented too, bits

of metal and wiring ran up and down almost managing to cover the skin underneath, skin that was just as bunched up and crumpled as his face. Hm, maybe more metal than skin actually. Really must've got banged up. And those few patches of skin had tatters of cloth hanging off, almost looked like words were written on them. Maybe nailed into place. Bit horrific, really.

I found myself wonderin' what kind of tragedy he must've been through, but then I remembered I had no reason to actually care. Unless it involved me getting that armor from him, of course.

His hair was long and grey, tied in a ponytail behind him, nearly reaching to the floor. Maybe if I'm lucky I can get him to walk around Boozie's corner and have his hair double as a mop. I couldn't tell if the man was old or if his life wore him down already, hardly matters though.

He had eyes a mix of blue and red, piercing, although whether the red was natural or just bloodshot eyes I couldn't say. Thick around the waist but still thicker through the shoulders, a massive man whose every step felt like it was filled with purpose and barely contained energy. I'd say that was in thanks to those augmented limbs, but the man looked like he could rip me in two even without 'em. Even with no weapon, the size of his frame and the look of his fists had me nearly rethinking robbing him blind once I get him plastered... nearly.

He threw himself down onto one of the barstools in front of me. All the grace of a crippled elephant, this one. He slammed a fist onto my counter, splintering the wood... well making it look worse than it already did at least, I'm sure. Well see, now I've surely got the moral high ground for robbing him blind. I mean he broke my counter yeah? Maybe the prices don't quite equal out, but I figure that's just splitting hairs.

He opened his fist to show two golden coins. The smile was getting harder and harder to fend off. I mean the guy's an Astra-damned gold mine! Ever since the government declared a

‘mandatory reacquisition’ of all precious metals, folks trying to beg their way up the government food chain paid arms and legs, literally, for this stuff. So, the way I see it, these and his breastplate should just about cover the damages. “Bonsoir. Hm, what was the word... *allow* me your largest mug of beer yes?”

I scooped up the coins and poured some beer-flavored rubbing alcohol in a cup. Well, close enough to it anyway. His accent was fluid and smooth, and although the origin sounded somewhat similar to some ancient civilization on my home world, there was something far more foreign just underneath. But what got my attention most was the damn smile he had painted on his face. Almost like if he stopped smiling his whole world would fall apart. Fighting for his life with only his lips and teeth. Repulsive, just awful.

I set down his drink and tried to shuffle away, both gold coins in hand.

Just before I could get away however, Ol’ Boozie decided it was time for him to make an impression, “Hey there fancy-boy, that slur in your accent makes you sound drunker than I’m about to be, right Old Man! Where you from shiny?” and suddenly I was pulled in.

His laugh sounded more like a joyous roar and was somehow able to warm the whole room. Absolutely sickening, nearly tossed my lunch right then and there. “I am not ‘fancy-boy’ or ‘shiny’ my friend, my name is Gerard. As for my *mère patrie*, non, uh... home... hm, it is in distant solar system. ‘Newly discovered’ they say. I am... what is word, moving? I am moving with those, hm, discoverers? for now.”

Luckily, Boozie wasn’t so drunk that he couldn’t keep up the conversation he started. Other than nodding whenever I heard him shout ‘right Old Man?’ I was able to escape any other form of talking. So, while Boozie droned on about government plots and Gerard laughed endlessly I let my mind wander.

As always, a mistake.

Robbing at least half my customers usually keeps my mind busy, but lulls like these make me remember who I was before I set myself up for a life of suffering on this rock. Huh... well, I guess I was suffering all the same back then as well... no... no I wasn't always suffering. Most of the time sure, but... it's just... I remember my mother. I mean, I don't remember much. I was young, though I couldn't put an age on it. Maybe that says it all though. But I do remember her smiles and her words and her hugs, the kind that just barely avoid squeezing the life out of ya. I remember how hard she worked, how she always worked. Running herself ragged just to make it back for those final few minutes before I'd drift off to sleep. I never really knew what her job was, what she did. It all seemed so distant to me back then, unimportant I guess. Now that I'm trying to piece things together, Goddess knows why I'm even bothering, I practically have to carve out my own organs just to get a few more defunct files from the long-exiled traitor government, revolutionaries now I guess. The only thing I've found is that she was a captain of the planetary self-defense force. Well, a captain of a penal battalion; leading the worst kinds of criminals to the front lines, having to kill as many of your own soldiers as you did the enemy. Being scorned by her peers simply for her assignment. But she'd show them. When the day came that our skies were made dark by thousands of drop ships, she was there at the front, ready. I don't know what happened during the fighting. For three months I was locked underground with the other children. I remember the crying and shouting, but mostly I just remember the shaking and that... that gnawing hunger, gods the way my stomach would turn on itself, I thought one of those alien invaders were eating me from the inside out. Every time the light above us flickered and pieces of rock fell from the ceiling I would wonder if my mom was still alive, she had to be. When the three-month long nightmare ended, I was whisked away to the capital, it was where I was supposed to

meet my mother. We were put in the back of a freight truck, switching one dark pit for another it seemed, but I imagine it was what little our planet could spare after how much the war took from us. We arrived in time to see the parade, and there at the front was the most highly decorated battalion: my mother's. There were celebrations and happy times and reunions. It was a good time to be alive. But it all comes to an end at some point. My mother held her mood for a week, but after that she changed.

As it turned out, we didn't win the war. A coup replaced our government mid fight and they made peace with the alien invaders as soon as they could. It meant peace. It meant joining their little 'federation'. It meant no more enemies. It meant the only wars we'd be involved in would be on distant stars. Wars that were fought in ways that were completely foreign to us. There wasn't any room for heroes leading charges in these wars. She quit her job soon after it became nothing more than pushing papers and writing letters. She found her soul in that war, her purpose, but there were no more wars, and she couldn't live without her soul anymore. So... she tried something else. I walked into the living room, maybe a month after the war ended, and her body was limp in the middle of the room. A simultaneously blank and euphoric look in her eyes; a 'crank-stick' was lodged in the port on her augmented arm, injecting some 'feel-good-virus' deep into her bloodstream.

Weren't you supposed to be a hero? Aren't you supposed to be better than us? An example to us? A role model for children and adults? Is this how heroes look? No, is this how a mother should look? I mean, for God's sake, is this-

"Bar man, you look pale." Gerard's accented voice coiled down to the depths of my mind, I grabbed hold and managed to pull myself away from... from the memories.

"Hardly."

“You lie friend. Maybe you need another drink yes?”

I’ll be damned if I let one of my customers get *me* drunk. I don’t need booze to deal with my past, I’m stronger than these pathetic drunken wastes of space. *I* play *them* not the other way around, “Hell, maybe you’re right Gerry-”

“Gerard.”

“Sure. Tell ya what, how about I get you another drink and you tell me something that brightens me up yeah? We’ll call it an even trade.”

“I’m afraid I only have one story.”

“Guess you only got one shot to make it a good one then.” I filled his mug back up to the brim.

“Well, it *does* have a dragon.”

Our village priest was a sickly woman. Perpetually coughing into a blood-stained rag and always supported by that oaken walking stick. I always felt like those black robes of hers covered up what must’ve been a skeleton, after all, her wrists and ankles looked like nothing more than flesh-painted bone.

What she lacked in muscle, she made up for with faith and holy relics.

At least, that’s what she said. I held my arms at my sides even as the blood dripped down from my face. Some of her holy items manifested themselves as brilliantly studded rings. The diamonds and emeralds had left many scars on the villagers, and they had certainly marked me more than a few times.

“Do you understand why I must strike you?”

I could never really tell when she was being rhetorical. I waited, but another slap and a few more scars on my face let me know I was supposed to respond, “Of course not Speaker, I could never hope to understand your translations of our Holy Mother.”

She sighed, readjusting her rings and trying to pick out my blood flecks with her nails, “Obviously you could never hope to understand Her divine workings in the way I do. It is a good thing you understand that much. But then, you accursed child, why am I striking you if you understand that much?”

The church was built onto a cliff above our sea-side village. The Speaker would always punish me right on the cliff’s edge. She could push me at any moment, no one would blame her. In fact, many would praise her for getting rid of the ‘accursed child’.

But, you see, I am not afraid.

No, how could I ever be afraid? My Holy Mother, in all her glory, has given me vision after vision. She speaks to me. She visits me. She guides me. And She has shown me that I am meant for so much more. She has shown me what I am to be. I will not be some lowly fisherman who lives and dies in this village having nothing to show at the end of my life. No, She did not mince her words.

A hero, a hero is what I shall be.

I looked back at the cliff’s edge. It seemed like a storm was brewing. Dark clouds were beginning to pile up, connected by bolts of light flashing back and forth. Our fishing boats, simple single-sailed rafts, were heading back for the beach already. At this rate I won’t even catch dinner for myself. Another hungry night.

“If you continue to ignore me, I will not wait for the inquisitor to show up. I will put you on the stake myself.”

“Speaker, I will accept any punishment you wish to give me, but I cannot deny the presence of our God. If She speaks to me and I say I hear nothing, then She will be the one punishing me. Her’s is a punishment I could never take.”

“You heretical brat! Nothing but a wicked abomination! *You* hear nothing!” she paused, breathing heavily. It seemed like screaming at me had taken its toll on her. She spat some more blood onto her rag and then reached into her pockets, “Come here.”

And, just like every week since I spoke about being able to hear Her, the Speaker took a strip of cloth covered in prayers and held it to my body. She then brought out a hammer and a nail and attached the cloth to me.

I clenched my teeth, again she managed to hit bone. She sunk the nail home and told me to leave.

I got back to my shack, the storm still sitting on the horizon. I collapsed onto my knees and rubbed at the nail. All this pain, it is necessary.

Oh Holy Mother, I will go through any suffering for you. I place my trust fully in you. I will take any punishment upon myself for you. I *will* be the hero you’ve told me to be. I shall continue to wait, to persevere, until you say it is time.

And that time will be soon. The Speaker did send for an inquisitor to be dispatched to oversee my burning after all. What my Holy God wishes me to accomplish will require me to be alive, so I’m sure that before the inquisitor sets my flesh ablaze I will find the path She has planned out for me. The path of a hero.

I fell asleep there on the floor, but for some reason the storm never sounded like it got any closer.

The next few days passed with an odd suspense in the air. The storm seemed to almost be stalled on the horizon, unmoving. Many were looking to the Speaker for guidance, but she was too busy with other matters.

Namely, she was preparing for my execution. Most of the villagers agreed that accommodating the inquisitor was more important than thinking about some storm in the distance. After all, they said, isn't it a blessing that the storm isn't coming closer? Does it matter if the storm rages forever as long as it doesn't come to us? They offered their empty, faithless thanks to our divine Mother.

A storm being held in the distance is not a blessing, it will be a divine retribution for us. Us who have become so faithless. Corruption among the clergy and complacency among Her children.

Oh my dearest Mother, I can only beg your forgiveness, though I know you will not give it easily. This, this is why I shall offer up my very life, your greatest gift I shall lay at your feet! I shall be the hero that saves this land of false believers, I promise you. I will do your divine bidding, I will accomplish your divine goal, and then you can take my life. I shall make that sacrifice so that this world can once more feel your holy light.

I started to spend more and more time sitting on the beach and watching the storm. I was waiting for Her divine sign. The clouds bubbled and broiled, rising higher and higher and growing darker and darker. A great evil, no, a great *sin* is manifesting itself within that miasma. I can feel it.

Tell me dearest Mother, just give me the sign and I shall sacrifice my life to purify such a daemonic being.

On the fourth night of sitting on that beach and waiting for some holy inspiration, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I closed my eyes. Is that you?

“What is She telling you?”

“I’m... I’m not sure.”

“But She *is* speaking to you?”

It was a small village, and we didn’t see many travelers. This could only be one person: the inquisitor, “She has spoken to me, yes. Though I am still too incompetent to grasp the specifics. I am waiting for Her help, for without Her I shall accomplish nothing. Without Her, I am nothing.”

“You *are* nothing. You’re certainly not a Speaker. You’ve been granted no titles by Her Highness. Suggesting you can hear our Holy Mother is heresy you know?” Something cold and metallic rubbed against my neck, “Now, what exactly did *She* tell you?”

I breathed in deeply. I’ve grown up on this beach and I’ve seen plenty of storms. When fishing is your livelihood, you end up learning how to read a storm. Smells. Smells are how I read them. There’s a different scent for every type. A storm with raging winds or one that will be plagued with lightning both have very different smells.

But this storm...

There was a smell of metal but also something... something more. It reminded me of having a bloody nose.

These smells were growing for days now, but suddenly they were overpowering.

What sign am I missing? What flaw within me is holding me back from understanding your divinity? Ah, dearest Mother, my Holy God, how can I serve you?

“She told me... She told me I am to be a hero.”

For a long minute, or maybe longer, that cold, sharp piece of metal hovered at my throat. And then he pulled back his blade, “I don’t believe you, but Her Highness is growing desperate. To think, sending an inquisitor after village crack pots. If your damned Speaker was doing her job she would’ve... it doesn’t matter. Your Queen has decided that those that Our Mother speaks to will be the ones to liberate us from our enemies. You will serve her.”

No, I will serve Her. I pointed to the horizon, even though the sun should have been rising by now it was still obscured behind the blackened sky, “So, that’s the enemy then? That’s what this has been about.” I rubbed at the talismans nailed to my body, “A holy war. Yes, I will serve.”

Iron shackles clasped around my hands, “Ha! You accursed monsters really are madmen. That’s a storm you fool. Do you really think you can fight clouds? No, you will fight those heathens encroaching on our borders. Congratulations ‘goodfisher’ you’ve been promoted. You’ll be on the front in a week with your fellow delusional freaks.” The holy inquisitor, keeper of the faith, spat on the ground, “Never thought I’d see the day where the fate of our kingdom would be left to a fanatical charge of madmen. Sorry you won’t have an army to accompany you, ours was turned into fertilizer a week ago.” He gave the chain a yank, pulling me away from my divine purpose, my holy fight, “Ah well, just die quick y’hear? Maybe I’ll still be able to convince the princess to run away with me.”

I saw drool rolling down his face, a strange grin that spoke of only heresy and sin.

I have no power to resist. If I cannot resist here, then surely this must be a part of Her path? Yes, I must finish this worthless war quickly so we can rally against the true enemy. The enemy of our very souls.

I must restore the faith to this land.

I must be the hero She wants me to be.

“And so,” he ignored the specs of grime that were floating in his mug and took a few gulps out of it, ending up with an expression you wouldn’t normally have if you were drinking beer without that uh, ‘extra flavoring’, “they put me to work.” He brought the mug back down onto the counter, the sleeve of his cloak rolling back a little in the process, revealing some more of those tattered strips of cloth with that fancy writing painted on ‘em.

Didn’t even finish his damn mug. What kinda customer’s still on their first drink at this point. I realized I was grinding my teeth and tried to look as nonchalant as possible as I relaxed my jaw, which wasn’t too hard considering I played into the ‘old age’ aesthetic pretty strongly, “Damn body’s gonna give out one of these days, just hope my mind goes at the same time. Nothing worse than a body-less mind, huh?”

“A mindsh-leshz body maybes...”

I ran Boozie’s card for talking out of line, well, I run his card for just about anything, but that was the reason this time. “So Gerry,” I stared at his little talismans nailed onto his forearm, “looks like ya’ve been through a bit, guess you’ve got more of a right to complain about aches and pains than I do. Man as tortured as yourself needs a better medicine, I’m sure.” I uncorked a bottle of the hardest booze I had, expensive stuff too. This night’s turning into quite the investment.

He picked up the glass. It was almost comical how small it looked in his hands, “Lever le coude, eh?” that roaring laugh, Goddesses above, a man happy enough to make that noise should be strangled, “I should be thankful my boss only checks in through a screen so he won’t be able to smell the booze. Oui Old Man, let us drink!”

Heh, everyone wants to prove how painful their life is don’t they? A tortured man should drink and drink he shall, but with a laugh like that,

you don’t know the first thing about pain, do you?

“So then Gerry old boy, I guess the question is where’s the dragon? Was it the clouds or the invaders?”

“Dwagons?”

I figure Gerard was catching onto the social dynamic of my bar pretty quick considering he completely ignored Boozie, “No, the dragon had not yet made his entrance. C’était piégé, erm, it uh... it had not escaped. Or, maybe it had not arrived? Je ne sais pas. Our country was being taken by invaders, nobody focused on unholy storms my friend.”

“Yeah, I guess they wouldn’t. Sounds like your Godly leaders weren’t too interested in, well, Godly things.”

“Oui, they had lost the faith.”

“And you didn’t?”

“I’m... I don’t know. I had a very, well, my mind was focused only on being a hero. I had faith in that and that my God made me for that alone. And living through all the batailles, er, the ‘fighting’, it only strengthened my faith. My faith that I was to be a hero. That I had found my,” he paused for a moment, with a kinda ‘thousand-yard stare’ to him, and then, in a whisper almost too small to hear, he said, “raison d’être.”

I’d read that last bit somewhere. Or maybe I saw it somewhere. A meaning for his existence, huh? That’s what being a hero is to him then. Must be a bit of a pill then, what with not being a hero anymore. I poured him another drink, taking a moment to admire how much alcohol he’s put away since my little ‘tortured’ comment and how well he seems to be holding it.

Being a hero... it certainly sounds purposeful. Sure. Not exactly long term though.

Saving the day and vanquishing evil sounds all well and good, but there's a pretty distinct end. Once the hero triumphs, what then? What path is left when your purpose was being a hero? Drugs and alcohol, running away, leaving your kid to rot in some laboratory of an orphanage-

Bah, I'm projecting, aren't I? It's just, what the hell is a hero anyway? Hero to who? Hero for what? How long? All the rest. It seems like a great purpose, but isn't it kinda flimsy? If you don't die on the battlefield, then what the hell do you do afterwards? Just go back to being a normal person? After all that hero-ing business? Gerry here kills a dragon and then he's supposed to just, what, go back to fishing? Maybe being a hero isn't so great,

maybe she deserves my pity...

I poured myself some of the strong stuff, trying for the second time tonight to stop thinking about my mother, "So, you did some fighting, earned some honors, then what?" I need to do some forgetting. I really do.

"When our borders were secured, that's when the dragon came. We had no rest. After nearly being wiped off the map, our country had nearly nothing. Certainly nothing to fight off a dragon, not one like this. But I was young, j'avais bon espoir, I was sure I could do what needed to be done. So, I asked the queen to send me."

I left the capital to begin my journey. I was given two boons to help me on my quest: a shield blessed by the saints of our patron God, holy is Her name, and an order from our Queen: save our land again. And so, with the blessing of my omnipotent God and the order of my Queen, I felt little fear as I set out. I was made for such a quest. *God* made me for such a quest.

The roads were long, the path was long, the quest was long. I traveled for too long to remember. Too long to believe. But that's a tale hardly worth telling. The boring parts of a quest, they always end up left out. The walking, the waiting, the idyllic days of travel, the miserable days

of travel, all left for only the one on quest to know. Occasionally during these times I would stare up at the blue-stained sun or swirling white moons, hidden or laid bare through our God's holy will, and I would think that the aftermath, when the hero is done with their task, that part doesn't get told either. But during these lapses, my motherly God would always bring my mind back to the quest. Back to my service of Her.

Yes, the story really began when I found myself exiting a valley. Snowcapped mountains rose on every side, high into the heavens above. They were mountains that rose above mountains, and I traveled along the already cloud-height plateau between them. It was breathtaking.

It was early spring, and the breeze wasn't quite cold, but it wasn't quite warm either. It was weather to read in, but not to nap in. Small piles of snow dotted the landscape, islands of white surrounded by all the colors of the rainbow. Greens, blues, reds, and purples. Flowers rose to the occasion everywhere they could, swaying slightly. The smell alone was enough to fill my travel-weary heart with renewed joy and vigor. God must surely have blessed such a place. I thanked my almighty God for Her bounty that She, in all Her glorious nature, decided to allow me a piece of.

The mountains in front of me seemed to drop straight down into the churning sea, far below, forming the edge of the half circle plateau that was painted with flowers. Those mountains seemed like they had been sheared off by some giant blade. I'd love to take the time to describe the sea. To try to bring words to that beautiful and awe-inspiring sight. But, in that direction was something else that stole my attention.

A towering citadel that rose from the fog-laden waters, the base obscured, leaving only a wretched spire peeking out at me. It sat on top of an island that jutted up from the sea to the same height as the plateau.

A moat had been dug between the base of the island and the plateau I was standing on. The island had clearly been attached to the plateau at some point but must have been cut away by some unnatural force.

The moat seemed to serve little purpose, however. At least the water in it. It was a sheer drop of hundreds of feet, with maybe only a few feet actually deep enough to go below sea level and be filled with the waters down below. The amount of manpower it must've taken to trench this mountain and create such a thing would've surely taken decades, maybe centuries. The ancient civilizations were surely blessed by our God.

A rope bridge, barely wide enough to hold one man, stretched across the moat. It spanned the distance of nearly a hundred feet. The rotting stakes on either side made me wonder if such a thing could even hold a human without collapsing into the abyss below.

But the bridge could have been built of discarded wheat and I would still cross it. For even the most fragile is made as steel if my God wills it. As I crossed this hanging bridge and the fog in front of me began to dissipate, I came into view of... of *it*.

It was a monstrosity. An abomination. An affront to our Holy Mother. A tainted, foul, poisoned version of what once must have stood there. But... it was...

beautiful

It was hideously beautiful. Grotesquely beautiful. Horrendously beautiful.

A *heretical* beauty.

Holy Mother forgive me.

I emptied my mind to my Mother God, just as my priest from my hometown had taught me during all those beatings. My fingers, covered in a webbing of metal that had psalm-covered cloth woven into each chain-link, gripped my shield all the fiercer. The penitent spikes on the handle

pierced through the chain links and a dribble of blood began to fall to the ground. The pain of wielding such a holy relic will guide my mind true.

The building was an ever-rising mishmash of stone and metal and wood. Browns and greys interwoven into a tapestry to tell the very tale of humanity itself. From the very birth of houses made from trees and reeds to the current world dominated by metals and stone; it told it all. The shoddy wooden huts clinging to the spires of stone, held together by flying buttresses forged of iron. It looked as if a basic structure once stood on this island, but then some wicked curse caused the structure to grow, almost organically. Stairs leading to nowhere and houses birthed from the walls with no entry to speak of, hanging too high to reach. Structures with no purpose other than to exist.

The screeching of metal supports bending from weight and weather was the likely cause of the daemonic noise, but in my heart, I knew evil lurked here. Whether the howling was theirs or the structure's, I can't truly know. I ripped one of the cowhide prayer streamers off my armor and began to gnaw on it. The holy words filled my stomach and steeled me more than any food or drink.

The citadel rose from the island, not wasting an inch. The entire perimeter of the island was growing with more chaotic splatterings of materials, waiting to grow into some beautiful structure if just left alone; steel beams sticking out, wooden floors rising to the surface, stone arches barely inches above the ground but, given time, surely they too would soar like the arches at the heart of this monstrosity.

It was as if some sick human tried to replicate God. Copying the plateau before him that grew with flowers and grasses. And this was the result.

I continued into the beast of a structure, entering through another archway made of iron, worn and corroded by the elements. I ran my hand along the metal, feeling the ragged and pitted material through my mailed hand.

Holy Mother, your voice too pure to reach us and your body too bright to view, is this my quest?

“Nows, corrects me if I’m wrongsh,” Boozie stared at Gerard’s face, interrupting his story for this singular outburst. Surely Ol’ Boozie must have some direly needed criticism to share, “were we not promised dragons?”

Now I think I’ve made my position clear enough: I listen to the drunken rambling of these people cause it encourages them to get more drunk and more loose with their wallets, both figuratively and literally. But... I’ll admit, though I’m reluctant to say it... flying, fire-breathing reptiles may pique my interest... a lot. I mean, can you blame me? No. You can’t. And so, for the first, and hopefully last time, I sided with the man who only half an hour ago vomited in some stranger’s carry-case thinking it was a trash bin, “Ol’ Boozie’s got a point Gerry.”

“Bah, of course you péquenauds would never understand adding *scene* to a story. Mais oui, the dragon is coming. And then...” He trailed off into more of his native language. It seemed he lapsed into it more often when he was properly drunk.

But a part of me, a small part, was concerned. Not for him, of course. He might end up looking poor without that hunk of metal and mineral on his chest, but the man beat a dragon, surely he must have plenty of reward money or something? I mean, that’s gotta be a pretty big deal. I palmed the two gold coins I’d taken earlier. I hadn’t heard his pockets clink with metallic sounds since he handed them over. No, it hardly matters. Who’s to say who needs it more? Maybe his God would have an opinion on it, but maybe she’s busy with his home world and can’t be bothered.

No, the concern wasn't for him. It wasn't. But, after my little jaunt down memory lane... I hardly wanted to hear a story that caused a man to drift off into mutterings, that's all. Story'll just end up crazy or sad, I'm sure. Why can't I get one goddamn happy drunk huh?

From across the bar Boozie made a choking noise as he vomited. He kept his mouth closed, catching it all... and well, with a look of determination only found in universe-class athletes, he swallowed one, two, three times. His eyes met mine, and with a gap-toothed smile stained greenish brown, he gave me a wink as if he'd just done me some great favor. Tell ya what, second thoughts: one happy drunk is plenty, "Well then Gerry, I can't imagine Ol' Boozie being conscious much longer, so let's hear about this dragon then yeah?"

Madness.

It's everywhere.

I unlaced my great helm and traced the metallic relic that the nuns nailed into my cheek. It throbbed painfully. The holy wound had started to rot and fester during my quest, surely a sign of my lack of faith. Oh mother God, I can only beg your forgiveness and ask for your strength.

The further I walked into this abomination, the clearer it was that Her cleansing light could not enter here. One moment I would be traveling through a crumbling stone tunnel with rotted wood supports, and then I would be walking miles above the ground, traveling on metal aqueducts rusted to oblivion.

I would spend what felt like days climbing a staircase that would ultimately disappear into the wall, leading to nowhere.

There was no life in this place, not that I could see. Yet still, I knew I was being watched by something. It seemed as if the very structure itself could sense me.

Every path was more dangerous and more daemonic than the last, but I walked with assurance. I could not fail. The deck was stacked in my favor. With my God, surely nothing could stand against me.

Even with all the dead ends and empty paths I could tell I was getting closer to the dragon's den, I was sure. But, before I could appreciate this, appreciate the journey coming to its dramatic conclusion, my mouth was filled with a taste I remember all too well from those wars: iron. Just like that night on the beach, the same smell, the same presence. There was death ahead, and by the overpowering taste of bloody iron, it was death on a scale unknown to my people. I shudder to think that our little war that nearly brought our nation to ruin likely couldn't even compare to the amount of death and destruction that lies ahead.

I... I wish I could say otherwise, but I closed my eyes to the scene. You must understand, I've been on countless battlefields; I've seen men burned, rotted through, fed to the dogs. But this? There were things us mortals were not meant to witness. Things that brought only madness. I shut my eyes to the horrors and tried desperately to find comfort in my God. I found myself gripping the nails that the Speaker put in me, knowing the holy text would bring my soul comfort.

I ignored the sound of my sabatons wading through the liquid and the occasional sucking feeling as something more... *solid* came under foot. I focused on what I could hear. I'd been told the wretched wyrm was large, bigger than a two-story tavern at least. Its breathing was something it surely could not mask.

I slogged my way through the room of unseen nightmares. I stalked down a hallway, unnaturally long and surely cursed by the foul daemon, but my faith guided me. A light appeared ahead and, more importantly, the sound of the unholy monster's breath.

I entered through the archway and raised my blessed shield, blessed by the saints and said to banish any evil. It will bring a quick and painful end to this foul beast. I shouted in triumph as the light from the stained-glass windows of this inner sanctum bounced off my shield and onto the wyrm.

But... nothing happened. No grand victory, no holy triumph. The beast simply... awoke. God preserve me, it was *awake*. I prayed furiously, surely my faith was the issue? But as the beast rose its head and stared into my soul with eyes holding nothing but fire and terror, I began to think maybe She could not hear me here... maybe even She lived in fear of such abominations. No, She is all powerful.

But then why... why is it awake?

A voice snaked its way into my head, violating my very essence just to whisper, "Pitiful bag of meat. Your holy trinkets, are they not working? Your God, is she not here? No, yes, of course not. But do not fear, come to me and let me free you of your mortality. Join in the eternal existence and connectivity of those that soak in the room you've come from. Surely it's a better fate than being betrayed by your God?" Was this it? Betrayed by my faith and thrown to the daemons? Did I have no other choice?

But of course I did, I realized. My Holy Mother did not give me this shield. No, She gave me these arms, She gave me this faith, She gave me this task. I raised my shield, no longer holy but simply practical. My holy body, given unto me by my most Holy God, was what would defeat this wretched beast.

The fiery breath came pouring over my shield. I was able to cover most of my body, but my legs were left unprotected by the kite shield. The flames burned. They burned, they burned, they burned. The scorching heat turning my armor into a boiling pot, the chainmail sticking to me,

seeping into my skin. My shield began to bend, and the handhold was nearly liquid in my mailed fist. I can't take much more of this. I know. Before the muscles in my legs were turned to molten mush, I launched myself sideways, escaping the dragon's breath. While the evil wyrm focused on what it thought it was still melting, I rolled underneath its scaly breast.

After exiting the stream of flame, it was even easier to tell just how badly I'd been injured. My legs could barely move, a mixture of steel, skin, and bone filled the casing of the plate armor of my greaves. My hand that was holding my shield was no longer five fingers. Instead, another puddle of skin, muscle, steel, and bones formed some webbed monstrosity. I could not even remove my helm to find the oxygen I so desperately needed. It was fused to my head after having been exposed to such heat. Yet even as my insides boiled and baked, my very existence, my God's greatest gift, roared at the top of its lungs: defeat the beast!

I rolled my body so that I was facing the underside of the daemonic wyrm. It had to have a weakness. It had to!

And there it was, shining brightly, a message left to me by not only my God, but also by the men and women who gave their lives desperately trying to fight. A tear in the scales: a pathetic wound given to the beast when it first assaulted the castle and was met by a volley of ballistae. Inside the tear, a beating mass of red: a heart. The dragon noticed I was no longer in its stream of flame. It began to scan the room. I didn't have much time. I had to be quick. I had to be strong.

I had to be a hero.

I urged and begged my useless legs to struggle for one more moment, to fight for the last instant, to decide the fate of my very world! Slowly, I rose. I gripped my sword, holding the handle and pointing it up to the opening that was easily ten feet above me. I had only one shot. I used my good hand and wrapped it around the handle. With all my strength- no, with all my country's

strength, with all my God's strength. With the strength of us simple mortals and our Holy Mother behind me I threw my sword as if it were a javelin. It flew straight and true, finding its mark. It sunk deep into the exposed heart, so much so that I couldn't even see the hilt. The dragon bolted upright, onto its very claws. For a moment the head of the beast peeked underneath, staring at me, and with that gaze came the same voice that pierced my head not long ago: "Me? Slain? By a *mortal?*"

And then it died. I apologize for the lack of theatrics, truly, but that was it. One moment, the daemon was alive and the next... it was lifeless, forever and always. Never to return.

I started to crawl out from beneath the dragon, but my wounds were too much. I was only able to avoid being crushed to death thanks to a torrent of blood that swept me out from under the beast. But I was not yet free, the collapse of such a massive creature sent shockwaves through the citadel. Pillars cracked, and with these cracks they were no longer able to hold up the weight of the ceiling above. Massive chunks of granite crashed into the ground, threatening to crush the very life out of me. But I had bested the wicked beast! If this is when I must offer up my life to you Holy Mother, then I shall give it freely. But until then, I must continue to fight. So I summoned everything I could just to inch my way along the floor like a toddler. Slowly dragging my burnt and melted body through any unobstructed doorway and down any complete set of stairs I could find, hoping that at some point I would find an exit. The collapse of the ceiling was followed by the walls and even the flooring began to fall behind me into the void. I pulled myself, with every fiber of my being. I crawled and I crawled, waiting for either my death or my escape. Then, before me, I saw light. Ah, such holy light. My arms, all that I could count on now, strained. Every muscle and vein popping and pushing to the surface. Breaking and snapping as each new movement served

only to destroy me further. But I was born to struggle, I was born to struggle against adversity. A hero's *purpose* is to struggle!

And so it was that I found myself lying in the grassy hills surrounding the dragon's citadel. My chest desperately searching for breath, inflating and deflating; savoring the sweet taste of air untouched by neither daemon nor fear. I sucked in each breath greedily, basking in the pre-noon sunlight warming my soul. My body ached and burnt, but somehow the blue sky and cool air and perseverance of the sun to rise each day had me feeling like life couldn't be any better. After all of that: a journey lasting eons to find this place, a fight for the history books of a man against a dragon, a life nearly lost to a thousand trials through this journey, I could only laugh. Laugh and smile and feel joy suffuse my entire being. No matter my suffering: the sky was blue, the sun was warm, the breeze was cool, and existence was justified.

My existence was justified.

“And yet, here you are, at a bar whose floor is more bodily fluid than wood, and drinks more... well I won't finish that one.”

Gerard gave one of his hearty laughs, filling the tiny bar to bursting with only his voice, but it didn't even take a top-of-the-line barkeep like myself to see his eyes brimming over with tears. Now, I've never been one for imagining, that kinda stuff is best left to idiots who hope, but if some twit told me to imagine a giant crying or else he wouldn't pay his tab, I think this might've been what I'd answered: Gerard with his wrinkled, sculpted, scarred face upturned, as if to share his mirth with the stars above, shouting in laughter for that God of his to see. Yet his tears flowed freely, cascading down his face in great streams, and deep within his sunken eyes... well... I don't know. I don't know if there's a being alive that could describe that pain.

Maybe this laughing giant really is a tortured man...

I realized I'd have to step in, not many folks cared about the aftermath of a hero, why would they? After all, nobody cared for my mother, did they? Trapped with that drug... or maybe *by* that drug. Where is her thanks... where is any of their thanks? But, before I could speak, a slurred voice interrupted the laughter.

“And thast was it. Justifis... justfiz...” a quick belch and Boozie was back on track, “justified for that moment, but then itsh was over yeah? You fullfills your purposh, and yet ya stills gotta keep living... like a damn curse.” Boozie collapsed onto the table, with arms as a pillow. Strange, since he hadn't even drunk his usual dose yet. His shaking shoulders and barely audible gasps, however, reminded me he was just a patron to me. I don't really know Boozie. Maybe it's better that way. I'm sure it'd hurt my conscious to let a good man drink himself to death.

Gerard stared at Boozie for quite a while. Somber. Caring. But not pitiful. “Yes... well... yes.” His good humour that he'd had plastered on his face began to fade, and without that, the wrinkles and bags reminded me how old this man must be. How long had he lived like this? “Your drunken friend is right. A curse. Yes. The books I read, of heroes and leaders, none of them gave a realistic ending. Banquets and celebrations? Oui, mais...” Gerard's throat moved to swallow, but after decades of wandering without purpose, barely living and hardly wanting to, he couldn't manage to hold back the flood that had been rising within him, “but what about after that? They didn't give me a reward that could last, no lofty position, no new grand quest. They just threw me back to my cottage on the coast. Tell me bar man, how do you save your world and then go back to being a lowly fisherman barely eating a meal a day?”

He stared at me... for far too long quite frankly. I knew he was searching for some sort of answer, but I still hadn't figured it out myself. There he was, a man who fulfilled his purpose, and yet he was still forced to live. To live a normal life like the rest of us as if his accomplishment was

suddenly so insignificant. I could see it now: the nobility forgetting him and turning to more immediate matters, the people fearing him because who wouldn't fear a man that could kill a dragon, his country safe and at peace because it housed such a warrior and so no new quest could be found. He found no position, no adoration, no new challenge to face. But it wasn't like I could help him. I don't have words of wisdom or comfort. I've got shots and pints. It may be a shitty band aid, but it's better than nothing. I went against every sense in my head and slid half a glass to him, "On the house." I know this is where I should say something witty or profound, something to at least help mend this situation, but I'm already giving him a free drink right? And like I said, I don't have wisdom to give.

He smiled. A man who lost everything and just told some random stranger that didn't help him in the slightest, just smiled. I went to get a new drink for the customer on the far side of the counter.

I didn't turn when I heard the clink of metal or his stool scraping along the floor as he left his seat. Hell, it'll be nice to have him out of my bar. The place is bad enough as is, and unless stories like that get people buying more drinks, I'd rather not have to hear 'em.

I finished pouring the drink and charging double for 'sad hour' when I turned to see the door open. The city lights poured over Gerard as he stood in the doorway, casting him in utter darkness surrounded by a halo of neon. A man that should've been allowed to die a hero, heading out to punch the clock on time so his boss wouldn't fire him, all so he could eat enough to barely live, to survive. "I think I'll let this be my answer friend, if even a bartender can't help me, maybe there isn't an answer worth finding. Maybe I just need to accept reality. I'll ask my God to bless you, though I don't know if she'll hear. I don't think she's been able to hear me in quite some time. Au revoir, friend."

“Accept the reality’? What the hell d’ya make of that Boozie?” I turned to see Boozie running his hands over the breastplate that Gerard was wearing when he walked in.

“Probably meant thish.”

There was a long silence as I stared at the thing I was planning to rob him of. Minutes passed, then hours. Soon enough even Boozie stumbled/crawled his way back onto the street.

I didn’t sleep that night. Too busy. Too curious. Ah, maybe that’s all just lies. Too concerned, too lost? I couldn’t stop thinking about Gerard... I couldn’t stop thinking about my mother.

Quite frankly, concern isn’t a word I care much for, so I’ll pretend I didn’t think it. Let’s chalk it up to too much of my special concoction from the night before.

Whatever the case, time moves on... it always does.

Boozie walked in (not stumbling this early) as the sun was rising and took a seat. He ordered his usual and I went about spit shining his glass. He’ll ask me why it’s dirty, I’ll tell him I thought he was blind, we’ll share a laugh as if yesterday didn’t happen. After all, who’s to say it did? Maybe it was all my imagination.

Maybe heroes stop existing when the final sentence gets its punctuation.

Maybe we can all live happily with our saviors frozen in that triumphant moment.

Maybe my mother never started down her path of self-destruction.

Maybe-

“The hell is that Old Man? Thought you would’ve hocked that thing with your ‘pre-dawn’ friends. Looks a bit gaudy when compared to the... well... ya know, the rest of your... fine establishment.”

Boozie really needed his morning drink before he was worth talking to... and his afternoon drink... and his evening drink... and his, well you get the point.

Ol' Boozie was talking about the breastplate worth this bar ten times over I had hanging on my wall. He made a good point; I should've had it hocked by now. I could've if I'm being honest. But for some reason, "Ya never know, maybe some heroes have to get called on twice Boozie. Think, if I was responsible for our gallant hero not having proper protection, my bar would have an even worse reputation than now."

"Hm," Boozie threw back his first drink as if it was normal to drink 16 ounces of vodka as a pick-me-up, "you're right, wouldn't want this place sinking any lower than it already has. Just the right amount of degenerates I think, couldn't handle no more."

"I'm sure you'd manage."

Boozie smiled, all twelve of his teeth shining yellow like gold, "It'd be a struggle, but I'm a fighter." He glanced at the breastplate again while I finished pouring his next drink, "Heroes, huh? Do they really even exist? Or is it just normal people polished up for the briefest of moments?"

I stared at the breastplate, or maybe beyond it, pondering this drunkard's question. If he was really a hero, wouldn't he have saved us? Wouldn't he have helped the disenfranchised tearing each other apart not ten feet from my door? I spat in Boozie's glass, the phlegm coating the surface of his drink, "Spose we'll find out if that coat of metal ever comes off my wall, but 'till then, guess we'll stay degenerates. With no savior in sight."

The old, wrinkled, worthless, scumbag, alcoholic raised his phlegm-filled glass, "No hurt in hoping, yeah?" and drained it.

Third Draught: Do Spaceships Float or Fly?

“I may have been born drunk but that doesn’t mean I don’t wanna have some inter-species sex, y’know?”

Why does this man have to be nearly half of my income? “Boozie... how many more drinks ‘till you stop talking to me?”

“Come on Old Man, you’ve seen this bit o’ weaponry. A gun like this’z just gotta be shot! Or wait, I can do better... this uh, this python needs to... to... well, do what pythons do. Right Old Man!”

I’m sure I’ve made this clear by now, but Boozie awakes a certain feeling deep inside of me. That carnal feeling those first humans who found out how easy it is to crush a skull must’ve felt. How easy would it be to pick up a bottle and let it fall... forcefully... onto Boozie’s soft, stupid little head. I don’t know who’s granting wishes in the cosmos, but whoever’s listening: when I inevitably choke Ol’ Boozie with his own intestines, let me be the only one in his will if he’s got anything worth taking, “If you didn’t rip your pants off every goddamn time you got drunk maybe I wouldn’t be about to vomit at the idea of your ‘python’. You just ruined snakes for me. Congrats.”

“See now, I’m eyeing this bit of probably-plant-based-ass over in the corner. Think I got a shot?”

I'd say it's like talking to a wall, but a wall would be far less traumatizing... unless it was stitched together with still-living bodies; endless cries of the suffering begging for an end as their meatflesh melds with their neighbors in the most mentally scarring way possible.

Actually, that's a thinker. One for the vault I guess, which is worse: meat wall or talking to Boozie? Oh, I'm supposed to respond to him aren't I?

I looked toward the thing he was not so subtly nodding at (Boozie levels of alcohol tends to make subtlety a bit of an impossibility).

Now, I'm not a worldly man. I stay in my bar most days and I'm alright with that. But...

No matter how I looked at the creature he was nodding toward I was sure of one thing:

It was a mushroom.

Not even 'looks like a mushroom' no. Just... a mushroom, albeit human sized. That's it. Full stop.

"Uh, Boozie, I gotta feeling that thing isn't looking for your 'python'. I think as long it's got something dead to grow out of it'll be plenty self-sufficient."

"Hm, think I need to cut off circulation or something then?"

"Please, for the love of any God or god or whateverthehell known to astrological beings from across dimensions, go die. It's a mushroom no matter how you look at it you drunken twit."

And then, something happened. Something very nearly life changing. It was as if the big man or matron or whatever in charge of this mess of an existence came down straight to me and whispered the secret of life, cure for warp sickness, and a recipe for penis enlargement pills all at once. Yeah, something on that scale as Boozie said:

"Mushroom's just as good as anything else Old Man!"

And then, I genuinely can't make this up, he started hitting on a mushroom that I'm pretty certain was incapable of comprehension at the least and probably, like most mushrooms, incapable of just about everything else at the most.

Godspeed you horny sonofabitch.

Maybe with him gone I'll actually get some work done. Keeping up with Boozie's orders is, unsurprisingly, quite a task. I looked toward Boozie's seat and began wondering what sort of tools I'd need to actually clean it.

Power tools might do the trick. Maybe a hypersonic-chisel or an InterStellaR™ atom disintegrating spray?

Sadly, both of these things are illegal and probably fictional. So, I figured it would be easier to burn the stool and destroy the counter when I had the time. I started to make some preemptive charges to Boozie's account when the door swung open. Pushed aside almost like the block of pure steel didn't weigh a thing.

How did I know this when I wasn't even looking at the door?

Well, I'm glad you asked. You can learn a lot just from some sounds. Like Boozie being beaten senseless which teaches joy, but this sound was a bit different. It was the sound of a metal slab crashing through my bar's tin walls with splashes of plywood splashed on for good measure. I looked up at the sound to see two things: one was a massive crack straight down the tin where the door smashed through, and two...

an oddly familiar looking woman.

Both, of course, always meant bad news for me.

Not that I know many women, or people in general for that matter, but the one's I do... well... bad news.

At any rate, holes in the walls meant more work and more money. Course, given the reputation of my establishment, it wouldn't look out of place if I just left it. And the body count displayed on my sign out front usually deterred most unwanted guests. But, and I truly hate to keep bringing him up, but that drunken, slobbering... whatever he is, already finds his way in before I open far too often. I really don't think I should make it easier on him. So, I started going about tallying some numbers in my head.

Maybe I actually will replace the counter and stool too while I'm at it. I've been needin' to head back down to the Blue Dot anyway (we can't call it 'Earth' since the Galatic assholes that 'technically' won the war gave the rights to the name to some sentient cow race instead). And I guess my contact did say there was some new info to check out. And she tends to get violent if I don't respond on time. Maybe I'll finally find the piece of the puzzle I need to figure out where my mom's been hiding all these years. I wonder which one of those would be my secondary task and which is the primary. Huh...

At any rate, I should probably focus on the lady that just busted my wall and seems like she wants something from me.

Well, this is a bar.

Within the time I'd been lost in thought she'd already found her way to the counter. Her jackboots, rising right past her knees, made her presence feel a bit too authoritarian. Like she thought she owned the place.

Can't say these are my favorite customers. Some folks come in here all dressed up thinking they're high and mighty, which I guess some might be, but, if anything, that just means I get to charge 'em double. Or triple. Etc.

"I heard this shack sells watered down booze."

“Well now that’s just ludicrous. Downright slander... or libel. Can’t quite remember which is which. At any rate, we sell boozed up water.” A little friendly banter can go a long way in getting a customer to drink themselves unconscious.

A slight grin spread across her face, and oh boy, what a face. She’d obviously been through hell and more. Scars new and old stretched ear to ear and chin to forehead, making it look more like a shadow from a veil than actual skin. Most of her neck was covered in pockmarks that then meandered up her left cheek. She was older. I’d guess forties if she’s a normal human, but even then, I’d bet she’s got some augmentations that’ll keep her past her expiration date. So maybe eighties then, going by the crow’s feet.

Whatever caused those pockmarks must’ve went a bit more than skin deep though. When she spoke, the words sounded normal enough, albeit a bit young for the likely-robotically-preserved eighty-year-old. What was odd was that her mouth just stayed open. It didn’t form any of the usual shapes someone makes when they talk. She just opened her mouth and kept it that way ‘till the words came out. I knew some folks that spoke this way, although it was because they were too poor to afford the vocal cord renewal surgeries. This lady, however, didn’t lack money. Not with the way she was dressed.

She leaned forward on the counter, exposing as much cleavage as she could muster through the ripped top of her red (or bloodstained) blouse, “Funny guy then?”

I’m sure it was a nice enough sight, but being a thirty-three-year-old man whose precious little spare time was filled with either thoughts about my mother or which set of moral rules I broke to end up here as punishment, well... I can’t say I spend too much time lusting these days. “Hardly. Not much room for comedy in a bar like this.” I motioned to one of the tables that actually had customers. They were currently in a heated debate, but instead of words and logic they were just

trying to gouge each other's eyes out, "Ah, and this might make things a bit awkward, but it's kinda an unspoken rule to not point guns at me during business hours."

The grin stayed frozen in time on her face, but her eyes seemed to narrow a bit. Like she was suddenly sizing me up. Ah, what a man I've become where rather than being self-conscious about some chick eyeing me up, I'm getting ready to pull a shotgun on a customer. She twitches, I shoot. Killed a few innocents this way, but I'm still alive so I tend to chalk it up to a win.

Huh, 'spose that there breaks most the moral codes. Still seems a bit overkill to stick me here.

At any rate, that frozen grin seemed to freeze time as well.

Actually... that's not quite right.

It felt like it froze *us* in time.

The bar began to blur behind her as she held my gaze prisoner. Customers shifted about, left, and passed out. A lightbulb in the far corner finally flickered out for good. Light poured through the holes in the walls as low-orbit cruisers drifted back to their ports and the cargo companies filled the new blank spots of space. Shipping goods from rock to rock: interstellar and interplanetary. The wooden shack floor squeaked with every little movement and where it didn't squeak it was only due to the wood being worn down to the artificial dirt underneath. I'd like to add in some cliché about a solitary plant growing out of that dirt, and me watching it grow in the time this woman stared me down. But plants don't grow that fast, not to mention plants don't grow on these asteroids. We're the only weeds that get to live on these man-made rocks. Meh, that line was probably cliché enough to make up for it.

She broke eye contact, looking quite satisfied, and sat down on Boozie's recently vacated stool, shooting her left foot up to perch on the stool beside her. Like half a squat. Can't imagine

that being comfortable. Gotta wonder if she might be blind to sit down on that stool though. Boozie's habitat isn't exactly inconspicuous.

“Give a girl something strong, aye?”

“I should probably ignore the obvious line here right?”

“A man who won't take a second look at my tits is plannin' ta make an order for a drink some kinda innuendo?” She started to laugh, but stopped almost immediately, “Hm, ‘second look’? Can't take a second look when ya didn't take a first huh? Don't quite ring as nicely though with ‘first look’ does it?”

Amazing, ‘inuendo’ one moment and shanty speak the next. I set the drink down in front of her. Seems like I won't need to worry about this one, just a bit of a screw loose I guess. The fact she looked familiar did still have me on edge however.

The only other woman I can say I know was a fellow experiment back in the orphanage. Thanks to our illegal augmentations from that horror house we managed to find some interesting work. She went a bit further than me though as far as ‘work’ goes. She managed to become the defacto leader of the revolutionaries, or terrorists depending on which side you took. Makes her a great source of information but considering she's one of the few who know about my augments she tends to, hm, let's say ‘politely ask’ me to do some very bothersome tasks. Ah, I'm getting away from the issue though aren't I. I guess what I'm getting at is that, if I recognize her, she's probably not someone I want in my bar for long.

I headed down the counter, finally able to escape Boozie's wretched domain. The smell would follow me, sure, but I won't puke regularly if I'm not nearby. And, with any luck, that smell will have her outta my bar soon enough.

As I started to take a knife to some gunk that was cemented onto the tabletop, something finally clicked: familiar woman who spoke shanty speak, wore jackboots, and had a blouse with some oddly blood colored stains on it?

I have seen this woman before, just not in the normal sense.

Her wanted poster is stuck on a board outside my bar.

Sonofabitch, this chick's a pirate.

And not just any pirate.

She's the pirate king of our solar system. Has some fancy base in plain site on Pluto, although some folks say she turned the whole planet into the base. Works like a damn net for any incoming long-haul ships. I hear most people consider her a legitimate planetary governor these days. Guess they think it's easier to just make her official rather than try to explain to every alien dignitary why a psychotic cult of murderers has taken over an entire planet... well, not technically a planet I guess. With all the modifications and work done out there it's actually managed to check the third box for planet status, it's just in the scope of intergalactic relations, the semantics of it all has become a bit silly.

Whatever, a big enough rock is a planet to me.

Even if our oh-so-wonderful governing corporations decided to go another way on the issue, the only viable alternative to denying the pirate king's legitimacy is to get murdered by her. Turns out pirate kings are pretty well versed in murdering folks. The fact that individual systems aren't allowed to have militaries also puts a bit of a damper on any real action. I mean, we have garrisons sure, but the only people who sign up for garrison duty do it for food, not for fighting.

But me, being the man I am, I saw only one thing within this situation. It was like my libido finally managed to get out of first gear as I eyed her up and made my plans like I do with any

customer that has a bit too much money. This pirate girl is nothing but a new paycheck for me to cash in. I mean come on, a bounty like hers? If I can count on the government to keep their word, I won't have to worry about cash for quite some time.

On the other hand, she *is* a pirate king. A pirate king who drags a trail of bodies behind her ship like tin cans at a wedding. The horrors this girl has committed could turn the stomach of berserker-kin. I've heard stories about her slaughtering entire asteroids just like this because she got drunk on bad booze.

...

Ah, that's the ticklish bit then, isn't it?

I was heading back toward her in an instant, pulling an expensive bottle from under the counter on the way. I'm not letting this fish off the hook, so I better use some good bait. I had the bottle opened and poured a new glass (one that was actually clean, thank god), and when I turned to slide it in front of her, I realized she still hadn't taken a drink of her first pour. She was just staring at me. It almost seemed like she wanted to ask a question, but I wasn't too confident that it wasn't just a 'about to blow your head off for fun' stare. She's got a record of switching from good times to dead bodies faster than the average cutthroat.

"Hey barman, something is seeming a bit strange about this situation, dontcha think?"

And just like that my hand was back to the shotgun under the counter. Although, now that I know who she is, I'm not sure I've got the best odds. Before I could start making a mental note of things that would get stolen before anyone even attempted to treat my inevitable gun shots wounds, she continued.

“Ya’ve gave me my drink and we’ve had a bit of... was it ban-shee or ban-ter? Hm, no no, it was banter, aye. ‘Banshee’s open with a shriek, but banter closes with murder!’ and that guy from the Martian Mailer said that rhyme would na’er come in handy!”

Oh shotgun, it’s a regular school dance for us tonight isn’t it? Hands on to hands off, except the teacher looking over this one is threatening murder rather than demerits. Then again, it’s not like the orphanage ever had dances, but I like to think the analogy still hits home, “I’ll go ahead and guess not all banter leads to murder with you. I couldn’t imagine you having the crew you do if that was the case Captain Clementine.” Saying the name alone had me sweating bullets. I really hope I look more clam than I feel.

“Oh no no, not at all. I mean, it did with him. But, ya see barman, he wrote an article that just didn’t seem quite fair. Every right, I had. I mean, it’d be hard to put the blame on me when the whole company agreed it was a bad article too dontcha think?” She said it like she actually believed it, amazing. Hard to disagree with the pirate that just murdered your boss I imagine. “Oh and don’t go callin’ me Clementine barman, not so found o’ the name meself, bit of an old joke from a historian I was leading on while I was land side. Heluva technique on that one,” she paused to lick her lips, “but all that history stuff really got under me skin y’know? He says’d ta me ‘You should call yourself Clementine! Pirates from the old days used to need citrus to prevent scurvy, it’ll be like a joke!’ then he rambled on about the origin not being the right period or some such rot, told me it wouldn’t actually be funny. So I took the name anyway, in remembrance see? At any rate, found out I hate the name, so just call me Cap’n then.”

There are times when you’ve got plenty of questions but shouldn’t ask them. I think this is one of those times. From that little taste, I’m afraid any questions into her love life will lead down quite the spiral and will end up with a lot more ‘in remembrance’s’. It’s times like these, and

only times like these, when I wish Boozie was around to soak up a few bullets in the worst case and let me sneak away before any of that in the best case. Ah, what I'd do for a drunk to put their body between mine and this murderer, "Alright then Cap'n. I uh, think this whole exchange started with a question you didn't get around to. 'I gave you drinks and banter' or something?"

For a moment, her eyes started to narrow again. Guess I'll check 'reminding' off my list of things I can do to pirate kings. But, like I said, it was just a moment. It was like she had to run through her own list of 'what warrants killing' before she was willing to jump back in, "Yeah, 'spose I did have a question I hadn't asked yet. I was thinking why I haven't been givin' you the honor of telling me your name yet."

You know what? I'm starting to think this isn't gonna be worth it quite frankly... no, no. I need this. This sorta money can change a life, it can change my life. Just ease into it, that's all. I pulled out my flask and took a pull of it, "Most people call me Old Man, but the name doesn't matter. We're just a barkeep and a customer, hardly a relationship worth remembering names over."

She laughed, slamming that first cheap glass on the counter and spilling most of the contents onto her blouse, adding yet another stain, "I normally just drink with my sailors, but I 'spose you'll do for the night." She smirked and, for the first time, it seemed like there was actually joy there, "Now, am I gonna have to drink this piss water, or are you gonna give me some o' that quality booze ya've taken out?"

I slid her the new glass that I hadn't thought to let go of, what with the sudden murderous tension. It was still only halfway full, so I wasn't giving too much ground, but I was really hoping to keep this stuff for a rainy day. I shook my head, my black hair (alright, maybe more gray than black these days) waving slightly. Huh, judging by the lack of liquid in this bottle I'm guessin' I'll

need to pick up some more if I want to get drunk on decent booze in the future. Guess I'll be moving that trip to the Blue Dot up a bit further in the schedule.

Now, Cap'n here was short and she was small. Biologically speaking, she shouldn't be able to keep this up for too long. But, on the other hand, she was a pirate king, so I'd wager she can handle her own. That only leaves the question of how long she's sticking around in this dump. Can't imagine her visiting for fun, so I'm sure she's got her crew offloading some crank-sticks for the locals.

Damn, I'm gonna love sending this piece of human garbage off to an execution.

Odd, where'd that come from? She's just doing her business, that's all it is. Not like I'm doing much different anyway. I'm just looking for cash, not any sorta moral garbage. Business as usual, that's it.

So, she can probably hold her own in a game of booze. Looks like it'll be another night of listening to some drunkard's rambling. You'd think I'd be used to it by now. Hell, it's practically *in* the job description.

She took the whole drink in one go and proceeded to smash the empty glass onto the floor with a shout of triumph. If the cups I had were anything other than odds and ends I pulled out of dumpsters I'm sure I'd have lost it just then. I started on pouring her another,

and another,

and another,

and she still wasn't slowing down. Seems like being a pirate trumps being small when it comes to drinking after all.

I realized I could fall back on the barkeeper code: smile and nod. Drunks tend to talk to themselves more often than not anyhow, so it rarely mattered if you paid close attention or not.

Course, with a pirate king, I had to be a tad bit more careful. A wrong nod with some moon laborer would earn me a few bad words, and the lunar dialect meant I didn't understand them anyway, but a wrong word with Cap'n here? I have this strange gut feeling that I won't get to have gut feelings anymore if I nod when I should've shaken.

But she kept on, and I kept nearby.

Not because I thought nodding was doing any good in getting her more drunk, no I was sure by this point she didn't care that someone was there, I think she was really just telling the stories for herself. Old age getting to her? Maybe a bit senile?

Yeah, another question to not ask.

No, I wasn't there to listen anymore, it was just that I couldn't get away. Cap'n here was putting down every drink within a minute of me setting it down. We're already past my 'premium' collection, and I'm starting to worry she's gonna taste the difference.

"So, this man comes up to me on one of dem rocks offa Venus, wait... 'comes up to me offa'? That ain't sounding right does it? Well, it's what happened though, sure as Ol' Ad Astra be the god o' the stars, this man comes right onta our ship in his space canoe. Y'know, one of them canoe lookin', uh... one of them, what do they call 'em? Like-a, like-a plant maybe? From those tall lanky streetlight lookin' fellas a couple galaxies o'er. Funnels? No. Fondue? No, no, that's the cheese, or the dessert, anti-respectively." She was lost in thought, chewing on a bullet. Well, 'chewing' might not be right, she'd lost her dogtooth and was mashing the bullet against her gums, trying to fit it in the gap. "Ah! That's it: fungus. Yeah yeah I got it. Crew says I've quite the brain and I gotta say, they must be onta something. Sharp as a whip, quick as a tack and all the rest."

She went quiet again, looking quite deep in thought. I... I genuinely have no idea what she was pausing at. That whole thing seemed to warrant a couple of pauses for consistency's sake. She

let out a bark of laughter which then cascaded into a fit of table pounding and yelling at one of the other customers who was, of course, unconscious. It didn't stop Cap'n from lobbing a few good-natured death threats his way though. I started to wonder if she was going to get back to the story she started with, but then again, I think I already forgot where she started myself.

“Whips aren't sharp Old Man. Well, cept for some as it is. Those pointed head, six-armed, gymnast looking'uns from that star, the uh, the 'Ending Star'? They got some fancy whips. Sharp as them is sure enough to split ya in twain and I hear ya won't be nearly as good of a writer.” She wiggled her eyebrows, suggesting she made some clever joke. I offered a tired smile, not sure if the joke went above my head or if it was nonexistent, “Alien shit huh? Now, this fella paddles... do ya paddle in space? Y'know what? Stupid question. He comes on up ta the ship in his lil' ol' fungal canoe beggin' for some of these crank-sticks y'know? Y'know how people get. Absolutely lose it o'er the stuff the addicts do. So he's got his kid in with him and he says to us 'He works hard, doesn't stop, knows his life isn't worth more than what he does with it.' or something like that. Hm, no, yeah, that was it exact. Got a thinkin' for this sorta rememberin' stuff. No wait, 'brain'. Brain for it. I do...”

It's amazing, it's like she overloads herself and has to shut down every so often to let things cool down, although I'm still not even sure where she's at here.

'Crank-sticks' though. Of course. She runs them all over our solar system, obviously her stories will have them. I managed to hold back from spitting into her next drink, settling instead with using the counter rag to wipe out the glass. Pirates probably don't catch diseases, maybe cause they've already caught them all, but it helps the conscience to know I'm trying.

Huh, that's the second time now I've lost it a bit.

Just cause my Mom wasted away with the stuff? That's her own damn fault, isn't it? I can't really blame the worthless scum that sold the stuff... 'worthless scum' huh? They're just making their own money, aren't they? It's like I can't stop.

"Yup, quite the noggin', as they call it. So's anyway, I buy his kid, shorted him on the crank-sticks too, cause he was a addict and couldn't tell ya see? Just business is all. I've a good brain for business too, er... head? Head. Head for business. And the kid, well he turns out to be quite the worker, just as the da saysd. So I turn him loose on Posie's Pockets. Me ship, see? Works a storm, bow to stern, clean as a virgin, or a damn good prostitute. No nasties and no pissin' cream, right as the rains o' the Dot. 'Afore the Industry Hemisphere bill at least. Loved the boy, not too much though. There's a reason why ya don't see his race in the pornos. Mostly the whole kid spittin' process for them fungus-y folks being asexual and what not. Still, loyal as a brick wall. Stalwart? He'd do anything asked o' him. Got in a scuffle off GC 48a here by the ol' Dot and this boy, slave as he is and sold by his own da, jumps right in front of a seeker bullet from a GCA, one o' them assassin folk the corporations hire to off each other's CEOs. Silly, I was wearing enough plates to stop a Holy Federation's sanctified shell, the one's big around as a bus though they say the real power comes from God. Can ya believe it?"

I hate to sound like a broken record, which I hate almost as much as repeating idiotic clichés, but I'm truly, entirely, lost. It's a constant barrage of corrections and re-corrections mixed with tangents and sprinkled with that shanty speak that deserves a goddamn translator. A boy gets sold by his father and tries to get himself killed so he doesn't have to live with the abandonment? Happens every day. She may not sound the brightest at times, but there's no doubt in my mind that Cap'n could outthink just about anybody. She's that dangerous kinda smart that knows she's got more to learn. Still a bit of a cocky twit though, all things considered. And a worthless good-for-

nothing pirate as well I suppose. Strange, hearing her for, what? An hour? Just an hour and she's already starting to pull me into her mindset, her morality. A morality that justifies needless killing and pumping anyone she can with drugs but a morality nonetheless. Then again, maybe I wasn't so different to start with... just a different frame maybe? Agh, snap out of it, plenty of better people have been sent to the gallows. I shook my head, trying to escape this train of thought before it took me somewhere, Ol' Ad Astra forbid, philosophical.

As it turns out, shaking my head was the right answer to her question as well, "Right? 'Bus sized' shouldn't be the end all be all. Sure, shooting a bus sized round might be fun the first few times, but it just gets sad when ya realize that's the end of bullets. Like when ya say 'deeper' and there ain't no more ta give. Makes for a depressin' night, that's for sure. So, the boy gets his leg shot off, as ya do when ya block a bullet from a GCA, he don't scream though. Here's the odd bit, this is at least a decade or so after he got sold like cattle, and he says 'Is this enough dad?'. Can ya believe it? Betrayed at every bit of it and still asks for, uh, whatever the word is. Absolution? Hm, maybe I'm still stuck on tha priest's bullet bit huh? Any rate, I snap my gun in two and shove the stock right up his stump of a leg, more like a stick of a leg given his lank, and tell him he ain't done enough to get on a wanted poster and so he ain't done enough for nothing. Still has it lodged in him ta this day."

For the first time since seeing her, she truly looked regretful at her decisions. She slid a finger around her empty glass, making it hard not to look at the four other fingers where a line of organic thread separated skin that was obviously hers from skin that, and here comes the vomit, from skin that she clearly wasn't born with. She let out a sigh and let her red hair pool around her as she put her face on the counter. Well the hair's normal and less stomach turning thankfully.

Just as a reminder though, this is Boozie's counter, so I wasn't sure she would live through being that close to... well... I don't need to explain it do I? I was hoping to use this as an opportunity to escape, but apparently I was a bit too loud. She looked up at me. It was... odd. Her scarlet hair poured down her face, almost like a cascading bit of lava; slowly but surely letting gravity carry it down. Her eyes were nearly hidden behind this curtain of crimson, making her look far more drunk than she really was. She uh... she reminded me.

I think...

It was the same exact way my mother looked.

She looked like that whenever I came down in the mornings and she was just managing to lever herself off the floor from her late-night crank-stick journey. A hint of shame covered almost entirely by disorientation.

I hate this woman.

Which woman?

...

"Now, why'dya think I told ya that story Old Man?"

Sadism? Some awful psychological torture? "Couldn't say Cap'n."

"Well, either ya guess," she looked toward the door, a slight twinkle in her eye as she brushed her hair back into place, "or I burn this rock and throw the ashes into tha eye o' Jupiter."

There we are, now I remember who I'm dealing with. Not just some oddity of a customer. No, a right proper murderous, rampaging pirate. Great, "To uh, show me the downsides of selling your kid just so he can die protecting a pirate and getting a gun shoved up his leg?"

"No, no, he's quite alive. Been that way since he was born, or so he says ta me. Right hand man nowadays. A real proper pirate he is, though a bit tame. Helps to bring balance though. Sin the

same... or tin and grain? No, something black and white... newspaper! Huh, that don't sound right," she collapsed in a fit of laughs, again, "Get it? Newspaper? 'right'? Like the other right, write a newspaper? Ah, wait, oh! Yin and yang, yeah, there we are. No Old Man, the goal was a bit more complex."

And suddenly those eyes seemed to pause us in time again. The world kept on while we stayed stalled. It was unnerving. It felt like she was seeing something she wasn't supposed to. Something I couldn't even put a name to... or maybe wouldn't. The boy lived? Besides the moderately hilarious fact he's walking around with the stock of a rifle sticking out of his shin, there's probably another question that I'd ask: after all that, does he still want to please his

parent?

How much does this woman see? How much am I supposed to have figured out? I opened my mouth, but no words came out. My tongue was lead in my own mouth, refusing to move. Refusing. I knew it needed to be said. But, I didn't want to say it. I never wanted to. But, then why was I still searching for anything and everything related to my mother? Spending all my damn money seeking out some drug addict who left me not even a year after that war. Why. Why. WHY. WHY!

why

"He screamed the rest of the battle with that scrap sticking out his leg, and I'd bet my left nut, if'n I had one, that he wouldn'ta screamed nearly so loudly if he had some booze in him. So, there's yer lesson! Keep the booze comin' Old Man!"

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I poured her drink, filled to the brim while I was lost in thought.

Been a long time since I poured a full glass.

She lapsed back into stories of no consequence. But I couldn't get those ideas out of my head. It had to stop. Dammit, there had to be something to that. Does the kid still wanna see his dad even now? Does he still seek approval even now? After a decade and more and finding a home with these pirate scum? Is family still so important.

I have to know, and so I asked, "I get the story was just for a refill, a bit long-winded though if I'm being honest Cap'n. But uh, ya got me curious. Did that kid finally realize he doesn't need his dad? That he can live a good enough life without that sorta sentimental garbage?" I turned to polish a glass, hands shaking. Damn.

"Hm," she drained the glass, of course, and continued, "that's a story for another time. Too hard to remember right now, see? Ah! How 'bout 'till I'm proper drunk and ready enough for that one I give ya a better one? Wanna hear about some pirate business?"

I slid her another drink. This better be worth it.

"Ah, a stiff one, which is perfect ta lead to the first one!"

"Ah, done early Cap'n? This one didn't measure up either?"

"He gave it his best I 'spose, hardly worth da time though if'n I'm being honest. Feel a bit robbed I do." Wrong "Er, robbed. Still not drafty enough here ta be robbed."

"Indeed Cap'n. I'll send for your lighter outfit immediately. Will we be needing to... dispose, of your guest?"

Dispose? Zell's race sure pickup on this language stuff too easy. Dispose ain't like 'spose is it? No, you can't not 'spose can ya? That'd just not be knowing. Oh wait, 'dispose' like 'throw those' as in 'in the trash'. Ah, 'do I want my guest killed?' "Aye Zell, have him offa my ship however ya like." I pulled my lace breaches up and tossed on the blouse, both blacker than the space we're floatin' in. Probably sexy, mostly just gonna be a help for the bit ahead I'd imagine.

Gonna need ta have guile... wait no. Be agile, yeah, for this next bit. Well, maybe have some guile as well, "Walk with me Zell."

"Of course. Let me just find someone to get this cleaning done."

That's why I have the boy as my first mate, young as he may be. Or may not be. Ain't know how his race ages. Don't matter. He caught up quick enough to not have me in a fit. He's good at tellin' my mood, and right now I'm a wee bit on edge, "That goddamn peg leg's making more noise than Ol' Posie's Pockets's engines after a long warp. Oughta change the damn thing out, doesn't suit ta have a first mate making so much noise, hear?" Noise? Hear? That had me rolling. Put me in a bit of a better mood. Zell didn't seem ta get it though, slow with jokes I guess.

"I'm sorry Cap'n, but it was you who put this stock in my leg. It's a memory I hold in high regard. I can change if you wish it, of course."

Oh? Regards it does he? Well, 'spose I'll let him hold onta it a bit longer then, "Bah, hardly matters Zelly," hates it when I call him that, "now how's our little operation been going."

"We've managed to hack into five of the eight carrier craft that were heading out from the Vault in Jupiter's inner sanctum. Four of those are actually filled, the other one was taken too early and is still empty. My deepest apologies Cap'n, I'll have the man thrown to Ad Astra as soon as we make some distance from Jupiter."

Incompatible or incompetence? Both maybe. Both likely. Any rate, not what I wanted ta hear. I whipped out my void pistol, dark as night and able to fire even if you're stranded in the middle o' space. The barrel was lookin' straight toward some unfortunate deckhand, so's, as ya do, I started squeezing the trigger. First rule of guns: don't point 'em at anything you're not wantin' ta kill. Easier rule for a pirate. His sack-cloth breeches started to darken. He pissed himself? I really tried to keep my composure, believe me, but ya just can't kill a man who pissed himself can ya?

“Right, well, give ‘em food and water for a month, alright Zell? Give him some time ta, ya know, do some thinkin’ afore he dies. And you,” I raised my gun barrel and tapped it on my shoulder a couple o’ times, “Those hardly look like pants you’d wanna be buried in, right? Go change into something your mother wouldn’t mind seein’ in a casket.”

“Handled beautifully as always Cap’n. I’m humbled by your skills with the crew.”

Hard to tell when this light post lookin’ monstrosity was being sarcastic or not. I mean, he never is, but I like ta think he might be, keeps me on me toes. Hard to read a face that’s twelve-foot above ya and looks like a rectangle with holes punched through. Not all the way through though, just enough to where ya could tell something *had* to be in there. Looked like maggots to me, but he said they’re just cosmic worms. Guess they pollinate ‘im or something? Meh, doesn’t much serve to think on it, “So I’ll be guessin’ those robot guard fellas didn’t take too kindly to us stealin’ their ships? And people, I guess. D’ya consider robots people? Have we? Will we? No, no, robots aren’t people, that’s why we call ‘em robots right?” Wouldn’t do to have a thing o’ iron be called human would it? I mean, I guess we got cyborgs, but they still got some skin... usually. Hm, maybe robots are people? Wait, no, I used ‘people’ as a descriptor for their group, so it ain’t matter, right? Right. “So?”

“You are wise beyond the wisest Cap’n, truly a question only you will be able to solve, I’m sure. I eagerly await your answer, but until then, they have sent out their planetary guard forces. A hundred smaller quick-response craft with a few thousand larger ships in tow.”

“Bit much I’d think.”

“Yes well, we have just taken half of, well, something like mercury’s GDP I suppose. I don’t think they’re willing to overlook such a thing.”

“Aye, we did, didn’t we?”

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...

“Bit stingy, eh Zell?”

“Entirely Cap’n. Should we begin our retreat, or shall I draw up plans to fight to the death?”

“Dying ain’t so bad, but I’d rather do it with a few cameras rollin’ and stabbin’ something that bleeds rather than leaks oil. Let’s get outta here right quick yeah? Forward full! Or hoist the sails? One of ‘em, surely.”

“Surely Cap’n.”

The roar of Ol’ Posie’s engines rattled me ta me bones. Like the bones were being tapped on, playin’ out some god-awful melody only meant for the ears o’ the deaf. Telephone? No, phonograph? Hm... no, no it was a way o’ speakin’ without the words... “Xylophone!”

“I can hardly comprehend your inner workings Cap’n, though I’m sure they’re simply too far above my understanding. Would you perhaps phrase our escape plan in a few more words? Preferably not musically based. A thousand apologies, but I’m not quite familiar with human instruments.”

One of the scout craft sent out by those robotic sonsabitches landed a grappling hook on my girl’s hull. I grabbed hold o’ one of the swivel guns and set the charge to two and seven sixteenths. Given the scout ship’s size, it should be the perfect charge to head through deck and more all the way ta the engine. Sure as Ad Astra has tits like super novas, the ship’s engine popped like a bug that’s been under a lookin’ glass for too long. That’ll teach these metallic mistakes to touch a girl’s ship without askin’ or payin’, “Killin’ these factory defects ain’t gonna be easy. Usin’ too much charge already. You wanna tell me why the hell we ain’t movin’ lamp post? Shoulda

been gone by now.” The crew was firin’ every damn gun we had, but they’re worthless at it. If only I could crew a ship meself. Now *that’d* be a crew. No wait, is one person a crew? Does a crew need multiple people? No, no that ain’t make any sense given you can ‘crew’ something. A single person can crew somethin’ can’t they? But you’d crew something that needs a crew, right? So to crew you’d need a crew?

The sound of more hooks lodgin’ themselves into me ship broke my train of thought. Posie was just startin’ to pick up some speed.

“We are moving, although slowly. Apologies Cap’n, normally we would use the warp, but these robots have a knack for tracking ships through warping sequences. Our only course of action is to rely on Posie’s engines and your navigational skills.”

The lanky lamp post I call my first mate walked over to the enemy hooks embedded in Posie’s Pockets. Movin’ too calm and too calculated, he touched each and every chain, beginning a process of decontaminatio- wrong, decomposition. Decomposition. Yeah. Chains started to rust and fall apart not too long after the touch. Within a few moments he was back beside me at the stern, arms behind his back and rectangle-lookin-head facin’ forward.

Ol’ Posie was nearing cruisin’ speed. Now was the issue of which way we’d be heading. Headin’ home to Pluto would be the best course o’ action. The rock is built like a fortress. Or I built it like a fortress? Wasn’t quite on the ground for it, but she’s still me home. Good ol’ Pluto. Thing’s honeycombed with a million and more tunnels leadin’ every which way, even got the main line that heads straight on through. Fun as Ad Astra’s drunken parties to try to run ships through that. Gotten more than a few of my boys impaled on ice runnin’ that route! Ah well, sure they deserved it.

The entire ship rocked as a scout ship with a goddamn plow ran into our side and started to turn us starboard. Back to Jupiter. Gah. Gotta stop gettin' lost in the ol' headspace. Plenty of time to screw about, both literally and figuratively, once I'm back on icy ground. Focusfocusfocusfocus!

"Zell! Gimme a time on the next chunk o' their pathetic fleet. I wanna make like all my weddings and be good and truly gone 'fore they start ya'hear?" I ran straight to the wheelhouse fast as I ever had. Damn blouse doesn't hold for shit. Oughta jus' take some rope and tie the girls down.

I latched onto the wheel like a long-lost lover that I actually wanted to find and started doin' what I was best at: that bein' most everythin'. A few levers scattered about let me take control o' most every gun on the deck as well me full broadsides. Looks like Ad Astra has taken the time to keep everything workin' together properly today cause all my guns were charged to perfection. Or maybe my crew isn't so bad? No, won't let 'em have that. I let loose all me' port side guns at once, emasculating... immolating? Eviscerating! Well, they probably all work just as well. Er, robots ain't got genders though do they? Well, two outta three.

Course the guns ain't got no recoil, being lasers and all. But that ship blowing to pieces sure gave us a jolt. The blast got Ol' Posie turn'd straight at the edge of Jupiter.

Those ten seconds flew by, but ten seconds is a heluva lotta time, "Zell you good for nothing stick, where the hell are my times? Or when! Whichever!" One o' those cosmic maggots was juttin' outta his brick of a face. It stretched nearly a full foot, ribbed and bending. It kept stretchin' from him, and just as I was wonderin' if I'd be a good enough shot to blast it in two (I am) it sunk back into Zell, rockin' him backward, nearly on his non-existent ass.

“One minute thirty-six seconds until twenty-three of their lighter ships are on us, the next largest will be a full five minutes and eighteen seconds. A margin of error of three and one fourth seconds when taking into account possibilities of faulty engines or bugs in their programming.”

The lamp post was reachin’ into its bag which meant it was time to turn away. I get that it’s basically a mushroom, but even pirates don’t wanna see someone rubbin’ themselves down in week-old remains of... whatever he’d killed recently. No point in dwellin’ on it, got work to do. I threw a few more levers and the ship jolted forward. This’ll eat up the engines, but better than being eaten meself. Couldn’t imagine robots eatin’ people though. Might just tear us inta bits, huh? But if they put us in bits, surely someone’s bound ta eat us? Maybe.

“Cap’n, apologies, but it seems like we might be heading toward Jupiter rather than... away.”

“Aye.”

“Ah, well... I, being of such low intellect, must admit I don’t quite see the point of heading *back* to the planet filled with enemies. I’m sure I’m merely blind to your genius, but...”

Those maggots can make the boy smart in a thousand ways, but he still can’t see the suicidally-large pictures. I kept us full ahead. The ship started sinkin’ fast as we skirted too close to Jupiter.

“Apologies Cap’n, is the plan still centered around living? I tend to be more efficient when I know the end goal Cap’n.”

These robotic guard dogs started swingin’ wide behind us. Well, the bigger fleet. Them twenty-three small fry were still tryin’ ta tail us. I’m guessin’ their main fleet is gonna try to surround the planet on all sides once we dive in while the smaller craft chase us into their net. Damn good use of their numbers, that’s for sure.

“Cap’n?”

Jupiter’s gravity was really started to bite into us now. Jaw’s clenched and suckin, but that sure as hell won’t get anyone ta finish. No, no. Not the time for innuendos. Oughta be focusin’ more on the crescendos. So as the virile, shit, virtuous, double shit *Virtuoso*, aye, that sounds better. As the virtuoso I should be directin’.

Sounds.

Crescendo.

Virtuoso.

Dammit, this was no time to be laughin’, though I did all the same. So, as my crew looked ta me with fear stainin’ their breeches, ‘fore even a one of ‘em could think to start raisin’ the heat shields, I threw every last lever I had and put our engines near to burstin’. Like a spicket unthawed by Spring, Ol’ Posie’s engines started throwin’ out everything they could... there we go me, nice job not makin’ the obvious innuendo.

“Cap’n? I hate to be a bother, but I think I could be more help if-”

“Shut yer mouth ya stick of stalks, this here’s the finicky bit so don’t go distractin’ me. Agh, wait a minute! D’ya even have a mouth? No matter, just shut it all!”

“I’m afraid that may kill me Cap’n.”

Times like these I wish I had a third arm so’s I could use it ta shoot his other leg off and still keep me hands where they were needed, “We’re swingin’ ya stupid maggot havin’, planet huggin’, poorly seasoned, mushroom lookin’ waste of life!”

“I know your sexual desires are something to be in awe of, but is it quite the right time to be talking about swinging? Er, wait, did you by chance mean slinging? Of course, it all makes

sense, we'll use the gravity to our advantage then. Truly a perfect plan Cap'n. Your ability of forward thinking astounds me, I'm hardly even worthy to serve y-"

"SHADDUP AND GET THE CREW READY 'AFORE I PAN FRY YA!"

"Of course, Cap'n."

The downside was we'd be headin' toward Mars rather than Pluto. Upside was we'd be runnin' through the solar dump, or I guess some still call it the asteroid belt. More trash than rocks nowadays though. When those clanky, circuit covered freaks in the big fleet come 'round they'll give up 'fore they try and head through that. Sensors can't handle analyzing all the debris I'd guess.

Posie's Pockets finally managed to pull away enough for us to get the full effect. Ya could tell we were being slung pretty well given the handful of my crew flyin' off and bein' vaporized by our stellar-travel shield. Luckily, they weren't the good ones. But lookin' back at their non-existent corpses made me realize some o' those metal husks had a bit more smarts than I gave 'em credit for.

"Cap'n," Zelly boy was climbin' the crow's nest, settlin' into his defensive position, "it appears we've been followed. I believe they may have updated the future forecasting capabilities of these models."

Zell settled into a pile of... whatever he kept up there. I don't much care for this bit o' his, but he started spurtin' out spores all over me damn ship. Can't stand all these mushrooms, ah well. The spores started takin' hold on a few o' me crew while the ten of those robo-ships started headin' our way. Those fellas, with fungus coatin' nearly their whole body, walked to the stern and seemed to wait peacefully.

"What're ya usin' my crew for this time, lamp post?"

"I believe this will be an effective way of stopping this chase, Cap'n."

“Well, if ya screw up your plan like the waste of a pizza topping you are, I’ll handle it my way and give ‘em a good brocade... no, no that doesn’t sound right does it?”

“I do hope I can prove to be a valuable pizza topping in your eyes Cap’n, but I believe my idea here might save us the broadside-”

Ol’ Zelly started coughin’ something fierce. Sounded like he was dry heavin’. A few of those cosmic worms started pushin’ out of his head with every fit. Seemed ta me like they were almost gettin’ out. He coughed again. Closer. Closer. Closer. Finally, one o’ them sonsabitches flew right outta the hole on top of his block head. It came crashin’ down right into the fungal soup that was pilin’ up in Zell’s crow’s nest. Zell kept on:

“Apologies Cap’n, it seems my body is falling apart a little bit. Nonetheless, this should save us some charge on your cannons in case you need them later on.”

“Well...” come on Zelly boy, a couple o’ broadsides don’t even up with your life, “well don’t go dyin’ on me shit-stick. Not every Cap’n gets a twelve-foot telescope like you. Be a shame if’n I lost ya ‘fore I got the right use outta ya.”

“Of course Cap’n, I’m sure I’ll still have time left after this.”

For a stick-thin lamp post he sure is thick, or dense. Don’t they both work? Well, people can certainly be thick. Aye, that sounds right. And people can be dense as well. Are they the same thing then? Y’know what, hardly matters does it? “More time? I’m afraid you’ll hafta do better than that Ol’ Zelly boy! You’ll be workin’ for me till this little star o’ ours finally pops!”

We entered the solar dump and had every type o’ trash ya can imagine flyin’ at us. Half the crew headed up ta the top deck. Nearly a thousand o’ my louts were mannin’ guns on the upper deck of Posie’s Pockets. The other thousand inside were keepin’ her runnin’ as well as a few more on guns below deck. Ya’d usually warp through this bit o’ cosmic trash, but if ya were headin’ in

raw, which I certainly ain't allowin' normally, you'd need all guns blastin'. Stellar-travel shields could only take so much abuse after all.

All guns blastin'?

Headin' in raw?

I really wish we were outta this already so I could give that'un the proper laugh it deserves.

A strange clickin' noise was getting' louder. Sounded like it was comin' from the crow's nest, but I had a few chunks of space station and a discarded relocation asteroid that I was tryin' to sew a line through. Well that doesn't sound quite right does-

A series of explosions was soundin' off right behind us. Had me nearly on me ass. I turned around and saw the strangest damn site I'd ever seen.

And I've seen plenty o' strange sites. Happens when ya take aliens ta bed though.

Any rate, the crew Zell had mushrooms growin' out of were jumpin' off. Some sorta outer coating kept 'em from fully burnin' up in our stellar shields, then they'd land on some floatin' trash and latch ta it. This here's the weird bit: the bodies would start growin' like how a corpse bloats up when it's been left out for a few days. Then BAM mushrooms start pourin' out from the thing and attaching all over the rocks and space garbage, makin' a little web. In comes the robots and, needless ta say, their ships couldn't quite make it through the spawnin' ... hm... *spontaneous* webs.

“Then we had smooth sailing... sailing doesn't sound right does it? Y'know what, I like it, and we use solar sails every now and then anyway. Yeah, sailing it is! Smooth it was! From then on, as it were.”

‘Oh Boozie! Back already? Enjoy your fling? I don't suppose you could listen to this middle aged looking eighty-year old prattle on for a while?’ ‘Oh of course Old Man, I'll get right

on that, you just go relax somewhere quiet, and you know what? I'm gonna stop puking all over your bar!' Come on Boozie, hurry it up.

Space mushrooms, bank heists, and robot chase sequence? It would almost be an interesting story if not for... well, the fact that it didn't go down that way at all.

The 'incident' was all over the news and this chick thinks she can throw it at me like some lighthearted story? That chunk of change she stole led to the Great Mercurial Depression which, aside from having a very unfortunate name, led to half the planet starving to death.

I can't wait to turn this woman over and get my money.

Then again, I've thrown something like four bottles at her and she still doesn't miss a step. Or maybe I can't tell cause of the shanty speak? What a pain. I started to refill her glass, "Sounds like the life of a pirate is filled with adventure." and crimes against anything that breathes. I left that bit off though, since I'll take 'victim of a crime but breathing' over 'not breathing' any day. Well, any day when it involves a pirate. I don't mind the thought of getting off this rock and maybe death'll do the trick, but death from a pirate... well, I don't wanna have to watch them rip my legs off and stick them on this 'Zell' as replacements while they take their sweet time killing me.

"Aye, adventure a plenty!" she tugged on her blouse and put her hand to her mouth like she was about to whisper, "And I certainly wouldn't mind takin' ya along on one o' my *adventures* Old Man."

I'm fairly certain- no. No, more than that. I'm absolutely positive that was meant to be sexy. In fact, if I had to guess, she probably thought it was just that. But well, instead of the whisper that was obviously the goal, she practically broke my eardrums when she screamed out each and every word. Well, ear drums or no, that's gotta be a sign she'll be properly drunk soon, right?

“Well, uh, I think I’ll have to pass on that. Your ship, Posie’s Pockets was it? It hardly sounds like my kind of home. I prefer to sleep on a bed away from cannons whenever possible.”

Ah, just like old times, well ‘old’ as in when she walked in. She gave me a glare that could not only kill a man but get him to cook his own entrails into a four-course meal for her before the guy finally kicks it. What the hell could I have said?

“How the hell ya know where me crew sleeps?”

You’re kidding, “I imagined a pirate king as brilliant as yourself would keep her crew ready for battle all the time. It’s just something I couldn’t see you *not* doing.” Actually... on second thought she seems *exactly* like the type of person that would make her crew commute to work every day.

She stood up from her stool and threw one leg up onto the counter, like a dancer doing some stretches before starting their routine. She pulled a foot and a half knife, more like a sword to be honest, out of her boot and stabbed it into the table. Why, why do people keep abusing my table? “If ya say another thing that don’t sit right wit me, imma cut ya inta bits, alright?”

It was strange, the way she said ‘alright’ almost made it sound like she was genuinely asking if I would be ok with it. I nodded my agreement and she got herself back into her stool.

Things like threats of death tend to cause awkward silences, and awkward it was. I could head off and serve someone else... well at this point the only customer I got is sittin’ by the door since Boozie left a while ago following that mushroom and its companion, maybe hoping for a horrifying menage a trois. I’m sure that’ll be a story I don’t want to hear. Hard to meander over to the guy by the door while lookin’ nonchalant though. So, either that or just head to the far side of the counter and start pretending to polish glasses, as is tradition. The only issue is that it seems like Cap’n here wants to talk and if that’s the case I’ll find a bullet in my back the moment I walk away.

Hmm...

I guess if I'm being honest with myself, I'm just as likely to catch a bullet here talkin' to her, aren't I?

Have I mentioned how much I hate running a bar that attracts people like this? Dregs of society tend to be a bit more... dangerous than I'd like.

"She's a heluva girl though. Can sport a full three thousand crew when I can find 'em. Long as they're willin' to sleep in pairs, course."

It's usually not *my* bodily fluids that coat this place, but I found myself sweating as I attempted to answer her in a way that wouldn't get my head blown off, "Big ship." Yeah, that'll do.

"Big ship ain't the half of it Old Man. Nearly a thousand and some o' my feet bow to stern, nearly five hundred guns, not coutin' the small'uns, course. Gotta castle near the size o' a five-story building, and not a shack of a building neither, plenty o' room under there for even the tallest. Makes for a damn good target, but without it bein' that tall the stellar-travel shield wouldn't reach 'round the whole thing."

"Why not run the castle through horizontally like the Federation's military does? Heard it cuts on the power use."

"It ain't look near as nice though. Like a goddamn cross floatin' in sapce. Ya tell me Old Man, what looks more threaten'? A massive tower or a cross? Tower'll win out ever' time. Something about heights really makes a man think twice. Not a woman though. She'll see it as nothing more than an idle threat. Realizes it ain't once she walks to the edge o' it and gets a push, but that's 'sides the point."

"And so Zell's got his home set up in this castle?"

“No no, Zell’s in the crow’s nest toward the rear. Castle in the center with another crow’s nest ‘fore that. They ain’t quite so tall as the castle so ya need one on either side, see?”

Some laughs really make you wanna end it all. She’s got one of those.

“Get it? Get it? ‘See’? ‘Crow’s nest’?”

Normally this is when I’d realize my customer is ready to be robbe- relieved. *Relived* of their money. But this chick. This *damn* chick. This is just normal her isn’t it? This is gonna give me an ulcer.

I took a swig outta my flask to try and get myself in order, “So I think I had a question about Zell before all this, didn’t I?”

“Did’ja?”

Why am I still on about this? Just some poor kid that wanted some familial affection, seems normal enough. But, from what I remember, his race lives something like eternally, unless they push themselves too far. If time ain’t an issue, why bother with all that sappy reunion garbage. I’m sure my own mom has enough augmentations to keep her till the edge of eternity at least.

...

Then why am I even bothering?

No.

Why is *he* bothering? That’s the real question.

“Yeah well, this Zell guy, er, mushroom. Thing?”

“Fungi and fun guy are nearly the same, Old Man. We call it whatever the hell he wants to be called.”

“Ah, alright. So, is Zell still with ya? I mean, it sounded like he was hoping to get reunited with his dad, but you’re talking about him like he’s still with you.”

“Aye, he’s still with me.” she started shaking her empty glass in front of me. If I don’t get the reward money, this chick is gonna drink me out of business seeing as how she hasn’t paid. I’m also starting to think this girl could drink Boozie under the table, which is a nice distraction, cause that’d be a sight, “Serves as well now as he did then. Or maybe he serves well all the time? Does servin’ now and then mean all the time? No, that ain’t sound right, do it? He does a well enough job at any rate, ‘sides the killin’ me crew bit, of course.”

Oh come on you babbling idiot, why can’t you just answer the question.

Why do I want it answered so badly?

Useful.

That’s all, it’s just useful. After all, if it’s some absolutely asinine reason then maybe I can convince myself to start using my money on myself instead of paying for information on what the hell my mom is up to, and usually getting ripped off or having the info be worthless. Maybe I’d buy something nice for myself... yeah.

Like a... a... maybe a coat. Could always use a coa-

What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I even care, “But, does Zell still-”

“Ah! That bastard does kill me crew, doesn’t he?”

This woman knows how to throw someone off balance, that’s for sure.

“Kills me crew all the time. I mean, sometimes it’s useful, course. But other times, he just does it. I mean, it usually helps, but still, killin’ some random sailors ain’t quite the right mindset for a right-hand man, is it? Er, not man, mushroom? Wait, we had this conversation before haven’t we?” I nodded my head, resigning myself to the fact that she’d managed to walk about a thousand paces around my question once again, “Well, here’s a question we ain’t hit yet: why does Zell like killin’ me goddamn crew?”

I settled in, trying desperately to find something to polish and take my mind off of this sure-to-be obscene story. At this rate, my bar'll be known for the cleanest glasses in the galaxy.

Not a reputation I'm looking for.

"A race through the core then Cap'n?"

"Aye."

"Might I ask why? I'm sure your reasons are much too complex for me to wrap my head around, but I do believe we're supposed to rob the Andromeda delegation, aren't we?"

"Certainly on the agenda Zelly."

"Certainly?"

"Certainly, but I'll be damned if I let these second-rate murderers say they can beat me through me own planet. Er, well, suppose I don't own it exactly, but it's mine all the same!"

"Yes Cap'n, I'll find a way to make room in the schedule then."

Good ol' Zell, always knows how ta keep me from murderin' him. Unlike the last couple o' first mates I've had. And if I did go about murderin' him, it'd be a first rate kinda murder, do 'im out honorably. Can guarantee that much.

Some o' the rouges that like ta take a breather here on Pluto was figurin' they could take me.

"Canya believe it?"

"I'm certain I can't Cap'n."

Gotta stop lettin' the inner thoughts become outter thoughts, "Piss off Zell."

These rogues come up in a fancy lookin' corvette. Fifty or so o' the bald-faced young'uns lookin' to have a race through the core. We got a nice stretch runnin' straight through the center of this ball o' ice, so it makes for a popular raceway, as well as bein' the main stretch for the land

lovin' residents of me planet. Hm, maybe land lovin' ain't quite right, given that it's mostly ice, which is water. Wait, can frozen water be considered land? It's solid ain't it? 'Specially out here on the edge of the solar system. That one'll take some thinkin'.

"You tell the folks on the inside not to peek out durin' our race?"

"I've sent out the warning Cap'n, but, given that this is a planet for pirates, I'm not sure the way will be fully cleared."

"Never is." I started to chew on the powder bag I kept around me neck. Not like any o' my guns use powder, but the hide is from some big-ass cow that got hunted to hell an' back down on the Blue Dot. Wait, maybe not cows, but they seemed like 'em didn't they? Boa? No, no that's the one with scales. Bovine? No, ain't that just a better word for cow? Or cow like substance, er, species... shit, where did I start this? Ah, yeah, paid more than it would take to buy a moon from Jupiter, which, considering it's a gaseous little ball in desperate need of rocky ground, is sayin' something. Far too expensive, but showin' it off in front o' rich folks usually gets me wherever I wanna go, which is nice when I don't feel like doin' any sorts o' killing. Makes me look like a real cultured type.

And people say sleepin' with a historian doesn't pay off.

Or was it a zoologist... maybe both? Different men though, surely.

I spit out the powder that seeped through the wet animal skin and I started toward the wheelhouse, "Well, if we kill 'em we kill 'em. Not like they're terribly special, eh Zell?"

"Hardly Cap'n."

I made sure all me levers were workin' to the nines. 'To the nines'? Wonder where that comes from. Maybe somethin' to do with humans only havin' nine toes... wait, "Oy Zelly, how many toes do humans usually have again?"

“Ah, was my answer yesterday not sufficient Cap’n? I had a feeling that might be the case, so I did some light research. It appears the correct answer is indeed ten, given that that’s how many most humans seem to be born with so far as I could tell.”

Don’t much care for the idea of havin’ ten o’ the things. Probably why Ad Astra saw fit to get rid of one. Pretty good deity I’d say.

Everything seemed to be in order, as it’s always been since takin’ Zell on board. That lamp post does a fine job of keepin’ this whale space ready. I jogged over to the railing and started yellin’ at the sorry souls, maybe literal souls soon enough, that were tryin’ ta challenge us, “If’n ya lose this little race, I’m gonna sell every little trinket I pick off your corpses, then I’ll have ya work me oars for the next few centuries!” I peeked over at Zell, but he didn’t say anything. Strange, he tends ta be pretty quick on tackin’ on to what I’m sayin’ when it ain’t make the right sorta sense. Pretty easy one to tack onta as well, on account of corpses not makin’ good oarsmen.

Ah well, the halfwits on their corvette couldn’t hear it anyway, course. Hard to shout through space. But it’s the spirit of the game. That’s what matters. After all, their captain was on the railin’ just like me, probably shoutin’ the normal pirate-y insults. Good, good. Everything’s going well then.

The three engines off our stern took ta rattlin’. Good sign. Means they’re just dangerous enough to let us keep callin’ ourselves pirates.

Their corvette, on the other hand, was clean and sounded like they’d taken it ta a, oh this makes a true pirate sick it does, *a shop*. Probably in the last decade too. Damn disgrace o’ a pirate crew. But that means we’ll have an easy time blastin’ these urchins outta the... well, can’t say water, can I? Wouldn’t make much sense. But space don’t sound quite right either. Blast ‘em outta the system maybe? Yeah, I like that, “Let’s blast these bastards outta the water!” Agh, screwed it

up. Not ta mention, we're not even tryin' to kill each other in this race. Aye, just a race. Shouldn't've agreed to that bit, not a fun race without the fear o' death runnin' beside ya. Well, I 'spose we only said we wouldn't *try*. Aye, that's a good point me. Accidents can happen during these sorts o' things, and pirates have their fair share a accidents.

“How ingenious of you Cap'n. The passing heat of our ships will surely have some melting effect on the icy surroundings, leading to water spilling about. I would never have made such a connection.”

‘Spose I'll take it. I shot the largest gun on our stern, the beam of light headin' off into the surprisingly populated void of space and I threw the levers to get Ol' Posie's triplet o' engines firin' on full. We shot into the stretch through Pluto with their corvette takin' the lead.

“Posie'll need a minute to get cookin' proper. You all make sure this rickety pile o' scrap stays in workin' condition, ya hear?” One o' me crew started shufflin' past and trying to get under deck. A quick knee to the nethers got his attention, “Just cause we're havin' a race doesn't mean the deck doesn't need cleanin'. Get back ta it. I'll let ya know if we need ta toss ya overboard to gain some speed, alright?”

Hardly worth sayin' though. The man was screamin' so loud I don't think he heard a bit o' it. And, I'll admit, he didn't quite have me full attention either. Zell reached one o' his lanky fingers into the man's mouth. Never looks quite right, seein' that lamp post snake at least a foot o' finger inside a person like that. The man stopped screamin', which was a nice change, “Do they usually live through that Ol' Zelly boy?”

He slid his finger outta the poor boy's mouth. Careful and precise... or accurate? No, probably precise. Sounds better anyway. I didn't look at the next bit. A bit repulsive to see mushrooms start growin' outta a mouth like that. “I certainly hope so Cap'n. Although it does

depend on what sort of palette he has. Mushrooms, especially my... *variety*, can disagree with most species' stomachs."

"Woulda been nice if ya used that little party trick o' yours when we were starvin' to death between galaxies."

"A thousand apologies Cap'n. They do need a moist area to grow, and the crew was so close to mutiny already. Eating mushrooms from a corpse can make a man do strange things, or so I'm told Cap'n."

Their corvette already reached the halfway point, and here we are only a goddamn fourth o' the way through this catacomb. Well, kinda straight for a catacomb. Can catacombs be straight? Somethin' more ta think on.

Finally, Posie's engines got on the right notes. The jolt shook the whole ship, loose plate and boards rattlin' against each other. Cannons nearly breakin' through the locking mechanisms. The dull thuds o' me crew earnin' some new concussions was paired with the sound of muffled screamin'. I held tight to me wheel and took a quick look to see what happened.

Never good to hear muffled screamin'.

Well, except for that one guy. He sure liked bein' tied up. I tolerated it, course. The lady-like thing to do, as it were.

Shit.

I forgot to untie him, didn't I?

Ah well, he might've gotten out.

Wait, where was I?

Oh yeah, the muffled screamin'. Looked like the boy that shoulda been scrubbin' the grime off me deck guns got bucked off overboard. Fried to a crisp on the shields. Guess I'm dealin' with sticky deck guns.

I started positionin' Posie as close to the port side o' the cavern as I possibly could. Had a bit more room carved out which meant I might be able to squeeze by the core with a bit o' fancy sailin' and double that o' luck. The only downside o' havin' the biggest ship in the galaxy, but I'll be damned if I ride another. Ships ain't like men, they deserve a bit o' commitment.

They were just startin' to finish their own course around the core, takin' their sweet time keepin' that ship nice and pretty. I kept inchin' the wheel: more, more, more.

The thunk and click of the lever signaled I just cut the shield reach on our port side. Made us plenty vulnerable but gave us a few more yards o' breathin' room. Breathin' room I went ahead and suffocated by squeezin' us closer to the wall.

Zell was standin' with arms behind his back as always. Wish I could read what was behind those holes in that brick face o' his, but lookin' too close meant seein' them wriggles snakin' all around, "Zell, ya shittin' yourself yet?" A section o' ice started pushin' outta the wall in front of us. Worthless shop keeps can't just keep their stores withdrawn for a goddamned minute. The shields still managed to take most of the hit, but we ended up with a few extra holes that weren't there before.

And the shop keep was likely fried to a crisp.

Hope he wasn't sellin' anythin' good.

"If I was capable of such a thing, I'm sure that would've done it Cap'n."

Scrape scrape scrape. Me crew was screamin' bloody murder. Whether it was cause they were dyin' or workin', I don't know. Ad Astra, if ya could give me a bit o' help here that'd be a real nice thing. And if ya can't, then go off an' screw yourself.

Posie's Pockets shot out into the clearin' around the core. Soon as I knew it, I tilted hard to port, droppin' the grav-anchors on that side to get us flipped horizontal.

Their corvette was just about navigated round the core and it was lookin' like their engines were practically cold.

I screamed bloody murder at me crew. The upside to killin' off every lackey that couldn't follow me orders was that those that were still livin' practically knew me inside and out. Well, not really, best not ta mix business and pleasure, see? At any rate, a few screams and one more flipped lever meant we'd be back in the race.

A few o' me crew climbed outta the cannon holes on our starboard side to start arranging the grav-anchors so they'd slide off right instead of just smashin' up me ship. I managed to pull meself up to the railings, given that we're on our side and all, and saw that they looked in place. In place enough at any rate.

I let go of the railing, falling quick, and swung one leg around the wheel and my other around that final lever. And to think me da said I'd never make it as an exotic dancer. Too bloodthirsty he'd say.

The grav-anchors slid off our side and sunk deep into the core, the special metal managing to hold onto the man-made ball of energy I slapped into this rock all those years ago. I stared straight ahead as we spun in circles, tossin' out a bit of vomit, and got ready to cut the chains.

"Cap'n," oh Zelly, lookin as composed as ever, shouldn't ya be a bit more concerned for yer life I wonder, "doesn't this seem a bit dangerous for just a race?"

“Jokes on you pa! Turns out there’s a big notch for crazy, murderous gals!” I grabbed the final lever between my teeth and nearly cracked ‘em flippin’ the thing.

“I believe you mean nich-”

But ol’ Zelly was cut off, just like our anchors, as we got flung down the second half of the makeshift racetrack, nearly smashin’ into the corvette.

That little ship of theirs was quick though. Both bad traits, though for ships I guess they ain’t so awful seein’ as how they managed to keep ahead of us a bit. It was lookin’ like I’d be losin’ this race, so I started to get ready to fire the bow guns and vaporize ‘em.

I can’t just let these whelps beat me after all, wouldn’t look good. And us pirates are pretty conscious about our looks, see?

Fore I could even get me hands on the lever though, Zell was back up in his pit of putrid... no, that’s not right is it? ‘Putrid’ ain’t a word ta sit by itself, no no. Needs, uh, hm... ah! The filth! The filth is putrid. That’s it. Right as rain.

Now there ain’t no reason for him to be up there, less o’ course he’s just takin’ a break. Normally if one of my crew was takin’ some kinda break, I’d go about breakin’ them. Has to be done. But, well, ol’ Zelly does a fine job I ‘spose. Maybe I’ll let him take a few minutes. Shouldn’t need his help turnin’ that corvette into space dust at any rate. Hm, *back* into space dust is probably more correct ain’t it?

A question for another-

The corvette started expanding, like if somethin’ was growin’ outta it.

Zell you Astra-damned sack of-

And then it blew apart. Just popped right like that. Easy as you please. All sorts of bits and pieces flyin’ round.

But I couldn't quite focus on the sight, cause Zell was fallin' face first outta his crow's nest.

I dropped all controls, which wasn't smart since Posie's engines were still spewin', but that damn stick boy dyin' on me would be an even bigger problem, I'm sure of it. Absolutely. Positively. Definitely. Assuredly. Cate-damn-gorically.

The augments embedded in me legs were burstin' off, sending shocks through my whole body. I hate this. Never a good feelin' but it can speed me up a bit.

Somethin' metallic popped through me flesh, rippin' out all kinds of regular human bits with the mechanical bits. I'll string that bastard mechanic up by that worthless little augment he's so proud of, I'll have 'im dragged under me ship and drugged up enough to live through it!

I started slidin' with my broken leg behind me and my not so broken leg outstretched, just barely gettin' under the crow's nest fore Zell hit the deck.

I'd think about thankin' Ad Astra for makin' him light as he is, but since I just lost... ya better be on yer toes Ast-y boy.

Zell, sonofa... Zell had a lot o' them worms crawlin' outta his head. Some were already on the ground wrigglin' about in disgustin' cosmic crap that was leaking from him too. I reached down and started gatherin' up what I could. Zell wasn't sayin' nothing. Wouldn't even blink... guess he never did that though. Ah, ah come on, "Hey, how'm I 'spose to put these back in?" He stayed silent, "You better start talkin' or else we're gonna be on a one-way ticket to deep space, y'know that, right Zell? Couldn't do any good piratin' out there, y'know that."

"Cap'n! The crew's not lookin' so good after that roll, and ain't we headin' the wrong way? Cap'n? Cap'n what're we suppos-"

I heard some sorta breath outta Zell, but this little urchin was so loud. I didn't even need ta look to know I hit what I was aimin' for. I'm a damn fine shot. Always have been, "Come on now Zell, what're you tryin' to say? Where do these things go, huh? Get up kid. Ya gotta get back up."

He spit somethin' outta one of his holes. Not a worm, but some sorta liquid. I leaned in close, not too concerned with the nasty bits,

"Did I..."

Aw come on Zell, come on,

"... do enough..."

Somethin' inside me made some weird crackin' noises. Noises only I could hear. Noises I ain't heard in quite some time. Not enough booze. Not enough men. I remembered that day he took the bullet for me... you're going to be the end of me Zell... I won't make that same mistake again, I'll be a bit honest... just this once kid, "More than enough Zell. By a mile."

"... dad?"

This is normally where I'd tell you all about how sad and forlorn and etc the poor drunk is and maybe throw in a few extra bits about how excited I am to rob their unconscious corpse and roll them out on the street.

But, as it so happens, I don't have a great view from my current hiding *spo-*
location.

From my current location. Not hiding.

At any rate, I'll admit the... *defensive capabilities* of my current location played a large part in my decision.

I pulled out my flask and drained what was left. Guess it's about time to stop beating around the bush, yeah?

So, that other customer passed out in the corner?

Dead.

He woke up just in time for that heartwarming/rending ending and decided it'd be a good enough place for him to, hm, *express* himself. Yeah. At any rate, he expressed himself to the displeasure of Cap'n here who proceeded to, well I can't say 'put a hole in his head' on account of the head disappearing, but the idea is the same. Dead is dead is dead as some long dead person said.

That may not be the quote. Apologies, but I'm sure you understand given my predicament.

I kicked the wall and managed to make a bottle of booze tilt off the shelf. After making a pretty impressive catch I unscrewed the bottle.

Cap'n was screaming up quite a storm with some words I wasn't aware existed. She was actually lapsing outta that kinda shanty speak toward the end of her story. Guess that's her tell for when she's getting sloshed. Anger must sober her up though. Gods above and below I hate these little tabs they throw on the bigger bottles. If I wanted a slower pour, I'd pour the damn bottle slower.

Another shot vaporized a new hole in my bar. Don't get me wrong, I'm plenty angry about all this, but pirate's, among other murderous and psychopathic groups, are like storms. Ya just gotta wait them out. Guess I gambled and lost. Shoulda just tried to get her out.

There was a bit of a... a 'squishing' sound as she stomped her feet, in case you needed to be reminded of her general ruthlessness. I mean, the poor boy's dead. Been that way for a minute at least. Oop! Nearly spilled. Flask filled to perfection. Now to go about draining it. Again.

What an ending though. Something to think about I guess, given I got some time.

Maybe ol' Cap'n here wanted a kid of her own or something. Maybe it was romantic? Nah, that can't be it, she had that whole 'don't see them in pornos' bit didn't she? Whatever, not the point. I guess the point is she failed. Opened up only to be stabbed with a 'dad'.

Heh, guess her innuendo stuff is rubbing off on me.

Heh.

I had my flask between my teeth, clamped there as I leaned back and drank myself a bit closer to death. Good thing I got teeth implants, otherwise I might screw 'em up doing stuff like this. I kept leaning my head back. So the kid's got one hell of an attachment to 'family' doesn't he? Probably still does too, considering the mess Cap'n is making outta that corpse. That's the kinda murder you commit over a pretty fresh and raw wound.

The smell of melted metal was getting stronger with every shot she fired. Not the best of smells. Hope this place doesn't fall down on top of me. Huh, kid's so focused on his family that he didn't even notice Cap'n. Maybe never even considered her more than an owner. Maybe didn't even consider her at all. Just doin' a job.

Damn, times like these make me wish I picked up smoking. Strange that those federation folks ban smoking but not drinking. Guess they had to choose something to pacify the populations they conquered, maybe booze is just cheaper. Is family really so important? No replacements? What's so special about blood, huh? Or is it just those few years after birth that make all the difference? A second at your mother's tit and suddenly you're soul bonded or something? Swaddled by your dad and your fate's get tied together? I don't know, I don't think anyone knows, but I guess if I had to glean something from it, it's that blood ties.

Ha, 'blood ties', is that funny or just obvious?

The bloody-murder ranting of Cap'n came to an abrupt end, punctuated by a thump. Ah, wouldn't it be nice if I found her passed out and could still make money tonight? Cause, even just from what I can see of my bar right now, I'm gonna need some money.

Who am I kidding? I'll just cover up the holes with spare wash cloths.

I don't have spare wash cloths...

I'll find something, surely.

"Excuse me?"

Well, that can't be good. Not many folk can sound that calm after seeing a puddle that used to be a human being. But I'll have to get up at some point, "Hey ah, damn back, if you're gonna kill me, can you get it done before I straighten up? That tends to be the worst part."

"My Cap'n has advised me not to kill bartenders. She holds most of them in high regard."

"High regard huh? Sounds like she just likes getting wasted as often as possible."

"I'm afraid she didn't explain it that way to me. I'll have to ask for clarification when she wakes up."

I finally managed to convince my back to straighten up fully and was immediately glad that I put away so much booze tonight. The creature standing in my doorway was crawling on all fours, too tall to stand in the bar. His face alone was as tall as a kid. A big kid. Every limb was thin; I'd say 'bone thin' but the creature didn't have bones. And with the way he was talkin', well, this must be Zell.

"I thank you for your professionalism, most individuals tend to take a bit longer to... acclimate to my appearance."

"Well, being drunk helps."

"I can only imagine sir."

“You’re here to take her I gather?”

“Yes, these things tend to happen. A thousand apologies for being late. I’m afraid I’ll never understand the layout of these asteroids.”

His limbs reached out, gingerly, to scoop up the unconscious woman. I think there’s a cliché about psychos looking normal when they’re asleep, but she didn’t.

Well, all things considered my bar doesn’t look too bad. I mean, compared to how it started. A few patch jobs here and there. Sand down the bloody bits of wood. Couple of runs with the mop and broom to get the chunks. Boozy work.

So now, now’s the time to settle accounts I suppose. Got this guy straight in front of me. Mushroom-mancing murderer, oh that sounds nice. Ah where was I? Oh yeah, murderer and all aside, he seems like the type who might toss money my way for his master’s behavior. But... something was holdin’ me back. Money’s good, isn’t it? Even outside of fixing my bar and restocking my shelves I can use it to buy info. To keep on with this obsession, however worthless it may be. Isn’t that the most important thing to me at the moment? Isn’t that what it all keeps boiling down to?

Her?

But, maybe there’s more to it. I guess I’m just going through the motions with this aren’t I? Just sitting here and grabbing up documents and videos isn’t gonna make anything start moving in my life. There’s something deeper. And, I’d really like to get some pirate money, but hearing this guy’s thoughts... maybe I’ll find something in them, “Hey, uh, you’re Zell right?”

“I believe so sir.”

“Well, hm, how to put this. Your friend here was talking about you.”

“I don’t believe I know this man, though it is a bit hard... identifying him.”

“Ah, no, not the um... not the puddle. I meant that girl there.”

“Oh, you meant Cap’n. Yes, she does seem to mention me occasionally. I’m her first mate after all.”

“So, you only have to deal with puddles that used to be alive ‘occasionally’ then?”

I couldn’t be sure, but it started making a bit of a clicking sound. Not much of a tune to it, maybe like a chuckle, “Something like that sir. Now, if you’ll excuse me-”

“Wait a minute,” agh, I started scratching my head, a few white flakes falling off onto the counter; I really hope that’s ash instead of dandruff, “listen kid...” Come on, just ask and be done. But what the hell am I even trying to ask?

“Yes, of course. My apologies, being a pirate does strange things to one’s sense of duty. I will have money sent here immediately to pay for everything. You have my wor-”

“Is she nothing more than your captain?” my mind was feeling a bit fuzzy. Maybe cause of the booze, maybe cause my people skills didn’t develop so nicely, what with all the abandonment. Whatever the reason, my voice was a bit... *emotional*. Disgusting, “I mean, it just sounds like she cares about you, y’know? Like she wants, I don’t know, sounded like she might’ve wanted something more.” He just offered me cash, I should just take the money and call it a day. But that’d make me a coward wouldn’t it? “More than just a captain or something. I mean, sure she was drunk, but look what she did to that... crap I forget what planet he was from, but that thing over there is a paste-based substance now cause of how she feels about you, right?” Rather be a disgusting incoherent emotional mess than a coward... I think, “And maybe, well, I mean... it just kinda sounded like maybe you didn’t have those... feelings or whatever.” Yeah, I’m drunk. Agh, “From the way she was telling it... I mean, sure she was drunk... I’ve said that, haven’t I? But,

drunk or not it sounds like you just wanted your, well your dad's love or some rot. But, it also, maybe, kinda... she wanted to be-

“A mother?”

I nodded, taking another drink outta my flask. He's gonna say something I don't wanna hear, isn't he?

“I was aware of this, yes. She's a pirate, as you know. At some point her breed are bound to crave feelings other than anger and rage and the like. To be quite honest with you barman, if I'm correct, wouldn't that just make me some usable item for her? Some button she can press that wipes away her wrongs and lets her feel good about herself?” Those boney, elongated fingers started wrapping tighter around the unconscious girl in his hands. Tighter. Tighter. Tighter. Her body started to spasm, “Relationships? What a fun name you humans give them. No, they're just contracts. Agreements. Ways to use one another. Mutual agreements that each party will serve themselves and use you to the best of their ability towards that end.” His fingers loosened and the body was limp. Part of me wondered if she was dead or still just unconscious, “Blood, barman, blood needs no contract, it needs no exchange.”

My voice was hoarse when I tried to speak, so I decided to drink more, “Your... your dad-”
ugh, “the... the drugs and,” agh, “he sold-”

The monster in my doorway turned and walked out, saying as he left, “You'd trust a pirate at her word?”

I slumped down back into my hiding spot. Goddess I'm drunk. What the hell was that stick saying?

Contracts?

Blood?

Are they really separate?

No, no they can't be. If they were, my mother would still be here. She wouldn't have left.

But she did. And so did his dad.

I may not trust a pirate, but it's hard not to believe my own past.

But he's right, at least a bit. Aren't relationships just agreements? I'd say blood relationships are the same though. Just agreements to use one another...

So...

Was it you or me mom? Which one of us wasn't living up to our end of the contract.

I'd vote you.

But what would you say?

Fourth Draught: Out for Supplies

“You heard me you absolute boozier.”

“Mosth people calls me Boozie, Old Man. Thought you was aware of thatsh.”

“Tell ya what Boozie, since you’re still more booze than... I don’t know, any other bodily fluid I guess, I’ll put it to ya simple: if you try to get in the door one more time, I’ll pin your corpse to it.”

“Alright, alright. But see here, lemme go aheads and get the ol’ point acrossh. If I ain’t gonna get on through this door, how’m I ‘spose ta get drunk? Er, well, drunker than I am I means.”

He followed it up with the classic Boozie belch: mostly air with a bit of fluid. Delightful, “Boozie, like I said, I’m headin’ out. Which means I won’t be here. If I’m not here and you get in my bar, I won’t be able to come back from that much of a loss. Stay. The. Hell. Out. Of. My. Bar.”

Boozie started crying, wailing in the middle of the street, well it’s more like an alley. He was on his back like some brat throwing a tantrum. Luckily no one was out at the moment, but that was probably due to the rain. I nudged him onto his stomach with my foot. Alright, maybe more of a kick. At any rate it’ll save his life, so I deserve to have my fun with it. The ‘rain’ on these asteroids isn’t quite the same rain as down on the Blue Dot. It’s a chemical cloud that gets pumped up so it doesn’t rot the atmosphere down there any further. Although this factory concoction of... well, I’m not quite sure, but that stuff that they let out still manages to do quite a bit of damage.

Its why they limited industry to one hemisphere. The issue is when the gas hits the artificial atmosphere of these asteroids. It turns into a sort of rain. Toxic rain. Probably poetic, mostly deadly.

I looked back at my bar. Hopefully a few of those holes from last night will be patched by the time I'm back. Definitely one of the more... destructive nights.

I pulled my coat around me a bit tighter and snugged up the leather straps of my gas mask. Better safe than sorry. Especially if you don't wanna augment yourself to hell and back. What was the guy's name? The one... uh, philosopher? Or maybe he was just some rich kid from God knows what time, apparently not important enough to be stuck in today's books. Something about a boat and if you replace each board is it still the same boat. Sounds a bit superstitious, which I guess is par for the course when it comes to philosophy, but I'd still rather play it safe. Ol' Boozie is more machine than man, though it's all his insides, but considering I can't imagine him being born a worthless drunken degenerate, I think there might be something to this whole boat thing. Certainly not the man he was born, though I guess booze and getting older both can change a person. At any rate, I'm sure casting bits of yourself to the wind isn't gonna help to keep you 'you', whatever that's worth.

But these damn alleys always give me a bad feeling. I'm usually holed up in my bar, so I don't have to accept the reality of what good ol' GC 213b actually looks like: a claustrophobic pile of shipping containers stacked so tall you only get about half an hour of sunlight on any given day.

As I continued to navigate through the chaotic honeycomb hellhole of GC 213b, I walked past some corpse. Not too unusual. The unusual bit was when the corpse pulled a rusty knife and started lunging toward me. Now, my reflexes ain't the best, but they're good enough to deal with the sort of people that live on these homeless relocation complexes. I swiveled the shotgun that was mounted on my belt. All it took was a few inches of incline and I pulled the trigger. The guy's

feet suddenly disappeared from under him. Ah, if only I was some badass action guy, maybe I'd hit him with a 'Did ya like that? I'm actually something of a magician'. Hm, on second thought, that kinda one liner should warrant a death penalty.

"You shot my goddamn feet off! My feet! My feet, holy shit, my feet!"

"Kinda silly to scream about things that aren't there, right Naranbaatar?"

The man, who happened to be a customer of mine, flipped a switch on the back of his neck and immediately looked much better, aside from the missing feet, "Old Man? I didn't even notice it was you with that gas mask. Sorry about that, just trying to earn a living." He levered himself up and slumped against the wall, fiddling with some other switches on his body. Some coils constricted around his ankles, stopping the blood flow and his face continued to drift into some kinda euphoric state.

"I don't think the word 'earn' really fits with mugging people. Sorry about the feet, but I gotta ship to catch, y'know?"

"Ah, you're headin' down then? So that means bar's closed? Or is Boozie gonna be there again? Last time didn't go so well, what with drinking your bar dry and all. And all that blood, that must've been one heluva pain to pretend to clean, eh?"

I was nearly to the next turn in this miserable asteroid sized maze. I shouted back, "If you catch Boozie in there again, kill him. Drinks'll be on the house for a day for ya."

A squeal of delight you'd hardly expect to hear from a newly footless man was the last I heard as I turned the corner. Poor Boozie, I don't think any god is gonna rest his soul though. Ah well. I'll celebrate when I'm back. For now, I was looking at the port and the low-orbit cruiser about to leave. Finally, some luck. Just in time.

I bought a ticket and took the elevator up to the ship.

Looks like we got a decent captain. The engines weren't running, which normally would be something to worry about, but these low-orbit guys just sling themselves from one port to the next. The ports are all on rail systems that wrap around each asteroid out here, so a captain that can just use a bit of boost to position his ship is gonna give a smooth ride as we get thrown from one of these ports to the next. That'll be nice since I feel like I haven't slept in weeks. I hate going down to the surface, but sometimes ya gotta. Can't hole up in my bar forever.

The robotic voice finally got around to the languages of the Blue Dot. Looks like another few stops before we head down. I tried to get as comfortable as possible and closed my eyes. I stayed conscious enough to know what was going on around me, not doing that is a good way to get yourself mugged. Most people knew not to bring anything but the clothes on your back when you board these things, but some guy two rows of bodies up was screaming about how someone stole his backpack. Something about his 'vital medicine'. All you can do now is hope he doesn't die on board. The smell tends to get pretty bad when that happens.

The roar of the engines coming online brought me back from my somewhat catatonic state. I was still half groggy from, well, I wouldn't call it 'sleep' but you get the idea. I was drenched in sweat and started to wonder if I should just start bringing a towel for the flight. The heat shields were never in good condition and the sardine can we were all packed in started to feel... ugh, too hot to even make a comparison. Any skin you got showing starts sticking to your neighbor and, if you're wearing shoes, you get to add to the random piles of melted rubber stuck to the floor. The whole ship started rattling and didn't stop. Hastily welded metal plates had broken loose of whatever bonds were holding them. Luckily there were a few layers of metal on these ships but seeing cracks in the walls of a vehicle that goes through space is a bit too much to handle for me. I just barely managed to hold in my lunch, which is more than I can say for the other humans on

board. The shock of hitting the ground caused everyone to lurch up. This might sound horribly unsafe, but considering we're packed so tight no one can even move, people rarely get crushed.

Now, all that sounds bad, and it is. But, for me, the worst part is coming up. The ship rattled up to a disembarking ramp and opened up the doors. Two things were on my mind, and only two things. One, the door toward the rear actually fell off entirely. Two,

I hate this planet.

I hate this planet more than you can imagine. We were immediately corralled and brought to a checkpoint. A sickly, skinny looking man with a gun twice his size was checking tickets. Anyone with a fake was thrown in a fenced in area while the rest of us got to go on toward the next five checkpoints. Oh joy.

As I continued down the fenced in corridor, more and more of the passengers found themselves pulled out of line and taken away. I think they usually get to work in the southern hemisphere factories as 'voluntary labor' but some of them get executed. Usually depends on which corporation is in charge at the time.

Security's gotta be tight though. I mean, it's the capital of the solar system. They can't let just anyone in, especially if that 'anyone' happens to be poor and destitute. Kinda ruins their image.

"Huh... hmm... you haven't been down to Earth in quite some time Mr-"

"No 'Mr', just 'Old Man'. Yeah, it's been a while. You guy's still callin' it 'Earth' then?"

"Using a nickname is against protocol, but I guess the son of a hero can get a bit of special privilege. Earth will always be Earth to us true-borns. We live by the vision statements of our magnanimous corporations. If they call it Earth, we call it Earth. Universal Alliances be damned."

Great, the worst kinda guard. Zealots. How the hell did they brainwash this poor sap? Ah well, a full stomach and a falsely fulfilled soul'll do that to a man. Actually, I guess the full stomach is usually enough, "Yeah, I hear that. May the corporations rise."

"And profits soar!" He checked the screen that popped up on his visor, "Alright, you've been cleared. Enjoy your stay on Earth and remember: the surveillance is just a part of the performance review."

And into the northern hemisphere I went.

I was led to an airport that connected all the major hubs. I checked the box for the biggest city and started my grocery trip to the heart of 'Earth'.

The capital city.

We used to live just outside of one of these cities back when I still had a parent. No, that doesn't matter. Not now. This ain't the time to reminisce. No, I mean there isn't ever a time to reminisce. Right? Why the hell would I want to remember living with my mom... No, no. It was a rundown shack where I counted rats instead of sheep and dug up muddy water every day.

Well, it wasn't like that in the beginning though, was it? Not when she was there, before the drugs... it was a garbage contract, right? That's all it was.

I hate this planet. Does strange things to me.

The sun was high in the sky, so I navigated the city until I found some folks willing to build me a new counter and get me a few new glasses. For cheap, of course. Which meant I was talking to the folks at the dump. Good trash is just as good as anything else. If not for this bastion of refuse though, the whole city was standing thousands of feet tall. Basically every building in the capital had to have some sort of climate control to deal with lack of oxygen. Not like you could see it from the sky though, since the planes didn't have windows anymore. Some sorta law put in place after

the oceans stopped being blue and any land not claimed by a city was either filled with garbage or factories or scarred to hell and back by the old wars. No need for farming when all your food can be shipped from planets purpose-built for it. Inside the city, you only saw the city. Massive interlocking hologram screens showed what the sky and outskirts would've looked like without the wars and corporations. It was strange, not a homeless person in sight. No destitute and no impoverished. Just happy rich folks living happy rich lives while the workers that had to commute were practically kept in boxes across the city, hell, maybe they even lived in those boxes. You didn't need to mug someone just so you could eat a meal a week. No, instead you saw the rich people peddling art and music on the sidewalks. Not a single bit of cash in their hands, but their faces seemed all too happy, I wish I could say 'in a superficial way', but it really did seem like they were happy. Guess getting a dividend from slave labor can make anyone happy, as long as they don't focus too hard on where it's coming from.

It was obscene.

Wealth incarnate.

All that mattered here was relationships and rising profits.

Hm, maybe I'm not so different from them though. The rising profits bit, that is.

Before I could really start considering what effect this realization might have on my life and how good of a person I could become if I just let money fall to the wayside, the cab driver took a wrong turn, "Hey, we still had at least two more blocks."

"Boss says we can't let you sit around doin' jack shit all day. Gave you most of a day, you oughta be happy."

Ah, bad luck. I was hoping to talk to my man o' the booze, as he calls himself, so I could get my bar restocked and my flask refilled. Guy might be crazy, but he's got the cheapest, barely legal booze around. Guess I'll try to send a letter.

Work always comes first on the Blue Dot.

Always.

The cab driver dropped me off at a skyscraper, or maybe more of a space elevator. At any rate, it looked the same as any building. Covered in ads from top to bottom, filled with offices that doubled as temporary homes for anyone working for one of the corporations of the Blue Dot. That meant they could spend the week on the job provided they forfeited some of their paycheck, which was, of course, required more often than not. Windows were non-existent to cut down on suicide rates. Just a rectangle of concrete; a stem of humanity reaching out to space. Squishy meat sacks doing the one job they couldn't get robots to do: sit in a cubicle all day doing nothing. Or close to it, at least. Some poor girl was sitting at the front counter trying her best to look like her job had merit.

“Ah, you must be here to fill worker 12's position.”

“Worker 12?”

“Yes, the worker who died this morning. Old age. Such a sweet man, died right there at his desk, fingers still hanging above his keyboard. A true model for us all. Ah, sorry, I guess I get carried away.” She glanced up at a blinking red dot on the wall, probably hoping someone important would see this bit of security footage to hear her great sales pitch, “He's already been uploaded to Afterlife™ so we need his position filled immediately.”

I'm a bit torn between being impressed by the efficiency or disgusted by how much they try to squeeze out of everything just to get a bit better margins. I looked at the girl, probably not more than twenty, "Well, sorry to say, but I'm actually here for a tour, has it started yet?"

"Not the new employee tour then... hm, oh! The foreign dignitary tour? That won't be starting until..." she focused her attention on the visor that seemed to be doubling as her itinerary, "shouldn't be starting until two at the earliest."

"Ah, well, someone said they were supposed to meet with me. Maybe not quite a tour, sound familiar?"

"Wait, so you're not here to work? What the hell are you doing on Earth if you're not working?"

"Like I said, just waiting to see someone." The shift in her personality was a bit jarring. It was as if the moment she figured out I wasn't there for work she lost all interest in my existence.

"Better hope you make some money from it. Nobody lives on Earth for free. Go ahead and 'meet' these people in the next hour, otherwise I call the cops and get you put away for loitering, alright?"

"Sure, sure. Will do."

I think I said this earlier, but I hate this planet. Everyone always waiting to make their next dollar.

Some ancient looking guy in an orange jumpsuit popped his head out of a doorway and looked toward me, "Old Man? The janitors need some help."

But I guess I'm just the same. Chasing the almighty dollar for rewards that probably won't be worth anything. What a way to live.

I followed the man to a door that looked the same as any other, but when I stepped inside the whole room began to shift down. Great, off of one vomit-inducing ride and onto the next.

It didn't take long for me to find myself in a dimly lit room that looked fit to hide bodies in. Comforting.

A voice from the shadows sounded all too familiar, "Well well well, Old Man. Or do you even go by that anymore? You're changing your name every few months from what my people in the intelligence branch are saying."

"I'm afraid you're all far too paranoid. I've been 'Old Man' for ages, and I don't have plans on changing, which is why this meeting may well go nowhere for you."

She laughed, the sorta laugh that you just *knew* came from somebody far too sure of themselves, "No Old Man, 'paranoid'? Hardly. We just like to know who we're dealing with, especially when it comes to people like you. You're a dangerous one. You should thank me for putting a stop to the contracts asking for you dead. Although, none of them even have the remotely right guy these days."

"Yeah, sure. Thanks for not helping random thugs who want to come murder me. Truly, you're a paragon of moral perfection."

Ah, that may not be the right thing to say to a leader of a rebellion.

"I like you Old Man, but if you talk to me like that again, I'll have you dissected by those freaks from a couple stars over. I'm no longer the kid who was picking wallets and scamming foreigners." She threw her legs up onto the table in front of her. Solid oak. Damn expensive since they're extinct and all, "I'm a leader now *Old Man*. I change the world these days. We might be friends because of that freak show orphanage, but things are a bit different now."

“Different? It’s all changed so much? Who’s to say a bartender and a rebellion leader can’t still be friends?” Her smug smile seemed to be a way to tell me we aren’t even in the same league anymore. “Yeah, alright alright. I get it. So, what’s the job. You’ve been sending messages for the past month, so I’m guessing it’s important.”

She leaned forward in her velvet cushioned chair. Like a mob boss rather than a revolutionary. Then again, I guess they probably share some similarities. Her dark skin peeked out from the shadows and her silver hair seemed to flow out from under her pilotka. She wore that hat everywhere. Some relic from a war fought on Earth back when we hadn’t even started to explore space. Something like an elongated triangle with a red star attached at the front. Though she couldn’t tell you what the red star even meant, no one could these days.

“It’d be nicer if I could find someone a bit more loyal to the cause, but your... *skills*, are certainly rare. The idea this time around is to get you to hack into the AI control scripts of one of the major subservient corporations. Next city over, less security. If you make them look like an idiot by letting their bots go on a rampage, they’ll be bankrupted in no time. Morale boost for my people, as well as opening some smuggling channels for weapons during the chaos.”

I let the silence drag on as she leaned back in her chair. She turned to the side with an unlit cigar hanging in her mouth. Another relic of times long gone. An aid rushed to her side, his fingertip opened on hinges, revealing some sort of heating element. He lit the cigar and retreated back to his position. Seeing stuff like that makes me wonder if that’s the sole reason he got that augmentation. What else is it good for? Probably torture, I guess. Or just party tricks.

Smoke began to billow out from her. Her eyes, hidden behind glasses to keep people from realizing she didn’t actually have human eyes at all, seemed to glow red. Probably scary if you

didn't know she was augmented, "Please, do keep me in suspense. It's not like I have anything else going on. Being a leader of a revolution is filled with nothing but downtime."

Heavy on the sarcasm it seems, "Sorry Gorata, just thinking about how many lifetimes the prison sentence would be for that kinda thing. You do remember I'm not terribly interested in spending my life and more in a company prison, right? I guess old age comes for us all, eh?"

She started twirling her fingers in her hair, "Ooh, age jokes? Why flirt with death? You could've just flirted with me." A wink and a flash of a smile had me wondering if she was being romantic or if she was about to pull a gun on me, I'm starting to think my lady acquaintances are all a bit psychotic, "To be honest though? I'd rather not be called 'old' by someone who chose the name 'Old Man'. If only you were born with common sense instead of a penchant for booze."

"Yes, but I *chose* to be called old, see?"

"I hate you."

"People tend to."

She sighed and the tension was expelled as well, "Alright, I get it. So? You're taking the contract, right?"

"Take a chance on that kind of prison sentence? If not that then they'll toss a death penalty on me and that's the sort of death sentence that they make you suffer through for a few weeks."

"You're such a resilient man though."

"Thanks, but I'd rather not prove it by being tortured to death, if I can help it."

And suddenly, it dawned on me. Of course, how could I have been so blind? She's someone I knew from the orphanage? Sure, and maybe there's some sort of twisted friendship that came of that, but what is she now? A leader of a goddamn revolution. It was like the clouds in my mind finally parted, letting the suns of a thousand and more galaxies pour through, enlightening me in

such a way that I felt like I wasn't just a drop in the river, no, I *was* the river. I was flowing endlessly and connecting to all things. Yes, I finally realized: Gorata would torture me just as badly.

“Y’know something Gorata? I think you might be one to abuse power.”

Every one of her soldiers tensed up at that. Fingers to triggers and atom shearing blades cleared from their sheathes. It was the first time I truly appreciated how many weapons she managed to fit into this tiny cubicle hidden beneath the leading corporation’s HQ. Ah, to restore the tension, something only an idiot would do. I need to play the silent character more often. Before a nervous finger splattered me all over the walls and made some janitor’s life far too difficult, Gorata spoke, “And I, you little runt, don’t think you should’ve ever gotten a hold of a liquor license.”

She’s got a point.

We both laughed. A bit of it was probably to cool off her revolutionaries, but it was mostly just a way of remembering we were both still who we were. We hadn’t changed when it came to the important stuff. Looks like our boats haven’t been changed too drastically then. I wonder at what point that philosopher thought the change got rid of the self. Would’ve been nice if he said, but philosophers seem to have a penchant for asking more questions than they answer. Could’ve helped us understand how all this augmenting business affected someone’s soul, if that matters.

“Alright, alright. What’s the reward? What’m I getting for risking my life?”

“Oh, you’re gonna love this.” She pulled open a drawer in her desk and reached inside, pulling out a disk, “Not many people can run this format anymore, but I figure you’ll have a way. The guy we got it from said it was about ‘the hero of the first invasion’.”

Ah, a CD huh? I could probably throw something together to play it. With a title like that, I’m sure she’s in it. Dammit, I’m too simple. Jump at this stuff immediately. Oh well, at least I’ll

be able to hold onto my money this time around instead of forking it over for this garbage. Helpful, given how my recent encounters haven't exactly made me rich.

And who knows,

maybe this'll be the info that makes me feel like I can stop searching.

I hope so. I'm getting tired of all this.

"Tell me where the computer is and I'll have this handled. And let's skip the guards this time, ok? When I was working for you, all they managed to do was make me look suspicious. As it turns out, revolutionaries have a hard time fitting in."

She pulled a feather from an inkwell and started writing something down, "Your funeral Old Man. And don't expect me to pay for it. The funeral, that is." She handed me the note, written to be just barely legible.

I made my way to the door. The man inside the elevator was already pushing buttons to get us to ground floor as quickly as possible. I gave her my final farewell, "Don't worry, the plan is to die in my bar, so I should be fine while I'm on this rock."

The elevator doors closed, and the lift shot up. The only thing keeping us from being flattened like pancakes by the force was the fact that these things had their own gravitational control. We arrived at the lobby floor in a matter of seconds.

The man running the elevator eased open the door and pushed his mop bucket out, "Thanks sonny, in my younger days I could've handled that myself. A few more years and they'll be firing my corpse!" He said it just loud enough for the girl at the front desk to pretend she heard. Better safe than sorry, I guess. I made my way out the front door, lying to the girl that I'd be back for that tour, hoping it made me less suspicious when, in reality, she probably didn't get paid enough to

care either way. The artificial wind and reflections of sunlight almost made me feel like I wasn't in a bubble designed to be both the cradle and the grave of its inhabitants.

I opened the note: 'Vitalnost Kroz Novac/lobby computer should work for you/find the file titled 5aqz98/reprogram as shown below'. Vitalnost Kroz Novac, I've heard they've been a real shooting star in the business world. Likely to overtake the current number one corporation and become the new planetary leader. Which means the new solar system leader, at least for a term. From what I've heard, they've been pushing the idea of paying for constitutional rights. They say it'll inspire competition and increase work efficiency.

If it weren't for Gorata's little rebellion and the two before her, we wouldn't even have constitutional rights. Not like they actually accomplished much with their uprisings, but piling up enough corpses, whether they're yours or the other guys, makes for a bad impression when foreign dignitaries come to visit. Especially when your planet no longer has room for grave sites. And those piles happened to be enough to get some concessions out of the suits up top.

So, I guess they're bad enough that I'll be in the 'good guy' role this time around.

I found a subway entrance, although that term is a bit dated, they call it a hyperloop. This thing can take you all over the northern hemisphere. Getting to the southern hemisphere is a bit more difficult, but that hardly matters. I found the city these Novac people set up shop in and boarded the train. They had some maps plastered on the insides so people like myself didn't end up traveling back and forth across the planet for days on end.

The maps were a stark reminder.

The stops were all clustered around specific cities. There weren't any stops in-between. The war my mom fought in ended with this: massive chunks of uninhabitable land. Irradiated, toxic, blown into an unusable state. Humans can hardly live there anymore. Now they all rush to

these cities, hoping to find salvation, only to be faced with profit seeking corporations. They're drained of everything, and if they don't die working then they're spit up into space. And those destitute degenerates find themselves on asteroids like GC 213b, and then in bars like my own. They drink themselves to death, and the cycle continues. Race? Religion? Who gives a shit. They're all just dollar signs and their only worth is in how long they can serve a purpose. Hm...

Really starting to see too many similarities between my bar and these corps. Probably not a good thing. Hard to even tell who I'm talking about. Maybe growing up here was a curse.

I hate this planet.

Can I really lay all the blame at their feet though? Agh, I don't have time for this.

I hate this solar system.

I...

I'm tired of this place.

"Heading to Novac?"

I was ripped from my worthless inner monologue. Like me worrying about this garbage will change anything anyway. After the initial shock of being torn from a pointless line of thought, I realized the oddity of the question. How the hell does this wheelchair-bound, gray-haired, more fur than skin looking codger know where I'm going? "You lookin' for a seat geezer? Sorry, I figured you'd be fine with your own."

He chuckled to himself and it almost seemed like he was remembering having this exact same conversation. He did look old enough to have had every possible conversation at least a few times over, "The only people on this train during this time of day are the folks working at Novac. And you only go to Novac's city if you're planning on working. Other than that, it's just a bunch of empty skyscrapers so out-of-system folks think the city's rich or somethin'. Corporations live

on their image, y'know? And Novac's just starting to build one, so they lie a bit." He followed this with a pretty non-committal shrug, 'just business' or something, I'm sure.

"So what, a city large enough to have two different types of weather at once is just empty?"

His chuckle started to turn into a laugh, a laugh that was almost too good-natured, "Can ya believe it? A world where land is the most precious resource, and they use a chunk this big just to make a point to aliens from a galaxy far far away! Enough to make ya laugh as long as you aren't on their payroll. Which I guess I am." His laugh kept going though. The guy's probably a couple steps from his death bed given his current state. It's almost pitiable from where I'm standing. But, then again, I guess he's the happiest guy on this train.

I looked around the empty train car.

Yeah, happiest by far I'd wager.

"So you're working for them then. Retiring soon?"

"Retirement? Is that some sorta space joke? No one on the Blue Dot retires!"

"Really? You're a stone's throw from death, old man. And I mean a stone's throw with those withered arms of yours."

"We're all a stone's throw from death kid. Even a 'withered arm' stone's throw."

Fair point.

"It's beautiful though."

What? Did I lose the plot somewhere? Could've sworn we were just talking about how awful this planet is, what with working people to literal death and filling the habitable bits of the planet with glorified concrete boxes... well, 'impressive' glorified concrete boxes I guess, if I'm being fair.

“Long as you overlook those folks in suits, it’s the best planet out there. Those piles of toxic garbage from the first invasion? Most people avoid ‘em like the plague, but if ya ever go... well... all sorts of plants are growing there. All sorts of animals are living there. We got a planet that can start shrugging off nuclear annihilation, given a few decades. Watching a scar heal can be beautiful, y’know? So long as you don’t focus only on the scar, you start to see the skin as a whole and what it can do. What it’s capable of. This planet ain’t great. But it’s got some charm.”

Odd.

Odd to hear someone talking kindly about this planet. Maybe I’m around too many revolutionaries, but I find it hard to believe someone could love this planet. “Don’t you think you can’t really love this planet until it’s got someone worthwhile in charge? Isn’t it hard to love a planet run by corrupt businesses?”

“I don’t love this planet for them, I love it for all the rest. I love it cause it’s still fighting no matter who’s in charge. Love is hard friend, so anytime we can make love’s job easier, we oughta.”

“So, what? I’m supposed to love these companies because they’re a part of this planet? Even though they’ve done so much bad?”

“Well... I won’t try and argue that. They’ve done plenty of bad, and I’m sure they’ll do plenty more. But,” the train started to slow down after climbing to ground level in the city. Metal plates slid down from over the windows and you could see a fenced in park. Recreations of plants and animals from all different time periods of Earth were scattered about. It was like some sorta history book brought to life. The old man was staring out the window, boney fingers stuck at odd angles around his suitcase, “but something about this place makes ya think it’ll all be worth it. Fake breeze and fake trees? Sure. But, to some folks they’re as real as it gets. You don’t have to

love those folks in suits, but you can love pieces of them. Like the pieces that made this... least, well, I'm fond of it, y'know?"

Senile. "Sure, sure. So you work at Novac?"

A sad grin found its way onto his face, "Sounds like you're not too interested. Yeah, I 'spose I work at Novac. I run the lobby, make sure the people gettin' in are supposed to be there."

Perfect, "That's fantastic. As it happens, I was looking for someone just like you. I need somebody who can show me the ropes before I decide that this is the company I wanna spend the rest of my life with."

"Well, you don't get to decide that. You just take what job comes to ya. But, if you're heading to Novac, I could show ya a couple tricks."

Of course you will.

It's nice, really. Someone coming up on the fear of death tends to be pretty willing to help if it means getting a chance to bore someone with their stories, and I'm a bit of a seasoned veteran at pretending to listen to stories. Now I just need to get to that computer, then I can be done with this and get back to my bar before Boozie drinks me into bankruptcy.

The train finally came to a stop. More metal plates shifted around and the door in front of us folded outward. A metal ramp collapsed into the opening and we made our way off the train, which was boarded by the night shift workers who can't get full time jobs, heading to the ports to make their way home. Or maybe they're heading to a second job.

The old man rolled himself beside me, already breathing heavily from the exertion of a few feet, "Tell ya what, I'll give ya two tricks of the trade before we even start out." He started coughing and gasping and I began to wonder if I was about to lose my newfound asset, "Agh, damn. Usually try not to bloody up the handkerchief this early in the day. Looks shabby, y'know?"

Anyway, here's the first bit: start kissing whatever ass you can." He looked at me for a while longer, expecting, "Don't make an old man ask you, eh?"

I tried to give a polite sigh, but I'm not sure I pulled it off. I grabbed the handles of his wheelchair and we started on our way, "And the second? You said you'd give two old man."

"I know, I ain't senile yet." He looked up toward the artificially sunny day. Mechanical birds circled above in pre-programmed patterns. I couldn't see his face, but I could tell he was smiling, "You can't just give 'em the rest of your life. Anyone can do that. So ya better start thinking about what else ya got to give."

Wow, these corps keep on surprising me. I mean, that's a special type of evil, right? Even I haven't come on par with wringing out the dead... huh, well maybe I have nabbed a few wallets from customers after a good bar fight, but I can't be sure they were dead, right? Well, anyway, erasing this company from the planet should increase my good karma quite a bit. I'm starting to think I might be a bit deeper in the red than I thought I was.

Who knows though, maybe I'll end up eviscerated by their security system before I have time to care about any sort of karmic justice.

Or maybe *that* would be the karmic justice?

Time passed quickly as I let my mind go a bit blank and waited until the old man's droning put me half to sleep. A sound louder than the others he'd made had me fully awake again soon enough. We'd arrived.

I have to say, it's exactly what I expected. A tall rectangle reaching even higher than its neighbors. I'm sure the top would be obscured by clouds if it was in a normal ecosystem, but the climate control meant clouds only popped up if they wanted them too. It was slathered from top to bottom in ads. Flyers and posters stuck as far as one could reach. Metal and plastic and more

making up bases for the larger ads. Holograms clawing their way through the mundane ads, supported by tiny projectors haphazardly nailed to the building. And the trademark of all these ‘beautiful’ buildings was right there... or rather wasn’t. The windows were nonexistent.

“Y’know young’un, I never asked your name.”

“Surprised you can remember our whole conversation.”

“Like I said, not senile yet.”

“Sure, sure. Like a... what was that saying? ‘Fallen chicken’?”

“Bit before my time, but I think you got the seasons messed up. Maybe spring works better, eh? Now, how ‘bout a name? I’d rather not have to punch in late because you’re too shy to give a name. They take away your lunch privileges for a week for clockin’ in late.”

“You could stand to lose some weight, right?”

“I can’t stand at all. *Name.*”

“Most folks call me Old Man.”

He laughed, still filled with some sort of joy I couldn’t wrap my head around. I mean, he’s about to go to work? Here on the Blue Dot no less. Who the hell would still be happy at this point? “Well then, we can’t both be old man, huh? Go ahead and call me Radoslaw then.” He chuckled and rolled himself through the automatic doors, “Sounds a bit younger too, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, yeah. Radoslaw sounds like the sorta guy who’s really partying hard when midnight comes.”

“You really think so?”

...

“Ah, sarcasm.”

“Just a bit.”

“Just a bit?”

“Just a bit.”

He laughed again. He rolled into the building and found his way behind the counter. After punching a few keys on the apparatus in front of him, he turned to me, “Alright, so, I guess I’ll tell ya a little bit about how the day goes here at Novac.”

“Hm, ‘day’? I’m sure they got you here for more than a day Radoslaw.”

His generally kind demeanor turned to one of seriousness, “If they have me for more than a day, then that’s a day.” With a look of complete subordination, he said, “You’d do best to remember what sorta words you want to spout on company time.”

I almost forgot what sort of group I was dealing with. I tightened my lips and waited for him to continue.

“Now, if you wanna do anything in this company, ya gotta know how to use this guy.” He pointed to the computer in front of him. Trapped behind a counter, his whole world confined to this expensive looking table made from the newest material that could impress foreign folks. If only it was easy to steal a counter, maybe I wouldn’t have needed to place that order for the new one. It was almost sickening to see gold-plated boards propped up behind us, showing a line of CEOs through the ages. All old, all human, and considering this company was still fairly new, probably mostly for looks. The room had walls and floors that needed to be replaced at least every week to keep the ideal look. It was greedy. It was bureaucratic. It was disgusting. It was nothing more than theatrics.

And yet,

I couldn’t help but find myself impressed.

I guess that’s the whole point though, isn’t it?

Right.

Radoslaw started to roll himself down one of the hallways branching off from the cavernous reception hall we were in.

“Taking your break already?”

“No breaks at Novac kid. I just gotta get rid of this wheelchair. Corporate doesn’t like how it looks if I sit in it behind the counter. Throws off the whole feeling.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Profits aren’t a joke around here. Ah, you mind hittin’ that button next to the computer? Yeah, yeah that’s the one.”

I pressed the button that looked suited to activating some star destroyer, if those existed. Large and red, but without any writing or symbols. The moment it clicked into place, large rods of some other-worldly metal slammed and locked into place along the front the door, “Holy sh- what the hell was that Radoslaw?” Er, wait. Do folks on the Blue Dot even use words like ‘holy’ and ‘hell’ anymore? Hm, I’m sure they have some money-based equivalent. I’m also sure I don’t actually care. I’m far more concerned over why the hell it looks like I just locked down the building.

He shouted from around the corner, “Just keeps the unwanted folks out. Y’know, poor people and stuff. They mostly stay on those asteroids, but you’ll find a desperate sort who hasn’t been able to land a job once in a while out here in the cities. I mean, c’mon Old Man, you do know business is done online these days, right? Reception staff like myself are just here to answer basic mail and greet the occasional VIP who shows up in person. And even then, they usually only show up cause they’re too poor to afford a good hologram resolution. Embarrassing. Least, that’s what corporate says.”

“Sounds like they got you working a pointless job.”

“Ha, yeah well, just about. But don’t tell them that.” This time I grinned a bit while he laughed, “No, like most of the human staff these days, we’re just here for looks really. Lotta those alien folks like to think they’re working with humans. They uh... what’s the word corporate uses... they think it’s ‘quaint’ I think.”

Radoslaw started to emerge from around the corner. I could hear his renewed coughing before I could actually see him.

Guess I should’ve figured, but the man was dragging himself on the stone flooring. Hand in front of hand, slowly finding his way to the counter. I imagine I should’ve gotten up to help, but I was still trying to figure out some of the ins and outs of Novac’s system.

Why the hell am I even worrying? Old codger does this every day. It’d be embarrassing for him if I ran to help, right? Right.

Shit.

Stop. Just stop. No need to worry over some old bloke just cause he seems a bit pathetic. I see worse pity cases in my bar every day. Boozie comes to mind, actually.

It didn’t take terribly long to bypass most of the security on this piece of junk. I mean, I imagine it *should* take terribly long, but with my... let’s call ‘em talents, any bit of protection they put up is as good as worthless.

This little talent of mine was a ‘gift’ from the orphanage. As tends to be the case orphans after a real catastrophic war tend to be, hm, ‘not very wanted’ is a way to put it. And, what with the government having internal struggles after effectively being torn to pieces and all, there weren’t many folks coming by to make sure that the orphanage wasn’t, I don’t know, experimenting with certain illegal augmentations? Me, being the lucky man I am, I managed to live through the

needlework and welding and implanted wires. At the end of it all, I was able to effectively download unencrypted versions of code from any technological device by touching it.

I mean, it's not magic. I can't just touch it and be done, see? Understanding and actually doing are two very different things. I still need a physical entry point where I can make the edits needed. It's certainly useful, though a bit of a pain to work with. At any rate, in a time where most everything has some tech connection, people with my abilities are considered quite undesirable. I guess that's the downside of being classified as an illegal entity that isn't allowed to exist in this dimension, or any other probably.

Ah well, wins and losses. Sometimes you go to an orphanage and get turned into one of only four (or so the caretaker told me) people able to hack whatever they get their hands on, and sometimes your orphanage doesn't root around in your cranium with a power drill. Luck of the draw.

"Hey, Old Man, you already got that thing figured out? I've been working with this program since before the first invasion and I still couldn't tell ya how to work it proper!" That laugh that sounded so sincere before, was tainted now. Not that his laugh changed, just how I heard it. I wasn't just playing some amicable newbie anymore; it was time to get to the work I'm being paid for. The work that'll probably have this old man jobless and drinking himself to death in my bar soon as the big boys at Novac figure out the reception computer caused a 'malfunction'.

"Well, you could say I've got a head for this kinda stuff."

"Some head."

"Probably better to ask that one in some non-descript alley." Gotta stop taking these easy ones.

"Eat shit."

“Hm, now that’s gonna be a rare alley I’d wager. Good luck Radoslaw. Insert-your-god speed.”

I lifted him, just a bit, into the stool behind the counter.

I didn’t do it for some altruistic reason. Just can’t stand him breathing so heavily. A cripple and a mouth breather? Yeah, this guy’ll end up in my bar for sure.

And, as tends to happen, time passed.

Time passed exactly as you’d expect it to in a job like this.

Slowly.

Far too slowly.

It was basically silence between the two of us and not much transpired. Sometimes, but not nearly often enough, Radoslaw would nod off for a moment and I could get a bit further into Novac’s system. Searching and searching and searching for any reference to 5aqz98. Which, in case I haven’t made this clear, is an absolute pain.

Torture, quite possibly. I mean, sure, it’s easy enough for me to understand how this garbage works but knowing metal types by eye isn’t the most helpful when you look for an iron needle in a pile of miscellaneous needles.

I peeked over at the ancient codger. He was staring at a piece of paper. Maybe not just a piece of paper, it looked a bit like there used to be something on it. Maybe a picture? It’s too faded to actually see anything, and the creases and tears aren’t doing it any favors either.

“Hey Radoslaw, you said you were here during the first invasion, right?”

“Forgetting our conversations? Now who’s the senile one?”

“Piss off, had to find some way to start a conversation after, what, six hours of silence?”

“Six hours already? Nearly a quarter done then! Well, if they let us off on time, that is.”

“So?”

“So how ‘bout you be a bit more specific.”

“Just... anything, I guess. How’d the people take it? How’d the world take it?”

“Well... I guess I got a story or two.”

Heh, I’ve really honed my craft. I might not have booze to give, but people’ll get lost in their own stories whether they’re drunk or not. Though, all things considered, convincing an old man who’s nearly expired to talk about his younger days probably isn’t much of a hurdle.

“It was odd. It was real odd. Real strange.”

“Yeah, invasions from space tend to be like that. I’m looking for something a bit more worthwhile.”

“You baby faced degenerates are what’s wrong with the universe, y’know that? It’s called ‘setting a mood’. Wars happen every day, just cause the folks on the other end come from the sky don’t make it strange. What was strange was how everything changed in a night. Me and my wife, we worked for Novac back then. Well they didn’t exist back then, but the guy who I worked for, his family runs this place now. Back in those days though, Novac was just an up-and-coming grocer chain. Me and my wife stocked shelves and got enough cash to survive and enough free time to live. Back in those days we still had a political type of government. Elected people and all that. Rules and regulations, and a fair bit harder to buy your way out of a crime, for most folks at least.”

“Sounds like you’re not a fan of the way things are now. Corporations holding the reins and all. Guess that’s not a surprise though. I had a hunch those democracies of old were the way to go.” I finally found a connection to the information system they had compiling data from all the different departments, the best place to get what I’m looking for. It was a bit eerie though, clawing

my way through a couple years' worth of data while some old man I'd only just met rambled on about the war that found my mother her purpose, and later: her weakness.

It all had a strange feeling to it, in this room with too-high ceilings. Everything white and pristine. Small vents scattered across the expanse, opening and sucking in any debris every so often to keep things immaculate. Lighting panels indistinguishable from... well I can't actually see where they're placed in the ceiling. Guess that just adds to it. A light source, bright and white, emanating from somewhere and everywhere. A few hallways branching off in separate directions, but other than that, it was just an empty room with a counter, some stools, and a computer. So clean and so perfect... it just feels unnatural for all this effort to be put into a room that's practically never seen.

“That’s a firing offense son, better watch what you say about how things are run.” Ah, brought back to reality once more, and just in time. The item I nearly missed had that wonderful little sequence ‘5aqz98’. Now to find out how to bypass the lock on it. “But political folks weren’t much better. You kids don’t remember, but it really wasn’t that much different. Only different bit was that the folks in charge back then had to sugar coat their atrocities a bit. A lot more sneaking around to pass legislation that puts you and your family in the gutter. At least with the corporations they’re clear about why they do what they do: profit. But... I don’t know. Maybe life is just always bad for the bottom rung of the ladder.”

Yeah, of course, here’s where the security bumps up a few hundred notches. It almost looks like they knew people with my augmentation would be trying to get into this. Important stuff then. I wonder what exactly Gorata is having me do. Gonna take a minute longer at any rate, “So Radoslaw? What happened after the invasion?”

“Well, the corporations kinda took charge. Almost all our political leaders were dead or missing. Some folks even said they were traitors all along, planned the whole thing. Pretty easy to believe too. We lost the war but for some reason those alien folks just left us be, course we got pulled into their little federation, but that didn’t really hurt none of us. It all felt strange, and since most of us were expecting a round two, thinking those fellas would come finish us off, no one really wanted to jump into the role of leader. Lucky us, some real rich folk who controlled the businesses that were making our war equipment stood up and said they’d give everyone money. Almost hard to believe these days, but that’s how they started. Funded our broken little planet so everyone could get back on track. A bit of a monthly allowance had us all feeling pretty nice. Then they started rebuilding cities, but they needed land to do it. We figured it was for the best, so we gave up our rights to own land. Some farmers were trying to grow food in radioactive soil and once people started to get sick the corporations were there again, ‘Let us handle that, we’re better equipped. We’ll even hire all you farmers!’. They said it just like that. Before we knew it, we’d given them everything we had. They were in control of it all. That’s when the machine integration years started. We couldn’t fight back; we couldn’t demand rights. We wouldn’t’ve just been biting the hand that fed us, we’d have been biting the hand that clothed, housed, and healed us.” He was staring at his employee card, bending it this way and that, like a bored school child.

Or maybe that’s regret? Regret buried under ‘we had to’ maybe?

Something changed. I focused on the monitor and saw company wide access dates on some of the mundane files changing. Methodically. Dammit, looks like they figured out something isn’t quite right. Sent the bots after me. Come on, come on. I needed to start setting up a program to screw everything over once the file unlocks while also making sure it’s not something that can get traced back to me. This, this is why I hate these last-minute jobs Gorata. No time to prepare. “So,

that's how you felt. Drawn in and trapped, huh? How'd your wife feel about it? I'm guessing somebody must've known what was going on, and surely your wife is smarter than you."

"Ha, well she can't be too smart if she married me!" Awful, a classically awful old man joke, but he seemed to enjoy it. Or maybe he was forcing himself, hard to tell. "Actually, my wife caught a bit of an illness. The doctors say she was infected by some unknown alien toxin. She was shot when we were trying to escape a refugee camp that got raided. She seemed fine at first, but after a week she just..." His voice cracked and a low, pained sound barely escaped his lips, "she stopped moving."

"Paralyzed?"

"Not quite, least that's what the doctors told me. Something else, something new. Something incurable. At any rate, she's the only reason I'm still working."

"To keep her alive? Or to find a cure? Not to be a bearer of bad news, but I don't think they'll ever be paying you enough for a cure."

"Heh, no. Neither. She had a contract with Novac. Apparently, when the kids took over the business, they found a loophole to rewrite contracts from way back and still have them be binding."

What the hell was this codger on about? Guess it doesn't matter, as long as he stays on it for another few minutes. But the silence was stretching a bit too long, if he focused on my screen, it wouldn't take long for him to tell I wasn't doing normal work. I turned to him, hoping to spur him on.

His eyes were clenched tight, tears streaming down his face. The few teeth he had were barred, a bit of spit dripped down from the toothless openings. His face tilted slightly down, staring at the employee card he was twisting.

It was strange to see a man steps away from death look so... vivid.

I was about to speak, to try to bring him back, but he continued, “Her new contract... she still owed them service apparently. They sold her. They sold her to a militarized group that wants to use the infection as a weapon. But they said... they said if I worked for free, if I signed away my life to them... they’d let me bury her once my vitals showed I only had a day left. I’ll give my life a thousand times over. I’ll keep eating a half a slice of stale bread every other day. I’ll live a life without augmentations. I’ll suffer through whatever sickness or pain old age brings. I’ll give up my chance at living another couple hundred years or going to that simulated afterlife if it just means she can die peacefully.”

My fingers hovered above the keyboard, unmoving. They’re supposed to be moving. Why the hell aren’t they moving? “Why,” why the hell am I talking? I don’t need to talk. Just one more keystroke and I can be on my merry way... but, “why? Is her unconscious body being buried peacefully really worth all of this?”

A smile began to grow out from him. Slowly being shaped into something barely reminiscent of the joy it was supposed to represent. Like a sunflower that couldn’t tell which way the sun was, and so it just started growing whichever direction it could. Malformed. “I’d just like to, that’s all. She told me a few days after getting shot that,” another horrid choking noise, “that all she wanted was to be buried right here on this planet. I don’t mind all the suffering, as long as it means she gets at least one wish granted. Maybe, maybe her soul will stick around that way. Maybe she’ll see this planet with a blue ocean and blue sky again. That’d be a dream come true. It’s all I could ever ask for.” His smile kept moving, like a living creature as he tried to control it, “Hell, that’ll be a wish granted for each of us! Ya can’t ask for more than that.”

Press it.

Press it. Press it. Press it, press it, pressit, pressitpressitpressitpressitpressit.

PRESS IT DAMMIT!

“Come on Radoslaw. You don’t really believe that do you? It’ll just be death, nothing special to it. Don’t you think you’re worth a real wish? Like your wife getting better? Or you to find happiness? Something?” They’re getting closer, sonofabitch, they’re gonna find me. My augment means a death drawn out over years. Or more experimentation. I know that, so why the hell am I sitting here talking to this old man? His life sucks? So what. Everyone’s does. If I start caring about him then I’ll have to start caring about everyone. That’s enough to break a man a few times over. I just gotta-

“I think... well, I think wishes need to be far away like that, otherwise we’ll just end up disappointed. You see, this is the end for me Old Man. This is it. The moment I fail here, I’m done. So any other type of wish just wouldn’t work. I wouldn’t own it, they would. You can’t just give them your life, remember? My wife gets buried only if I let them take my corpse.” He started to chuckle, although that doesn’t quite do it justice. The sounds he made... like a man with his head already thrown through the noose. Just waiting for someone else to finish off his life. “Turns out, with everyone trying to live forever, there’s a surprising lack of human corpses. They’ll pay me. The issue is, only Novac does testing on human corpses anymore, so... they’re all I got.”

It’s always these sad sacks isn’t it? But... if I don’t do this... I mean, what gives him the right to live happily anyway? Why should I place him higher on the totem pole than myself? What has he done that’s so great I should sacrifice myself for him, huh?

I wonder what that fish would’ve done.

‘I... I killed so many. Everything I wanted, I lost. Everything I didn’t want, I became.’ sounds like him. Agh, what was his name, Mustaq-something? Sure. Guy sacrificed everything for a good end. Ended up with nothing and became worse than when he started.

So what? Why the hell should I care what some fish did?

Cause I don't wanna end up like him.

Shut up.

Radoslaw was falling apart, crying. Quietly, and trying not to make it noticeable, but he was breaking all the same. My fingers still hovered above the keyboard. It almost seemed like we were both frozen in time. Waiting for something to happen. That fish did his best but ended up with nothing. Hell, maybe less than nothing given that he genocided his whole race.

Gorata doesn't usually pull party tricks, this job has gotta be something big. So, I'm gonna lead this bloke, and everyone else grouped in with this company, to a likely death? Some other sort of suffering?

Does it matter?

No, they'd suffer either way right. This'll do good, I'm ending a corrupt corporation.

'This'll do good' sounds like something Mustaq-etc would've said though.

What do I get? Some CD with a, if I'm lucky, bit of information on some chick I don't even know if I want to seek out. Ad Astra's sake, she's not dying anytime soon right? With her military service, she was front of the line for most of the good life-prolonging augments.

Are my own desires more important than all these people's?

...

And so, in a box of a room filled with the sorta light you find in a doctor's office, I decided my own desires outweighed everything and put Gorata's bug in the system.

I also put this man, probably among others, out of a job. Well, if I'm being honest, I probably killed them. Quickly or slowly, doesn't matter. The least I can do is own up to my sins, confront them. I won't turn away like you fish-man. I won't pretend.

“Jesus! Old Man, bloods pouring outta your mouth like it does outta my lungs. Er, oops, guess we aren’t supposed to use the old gods anymore.”

“I’m fine, just bit my tongue my bit.” Incredible. I didn’t even kill a bunch of people for a ‘good of the people’ reason. I killed them so I could just *think* about what I wanted to do about my family situation. And here I thought I was gonna be doing good this time around.

I need to stop working for these revolutionaries.

I need to stop visiting this planet.

I need to figure out why the hell my desires are so damn important to me. And maybe figure out what those desires are in the process.

I pushed back from the computer, eyes a bit more dead than usual, “I think I’m not cut out for this Radoslaw. Looks like I’ll be job hunting a bit longer.”

“What? Listen, I’m sorry I kinda lost it, but trust me, the job’s not all about listening to an old man’s ramblings.” Same smile. Same goodwill.

“No, it’s not that. I just need to find a better fit.”

“Well... good luck then. Although I doubt you’ll find another job at all. But, if ya do, I’ll hope for the best for ya.”

Don’t, “Alright, we’ve only been together a day, let’s not get too sappy, yeah?”

“Sure, no. You’re right... but, I don’t get to talk to too many people. I know it’s silly but,” I don’t wanna hear it, “could ya wish me luck? I just... I think I feel like I need a little boost is all.”

I’ve just made myself a villain, haven’t I? Or, at the very least, a piece of shit, “Luck? Luck is a pipe dream. I’m sure you already know that.”

“Maybe... but we could all use a few dreams. Even through a pipe.”

I pressed that big red button again and the bars in front of the door receded. I walked to the door. Even through a pipe, huh? Wonder if I'm supposed to take that as bad isn't always bad. No, no. *That's* a pipe dream. "I hope something works out for you."

I think...

I think I wanted to say, 'I'm sorry'.

The walk and ride back to Gorata wasn't something that really registered with me. I let my mind wander as I made my way. There was no denying it, I was doing bad. But I'd known that. I mean, I'd like to think I've done some good, but I knew I'd been doing plenty of bad. But now? Now I'm starting to wonder if I'm even doing bad for a good reason. At least fish guy was shooting for a noble goal. My goal is far from noble. I mean, it's practically nonexistent. I've never heard of a king that throws away his people in pursuit of finding a pursuit.

"You earned it Old Man. Novac's already trying to run damage control and failing miserably. It'd almost be funny- no wait, it *is* funny." Her sycophants laughed. These revolutionaries were the same as anyone else in power. It'll never change down here.

I slid the CD into a pocket in my coat.

I shouldn't feel this empty.

"Old Man. One more thing," she tossed me a key, "go home. And when you're done, go home. Things'll be happening tomorrow. Maybe the next time we talk, we'll be free."

I nodded. I smiled. I joked. I left. 'Free'? No, either you'll be dead with some other idealist to take your place, or this world will just end up with you as the next despot. I'm tired.

It was dark out when I left the building that housed Gorata's little revolution. What do I know, maybe she's doing right.

I guess it just doesn't seem possible. After all, if someone could do legitimate good,

then that would just make me more of a monster, right?

We're all just pieces of shit. I gotta believe that. I need to.

The air was being cooled. The energy it took meant more toxic byproduct probably being pumped out toward my asteroid. Ah well, it made for a nice night. The stars and milky way were visible, even through all the city's lights. Slight shifts and periodic streaks of lights as objects flitted through space, an ever-changing scene. I stood there for too long, watching stars move. Or rather, watching this planet move.

That has to be poetic.

Or not, considering it's all just preprogrammed images playing out on the city's dome.

I started to walk, somewhat aimlessly, toward the city gates.

I was trying to rehearse some moderately believable story that would convince the gate guards to let me through. They usually only let research teams go by, so I was sure I was in for a difficult time. Miraculously, however, the gate guards were nowhere to be found.

Gorata must be planning something real special for tomorrow if she's paying off guards.

I found the interface the guards would use to work the door. Like second nature, I was hopping through all kinds of security systems to get the door to open without tipping anyone off.

I heard a noise.

Probably not the most alarming sentence, but this was the sorta instance where you don't wanna hear any unwelcome noises, and this noise? As unwelcome as it gets:

engines.

It was too late; I'd already changed the records to look like a research party was supposed to be leaving right now so I could get out. If these doors don't open, well, let's just say not many people can break into these types of systems and change records. They'll know.

The walls of light, probably the sorta light that turns living stuff into burnt-to-death stuff, receded. The beams almost seemed to sink into the very ground. Then the doors started unlocking. It was a strange cacophony: metal clashing, electronic locks clicking off, gears grinding and cracking as they forced a door that was fit to withstand a siege open far enough for a human to get past.

The ground beneath the door opened up and more gears gripped into the serrated bottom of the gate.

The gears began to calm down as the rail system eased the load. And then the door opened fully, swinging out the rest of the way in the blink of an eye and making a loud, metallic clang as it crashed into the stopping blocks.

I'm sure this looks very impressive for visiting dignitaries.

I was still in the guard house, peering through the reception window. Something was out there.

The engines kept humming along, but a new sound had me nearly shitting myself: boots. Ah, boots. The symbol of authority. The symbol of someone coming to get his papers stamped by the gate guard. The gate guard that doesn't exist at the moment. And I'm afraid, with my shabby gas mask and tattered clothes, I might not pass for an 'official' type.

“Old Man?”

I'm starting to think that name is a bit more popular than it should be.

“We're with Gorata.”

Ah, that makes more sense. So, with my pants only slightly wet, I said- wait. Wait. Wait a second, they're with Gorata? Did I just? Did I just play another part in her little plan? For free?

And then the engines rumbled, and thousands of Novac construction bots rattled into the city. No... I didn't...

“Gorata said to tell you there’s a personal low-orbit ship waiting at ‘the house’. She said once the revolution’s over, she wants you to come down and celebrate, or something like that. Can’t believe that lioness has friends, especially childhood friends.” He fake-coughed into his fist, “Sorry, not my place. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

He was polite and formal. Probably what you’d expect from a soldier in his position. Then he turned to his troops, marching side by side with rolling construction bots, and started shouting in far less polite and formal tones. Their movements were a bit off, almost animal like. They almost looked drugged, but I wouldn’t think revolutionaries devoted to a ‘grand cause’ would need to be drugged into going to war. I suppose it doesn’t matter, this’ll end the same whether they’re drugged or not. The man who spoke to me gave me one final head nod and then he went off to murder and raze a city of mostly innocents. It was almost unnerving.

I have an odd feeling that a free personal spaceship isn’t going to lighten the load on my conscience.

I started to walk away, and I tried to ignore any sounds and lights coming from the city. What kind of a man am I? I wonder how far I’ve fallen. I wonder if I fell at all. Maybe this is just who I am. Maybe it’s who I’ve always been. I’ve only got the one augment, no other boards on my ship have been replaced... do I really have no excuse for who I am?

It’s times like these I wish I had a bit more normalcy in my childhood. My war hero mother abandoning me at such a young age and then I get the pleasure of being thrown to an orphanage? That’d screw anyone up, right? An orphanage that ran experiments on its kids too. Then again, I guess that’s not exactly rare these days. ‘Augmented kids are useful kids’ they say. But maybe the

illegal nature of my augment still puts me in a different camp. Maybe I deserve to be a bad guy after all that. Or maybe I was just molded into it by others with no real control. Can that be my excuse? Can't the natural course of a ship's life change it just as much as replacing the boards? Or would that just be a worthless ship...

Are these really the questions I wanna ask?

No, I think the real question is a bit more complex. Less good and bad and more... personal.

Who would I have become if life went as planned?

Surely not a seedy bartender who lacks a moral compass.

But, since I have no idea, I guess that's just as likely as any other option.

I wonder if she knows.

Before I could slip off into another pointless memory that would lead me in endless, infuriating circles I realized I'd arrived.

It was a short walk; I could still see the city's walls from here. The companies had strict policies on what land could be developed, so even though this area isn't the worst looking bit of the planet, it's still abandoned and unused. Anyone that chose to continue living out in these areas got carted off to the asteroids once the companies solidified their positions.

I think stark reminders of war make for better statement pieces than run down slums. Makes for better stories for those foreign dignitaries.

I found my way to the asphalt paths that cut the town into separate chunks. Plants, not all of which existed on Earth before that first invasion, broke through the asphalt. They broke through everything else too. Concrete and steel houses turned to mincemeat by roots. The whole town was coated in varying types of insects, and some mutated animals had obviously turned this place into their home.

It was kind of amazing. Humans built this place, but now the whole town is too hostile to live in. I guess whatever God or Goddess is in charge of nature really doesn't want us coming back.

The sound of my shoes hitting asphalt wasn't nearly as interesting as footsteps in abandoned places tends to be. No noise rang out and bounced off of walls and ceilings. It didn't even spook the animals that were hunkered down in the occasional buildings that had roofs that weren't entirely caved in yet.

I found the corner I was looking for. There was the shop that use to have a sign with... huh, what was it? Some sorta food with sunglasses. The usual sorta corporate garbage from back then. Maybe I shouldn't be so harsh on food-sunglasses guy though. Better than the legalese that coats every business from top to bottom nowadays.

It was a nice enough store though. My mom took me here once, before the drugs. Not that I personally remember. It was just some old footage from a previous trip to Gorata's. I paid far too much for that security cam footage that she said would 'change everything'.

It didn't.

Just some grainy video of my mother and I eating on a bench. It was too low quality to even see my facial expression. I paid a fortune for that, only to get nothing. But hey, maybe this CD is the one, right? Bah, I gotta get this obsession handled. Get to the conclusion of this so I can... I don't know.

Stop throwing my money away, I guess.

Hm, come to think of it though, I'm not sure what else I'd spend my money on.

I kept down the path, passing lot after lot. You could tell these places used to have lawns, which is pretty incredible considering the concrete jungles of today's Earth. The only greenery in those cities is fake and cordoned off in miniscule parks.

I threw one leg over a massive root from some-holy-being knows what. I levered myself up on top of it and immediately realized my age. Climbing over roots shouldn't be painful, or so you'd think.

Old age is a heluva thing. Can't wait to get it over with.

What *would* I do with money though? Well, I wouldn't buy better booze. Don't quite have the customer base for that to be worthwhile. I guess I could move my bar, but the asteroids have their own charm.

Not that I'm attached to them. I just... I don't know. Comfortable? Or just... monotonous? The only changes on those rocks are when people die, and that's not really an important change. I got my foot caught under a bit of asphalt that was being pushed up by some sort of spiked bush. I sat there for a moment, real stars in the night sky and real nature all around, and I stared at the bloody pool that was forming beneath my knee. Night air? Exploring? Scaped knee? Maybe twenty years ago this would've been a great childhood night. I wonder why now it just seems like an inconvenience.

I'm too damn old.

Or just too tired.

Or something... surely something...

I shook my head, though I'm not entirely sure why. Just felt right. So, no new booze and no moving? What else is there?

Maybe when her little revolution is over, I could take Gorata for a meal somewhere.

Ugh, if that's all there is I'd rather keep forking over cash for worthless memorabilia. Eating with a revolutionary that attended that horror-house of an orphanage? More likely that she'd have me cooked and fed to some beast for asking.

I'd been standing in front of the run-down shack for a bit too long. Guess I'd just hoard the money, bury it for fun or something.

I pushed the door a bit and walked in.

And immediately wished I didn't.

The place reeked of death. Broken windows and plenty of shit, in the literal sense, seemed to explain the situation. I guess animals decided this house would make a good toilet/morgue. I tightened my gas mask a bit more; leather straps biting into me and nearly drawing blood.

It didn't help.

To be honest, the place looked about the same as I remembered. Well, the place wasn't coated in signs of drug use, so I guess that changed.

Maybe I should handle the simple issues first. I tried my best to step in between the piles of... whatever was puddled up on the floor. It didn't take long to cross the cramped shack and find myself at the back door. I slid it open and, sitting there in all its magnificent glory, was a beautiful personal shuttle.

The thing looked high quality. Sleek and shiny. Paint hadn't even dulled. This was right off an assembly line. I decided not to think about how she got her hands on something like this. Not many options for a woman such as herself, and all those options tended to be... not exactly heartwarming, I'd say.

The design was obviously from another solar system. No boosters or rockets or fins. It looked like an oval with three rods coming out of both ends. Maybe hydraulics? Then again, that's human talk. Maybe an interdimensional warp system? Hm, sounds a bit too sci-fi. Maybe it's just for looks.

...

Back inside, I guess.

The building really wasn't much more than a shack. A central room with a dirt floor and two rooms branching off in either direction. One mine and one hers. I mean, not exactly a shack. The walls and ceiling were wood and metal. It's lasted this long after all. Had to be built somewhat decently. She started building this place when she was still working for the military. She had some money back then that she didn't immediately throw away.

For some reason I just stood there in the middle of it all. I wish I knew why I found it so hard to move. I wasn't even here very long. A few years maybe? And yet... no. No. It's a pain is all. Having to navigate the trash on the ground? One wrong step and I'll be dead by morning with some unknown infection.

Hell, I mean, to add on, what even is behind those doors right? Maybe some poisonous beast is just waiting to snap at me. That's it. That's it.

Sonuvabitch, why was my hand on the door already? I was just making a good point *against* doing this.

As I pressed down, the latch clicked. Only a few bits of the handle fell apart in my hand. My door opened. The door I wasn't even tall enough to open on my own when I was last here.

I wonder what's inside. I wonder what was supposed to be inside. What sort of things was a kid my age supposed to have? What sort of things were actually in there...

She tried her best for a while. But what's left at the end of the day usually isn't our best.

But, time also has a tendency to let us know how worthless we are. The room was empty. Nothing. Dust and plants and a few dead animals. I wonder why I didn't expect this. I wonder why I hoped. I don't know.

I just don't know.

AAGH! Damn! I started to practically rip my hair out of my head as I slid my fingers underneath my hood. I'm too old to break random objects in a fit of rage, but it would've been nice to have some stranger to punch. Or Boozie.

Yeah, that'd put my heart at ease, I think.

I stood there for a minute. It was a bit odd, y'know? Just a normal night, or what used to pass as a normal night on this planet. Bugs, breeze, nocturnal animals. The sorta summer night where you'd be sweating in bed, but it'd be the perfect temperature if you were just wandering around outside. The broken windows and decaying walls meant it was more the latter. The slight breeze was just enough coolness to keep me comfortable. Wide awake as I stared at burnt up and wasted away memories, most of which weren't what I'd label as 'pleasant'.

It's not like I can spend all night here though, so I swallowed once and slammed my eyes shut, fighting off some dreadful feeling. That feeling you get when a memory from the past finds you and you start to wonder how you could have ever forgotten it, and if you forgot that memory, how many more important memories have been lost to time. Time is limited though. Well... unless you get augments or throw your consciousness online. 'Spose it still doesn't fix the memory bit though. Time just makes for a good stopwatch for me to get the hell out of here as soon as possible and save my bar from financial ruin.

I guess her room is next then.

Ah, come on. Why is it so hard? I must feel something for her. I just wish I knew whether it was hatred or love.

That kid, Zell, his dad *sold* him. And yet he still sought him out. He even did it out of love. Or some twisted, misguided version of it at least.

So what, I'm supposed to run to a mother I barely know asking her to accept me? I'm supposed to overlook all she did?

Or maybe I'm supposed to find this 'contract' huh? Figure out which one of us broke the terms?

How the hell am I supposed to manage any of that?

No, am I even supposed to? He was just some poor, pathetic alien fool. He's probably got a whole different cultural take on this garbage. I shouldn't even be comparing myself to him, and yet..

and yet I do.

I just compare myself to others. Why? Maybe I'm just emotionally stunted. I don't know.

I opened the door, far less slowly than I did to my own door. It swung open, door handle slamming against the wall, half of the door snapping off and shattering to pieces on the ground. This place really was run down. Like some cheap stiffened cardboard, falling apart at the slightest bump. I guess I'll have to take back it being built well enough for the time. Then again, maybe I can just blame it all on time itself, right?

Whatever.

I guess it made me feel better. Breaking something.

No, no it didn't.

The room, like mine, was empty. Dust and plants and all the rest. Of course.

Damn.

Ah, I'm so tired.

There has to be more than this, right? There has to be. I started to sift through the dirt piling on the floor. Something had to be here. Some sign. Right? What sorta story like this ends with nothing? I dug and I dug. Something had to be here.

It's for a good reason, right? I'm doing good, right? Maybe not some incredible world encompassing good but... but it's still good nonetheless, right? Fighting to understand my past has gotta count for something. Fighting to save myself has gotta be worthwhile, right?

Worthwhile or not, whatever god or God or goddess or spirit is in charge of this mess, better start fulfilling their end of the bargain. I mean, I'm doing my part aren't I? I'm putting in effort. Hardly seems fair for the big man or woman or whatever is upstairs not to help out at this point.

I started to move methodically, sifting my hand through the dust piles that started at the far corner, risking plenty of infections I'm sure, and then working my way back toward the door. Something had to be here. Something.

It won't end the same as that knightly shit. It won't. He was just trying to gain fame, wasn't he? That's it, that's all. I've got a much more worthy cause. I'm not here for fame, I'm here for answers. I'm here to figure out what the hell the rest of my life is supposed to be. Or if I should even bother with the rest of it. That's a good cause, isn't it?

Isn't it?

Or... or maybe his cause was better. It was in the service of someone else, wasn't it? His god or princess or whatever he dragged on about. Whatever it was, it was in service of someone else, but this is just for me...

but,

is helping yourself so bad?

I mean, didn't he find his purpose through all that as well? Even if it was just for a moment...

Is it all really so pointless? Is that it. Don't bother helping anyone then? Is it all self-serving? Or maybe nobody gets anything from it? Or maybe, just maybe... there *is* a point.

I couldn't help but laugh. God, if someone saw me now. A lonely old man laughing, the sorta laugh that has an insane tinge to it. I can't imagine I'd be very approachable.

No. No, I don't think I ever was very approachable, was I?

I stuck my hands into the next pile of dirt. It really would be nice if I ended up without some awful infection from being bitten.

Why have I been thinking about customers today? It isn't like me. I serve them, I take their money, and that's it. End of story. If I have to listen to some garbage that's just the price I gotta pay. I'm not supposed to take their little lessons to heart.

My fingers ran up against something unusually cold. I began to push it around underneath the dirt, trying to see how fragile it might be. After a few minutes, I figured it was good enough to survive.

I pulled the object out and laid it in front of me. The moon and stars didn't give much light. But if I strained my eyes a bit... ah. Ah.

I remember.

I threw it back into her room when I found it ages ago. Was it my birthday? Or some other holiday. I can't remember what religion we practiced back then. At any rate, I wasn't terribly happy. She'd been pretty deep into those crank-sticks at the time. I think it was a painful gift. I think it still might be.

It was a simple tin container. The sort that was popular before the invasion. Some sort of relic of the past that caught on again after the invasion. Fond ways to reminisce take the edge off of wars that leave you decimated I guess.

Little images of cookies and trees and some indiscernible cakes coated the container. I dug my nails under the lid, trying to pry open the metal box. It'd rusted shut over the years. I pried harder. Something had to be in here. Gorata doesn't usually send me places for no reason. Though that something isn't always worthwhile.

Then again, maybe I shouldn't place so much faith in a woman about to raze a city to the ground for her ideals...

or maybe that's the best kind of person to place your trust in.

The lid popped. A bit of dust sprung out from the seams. But under that lid. I remember.

It was toward the end of her path of self-destruction, or at least what I was able to witness of it. I woke up one morning only to realize she was gone. Not shocking, but a bit unusual. Whenever this did happen, she would usually leave out some food before she left for her drug-related gatherings. She didn't this time.

The letter was high quality. Strong material. The sorta paper that costs a fortune. I wonder why... why'd she go to the trouble.

I stared at the letter for quite some time. It was... nice. It was nice to be in a place where I stopped and the world stopped with me. No people rushing about, no equipment running non-stop. Nothing. It was nice. I could just sit; sit and wonder what I was doing here.

There was something in that letter, something I tried desperately to forget. And I did just that. Did a damn fine job of it too. Am I really gonna undo all that work? No, that's not quite what I'm really thinking. Best not to lie to yourself when you're talking to yourself. How much work

will it take to forget again? Will I even manage? Being older means it'll either hit a lot harder... or I'll get something new from it, maybe something I *wouldn't* wanna forget. Fifty fifty then? The wax seal was already broken.

But that fear is still there. Maybe fifty fifty ain't the kinda odds I'd take.

What in the hell is wrong with me? I'm afraid of it? I've faced down horrors sprouting tentacles to humans that murder for fun. I'm afraid of some ancient cookie tin? Some stupid letter written by some woman who was barely even a part of my lif-

...

Is that right? 'Barely part of my life'? The woman who literally brought me into this world, she's 'barely a part of my life'? That can't be right. But it can't be wrong. She was only around for a few years. And she was a drugged-up monster before the end of it all.

Maybe not a monster. Just... dead. She didn't hurt me or abuse me. She just, she just kinda wasn't there. Does that make sense? I hope it does. I'm sure it doesn't. I'll chalk it up to bar thoughts. Put a pin in it.

I carefully eased the letter out from the envelope.

It was easy to see the whole page was filled. Ink bled through at every point. You could almost read it from the reverse side alone. I didn't want to read it.

Did I mean to think that?

Agh, I don't know. It's just not... it's not something I wanna see. I remember the pain. I don't really want to relive that. But I need to figure this out. I want to be done with this little hunt. I want...

I want to leave my mother behind.

Then I can stop.

I don't quite know what 'stop' entails, but I know it'll make for a far happier life than what I've got now.

Does accomplishing a task actually lead to happiness though? Ol' Gerry wasn't happy for too long after beating that dragon. Maybe I'm just living for this little hunt too, huh. Just like him and his little quest, right? He wanted to be the hero, that was it. Then he is the hero, figures he can't possibly top the heroic stunt he just pulled, and suddenly he's the sorta person that ends up in my bar. I really don't wanna be the sorta person that ends up in my bar.

But, I think I can understand him a bit. It feels like it needs to be done. Like a purpose. It'd be nice to just let it set, always have it to fall back on. 'Oh no, my life sucks and it's going nowhere, I sure wish I were dead. Oh wow, but if I killed myself I couldn't achieve my purpose, ah geez, guess I'll just have to keep on living' Heh, yeah, I could see myself having that kinda conversation. It's comfortable, having a safety net in case of a feeling of worthlessness. A safety net of purpose, or something.

Why'd Ol' Gerry boy fight then?

Goddammit. I hate fuzzy crap like this.

Cause it was hope, wasn't it?

He hoped he'd find worth. He hoped that finding worth would be better than just having his dream in his pocket as a fantasy. At the end though, it's not like it worked out for him. He fell short.

I promise you, dearest friends, I puke at the mere thought of *thinking* these cliché and fuzzy and idealistic words but, well

I still got some hope.

Ugh, awful. But I do. Just a bit. But it's enough to shoot for a worthwhile conclusion, rather than a safety net.

The paper was unfolded, everything right there in front of me.

Hahaha.

I remembered right.

It was exactly how I remembered.

I could barely even read back then, but the formality still put me off. What kind of parent starts a letter with 'Deepest apologies for the inconvenience,' She really became a high-ranking sorta person, didn't she?

The rest of the letter was equally formal. Apologizing for her parenting, her drug use, et cetera.

It's amazing she intended for a child to read this. Maybe she thought I was smart because I dragged her to bed when she was out of her mind and kept quiet most of the time. Something about silence and a couple acts of kindness seems to make people think you're far more mature than you actually are.

Or maybe she was just out her mind.

I wasn't mature, at any rate. And I didn't understand the letter, not really. 'Parting for mutual benefit'? What the hell is that supposed to mean? I got tossed in a horror house of an orphanage where I was turned into an illegal entity.

Maybe that's still better than how my life here would've ended up.

There wasn't much else in the letter. No hint as to where she was going or if she'd come back. No guide on how to live. No recommendation on where to go. It didn't seem like there was anything in there to help me. I mean her closing is even 'regards'. Professional to the end. A

professionalism she hated. She was a warrior; emotional and blunt. Those years in the office mixed with her drugs really changed her. I wiped something away from my eyes. Dusty. Just dusty. I put the letter back in the envelope.

Guess I'm taking another hit to my hope. Not much left now huh?

My hands felt glued to the paper sheet. For some reason, I wasn't able to put it back in the tin. Is my hope really so weak? So pathetic? That metal clad, knightly sack of sadness fought a *dragon* for his hope. Hm, but, counterpoint, ain't no dragons here.

No, I 'spose not, but the letter found its way into a pocket on my coat all the same. Not a dragon, but an antagonist, a goal. They can come in all shapes and sizes after all. Maybe there's a bit more to it. Maybe I just need some sleep first. After all, Gorata's pretty good at intel. And she may be a bit insane, or fanatic. Probably similes, huh? Either way, she's smart. She's skilled at being a leader, although those leadership skills are more geared toward war and revolution, but she knows as well as I do that tonight will either end with her head on a flagpole in the capital or put her in position to start a lengthy war. This is probably the last time for a long time that she'll be able to help me out with this. She wouldn't make her final gift a dud.

It was odd; something in me felt a little bit lighter. Ah, yes, that has to be it.

I was looking at my own personal space craft. Everything's gonna turn out ok.

It was nice and simple, unlike the questions growing inside me. A few pushes of a handful of buttons and the engine was prepped. A final flick turned on the sensor that registered me as a VIP of Earth. Don't know how you got your hands on that Gorata, but now I won't be getting shot outta the sky, which is a plus. I looked out the window for a moment, while I was still technically on this planet, and I saw the city engulfed in light.

People were dying down there. But I didn't particularly care at this point.

I guess I had other things I needed to focus on.

Like my family, or lack thereof. Or my bar, or lack thereof. Honestly, being gone for even a day meant Boozie may well have already gotten into my bar. If they ever write a book about an alcoholic, it shouldn't be about him. Even alcoholics would say he's got a problem. But he keeps the lights on. And the fans going. And the booze flowing... actually, his spending alone just about covers all my expenses.

The engine roared to life like it was brand new, likely because it was. It didn't take long for me to find myself beyond the Blue Dot's atmosphere. A few sparks of light were all that told of a rebellion taking place. A rebellion that no longer had anything to do with me.

A planet I hoped to never return to.

That goddamn rock is too exhausting.

There was a part of me that wondered what I discovered down there. A part of me that wondered if I came to some sort of grand conclusion about it all. A part of me that wondered if maybe, just maybe, there was an answer I just wasn't thinking hard enough about.

But I've got a bar. I've got a little CD to play. I've got a letter to reread. I've got a nice little spaceship, and I've got a few memories of a house I'd rather not have memories of. I'm sure the next time I get a lonely night all to myself, I'll try to think about all the things that happened today, and I'm sure... I'm sure that I'll need a drink when that night comes. A few, actually. Heavy subjects, y'know?

But for now, as my new ship landed behind my bar, all I could think about was how much booze was going to be left in this run-down shack.

I hope there's at least enough for me to get a breather tonight.

I walked around to the front, couldn't afford back doors. Or any other door actually. What I saw, as I rounded the corner, was the kinda sight that would strike fear into anyone's heart. The sorta sight that could taint a man for life. The sorta sight that made people shield their child's eyes and wish they could cover their own. The sorta sight that could only make one think: why?

Ol' Boozie was, with both tooth and nail, trying to pry open the metal crate that held the booze shipment.

They deliver fast.

He turned around at the sound of my footsteps, like a crazed animal. He nearly had me on the ground when we collided, "Old Man! Oh thank all the gods and goddesses and suns and moons and stars! Old Man please, I'm begging you, get me a drink. I've been sober for the past four hours and I don't know how much longer I can go on. See? I'm not even burping or puking mid-sentence!"

"Suns *are* stars."

He stared at me blankly for a moment, "You're right, huh?" Suddenly another burst of fear flitted through his eyes, "Did you hear that Old Man? I understood? I understood your correction! What the hell is happening to me?"

This guy... I truly have no words. I walked to the crate, Boozie on my heels, and held out the purchase card. The crate unlocked, rolled the pallets of booze off, then locked up again and shot up, or down, straight back to the Blue Dot. I popped open a bottle and handed it to Boozie.

He started to drink immediately, "Ah, just as awful as I remember." He hugged the bottle to his chest like a long-lost child. No, that analogy doesn't work with Boozie. He hugged it to his chest like a bottle of alcohol. Yeah, that's as good a description as can be given. "Oh, sorry, I forgot my card. Guess drunk muscle memory doesn't transfer over to sober me."

"Well, don't worry, I wasn't gonna have ya pay anyway."

“What? You’re... what the hell happened to you down there?”

I unlocked the door and swung it wide open, “You’ll be moving the packages in. By hand. Good luck.”

“What? But, you usually use, uh, forklifts right? For stuff this heavy? Maybe I should-” he stopped mid-sentence, not to barf yet, but to think.

I’m sure it’s obvious, but I’m guessing this is what he’s thinking: ‘If I unload this stuff while Old Man’s not looking, I can sneak a few bottles.’ Actually, he probably added ‘dozen’ in there. “Ah, Naranbaatar, you mind coming out?”

Naranbaatar walked out from a nearby alleyway. His feet were a different color and had obviously been sewn on. A few metal supports were connecting calf to ankle. “Well, I didn’t kill him, but I did keep watch.”

“Not quite worth paying ya for, but tell ya what,”

“Uh, kill me? Old Man, what’s he talking about?”

“if you keep watch while Boozie here unloads the cargo, I’ll give ya a bottle too. Mid-shelf.”

“Mid-shelf? You only gave me bottom-shelf?”

“Hmm.” Naranbaatar stroked his beard, which was quite a task considering his beard reached to his gut. Not that it stopped there; he then wrapped it around his gut, considered it a sort of armor. “And same deal, kill him if he screws up?”

“You got it.”

“Kill me?”

“Alright Old Man, you got yourself a deal. Boozie, start working. Also, can’t have you drunk on the job, so I’ll look after this for you.” Naranbaatar took Boozie’s bottle and tucked it under his bearded tunic. After taking a pull, of course.

“Old Man!?”

“Tough luck Boozie. Come back with your card tomorrow, yeah?”

I walked into the bar and found my way to the back. I closed my door behind me, making sure each of the eight locks were good and set, and started to climb the stairs to the second-floor room.

The sun was just starting to come around. Although the only light that actually reached my bar was the tiny stream that made the journey through each of the windows of the compactors in front of me.

It’s been a long day.

It’s been a long life.

Little bit of sleep should help me with the former.

The latter, well... I patted my pockets before I took off my coat and mask. CD and letter both still trapped in the pockets.

I’ll get to that later. So I guess my life’ll just get a bit longer.

Heh, some people would beg to say a sentence like that.

Wonder who’s in the right?

No, I think I’ve asked a few too many questions today. Especially moral ones that lead to pointless dead ends.

“You know Naranbaatar, I actually work better drunk, so if I could just-”

The loud percussive pop of a gun being shot was immediately followed by Boozy's screams.

"I USE that finger!"

"Hm... don't you mean *used*?"

Ah, Naranbaatar, I got the right man for the right job didn't I.

I laid back on my bed. I probably should've showered, or at least changed clothes. But it was far too exhausting. The fan spun idly above me, a slight creaking as it swung back and forth from a mix of momentum and a worn-out base.

I closed my eyes. Supplies acquired, and a few things besides.

Time to sleep.

Fifth Draught: Alone on Undeveloped Planet 1285.47-4h

I woke up to dark skies tinted with neon outside my window and an unstoppable barrage of knocks on the door that separated the bar floor from the top floor. I tried, desperately, to ignore it. I really did. But it didn't take long for me to be awake enough to make out the words being shouted.

“OLD MAN! PLEASE!”

Oh, that's right. Boozie's probably done unloading by now.

Gods I'm tired, but that must mean he wants to start drinking.

On the one hand, it'd be nice to start making some money again. On the other hand, I wouldn't mind a few extra hours of sleep.

“I'M BEGGING YOU! HAVE MERCY!”

Money won out.

“Shut up! I'm coming for Goddess's sake. Just shut up.” I reached the door and went through unlocking each of the eight locks. Boozie managed to bend one of them with his pounding. Almost couldn't get it to unlock. Well that just makes cosmic sense, doesn't it? Already have to add things to my list of 'needs'. Guess I'll just place orders on Mars though. If the bit of news blaring on the radio downstairs is to be believed, the Blue Dot is in a bit of a war, although some might call it a revolution I guess. Good luck Gorata.

“I've got my card and everything Old Man. Please, just get me a drink before-”

He cut off. Odd.

“Just get me a drink, I'm begging here.”

Less odd.

I managed to get my half-asleep corpse behind the counter. It was the new one. Nice and shiny. Plenty clean. Could almost see my reflection on the polished wood surface. It was a thing of beauty. Even had a nice little stand for my shotgun under the counter. They really do a good job with these.

“You brought this in too?”

“Well, it came halfway through, but Naranbaatar advised me to bring it in.”

“Advised?”

He wiggled his left hand, now lacking two fingers, “I told him no at first. But he made a convincing argument.”

“Ah, so I can see.” I slid him a drink. Cheapest stuff I had.

“Here’s the card Old Man. Better just hold onto it tonight. Imma be drinking to make up for all the drinking I didn’t do.”

I took the card, “Yeah, I think I’d rather hear your slurs than your actual accent.” I didn’t charge the card. I’m not going soft or anything. Just figure he’s earned a glass. Just *a* glass. That’s all.

It didn’t take long for other folks to start filing in. Something about an open bar gets to people subconsciously. Like they can sense it. Maybe it’s the sob stories and tears. Maybe it’s the laughs and camaraderie of drunkards. Maybe it’s the gambling and occasional murders.

Maybe it’s the smell.

I couldn’t say for sure, but nonetheless, people piled in. Each with their own reasons, their own stories.

It was good to be back, much as I hate to admit it. I stared down at the glass I was polishing and made sure to avoid all eye contact that didn’t involve a payment. It was good to be back making

money, but I could do with not hearing some hopeless drunk spill their life story. A bit too tired for that still. Not to mention I got a bit on my mind. The CD and letter were still sitting in my room, untouched. I just ain't got the mind for it right now. Too many stories clashing in my head. Remembering the stupid stories random drunks have told me. Fish and knight and pirate and more. It's all been mixing. And I don't know how to feel about the end result. Dammit, I decided to hope, didn't I? But what am I hoping for?

To get a conclusion for this 'mom' business.

And what does that conclusion look like?

Well, I've got plenty of information.

And yet?

I still haven't moved forward.

Am I... am I gonna have to... see he-

My hand had stopped moving. Just a dirty dish rag stuffed into a glass now. Fingers stiff, eyes unfocused yet unmoving. Something was happening, something inside me was clawing its way out and making an absolute mess of things, "Before what Boozie?" Please, please let me handle this later.

Boozie paused and set his glass down for a moment... well, that's probably what a normal person would do. Boozie, instead, just drained his still-half-full glass and let out a belch that could pass for a pretty decent bass line, "Huh?"

"Before I gave you a drink, you said something about 'before' like you were trying to stop some monster inside ya." Just give me something Boozie, I'm not ready to get lost in thought yet. I filled Boozie's glass and slid it back toward him.

He took it in both hands and stared into it. He didn't even take a whiff. Just stared at it. Stared at a full glass like he wasn't some kinda raging alcoholic, or, at the very least, like he was actually giving his drinking problem some thought. "People uh, people drink for all kinds of reasons Old Man. You know that. I, well... I drink cause I got some things in my head that I'm not quite ready to think about sober. That's all." He picked up his glass and got back to it, "To be honest, I'm not even ready to think about them drunk". End of discussion, it felt like.

Like I thought, Boozie really is just a customer, isn't he? I don't know anything about the guy. Absolutely nothing.

And that's it? All I got? Shit, I gotta find something to keep me preoccupied. Just opened the bar, can't exactly close it. Don't even think I'd want to be alone in this bar at the moment anyway. Think. Think. There's gotta be something to distract myself.

I scanned the bar, looking for anything. Boozie managed to clean up the place while he was unloading, only a few piles of dust and 'other' things sitting about. Not worth cleaning. No list to make, no fancy orders to fill. Everyone in here knows the drill, they're all locals, more or less. All of 'em got their own situations going on as well. Come on. I'm starting to rethink not wanting to hear a hopeless drunk's story.

I looked over the counter one more time. Boozie was still lost in thought and trying to get lost in booze. I looked away after pushing him a bottle. The lights in this place keep getting dimmer. Not quite dim enough to replace though. And that dimness managed to hide the thing walking toward me.

Of course, this is usually when I start getting cautious about what sorta monstrosity just entered my bar. But, for now, this thing should make for a good distraction. CDs and letters and

whatever the hell I feel toward my mother all seem a bit smaller when watching an alien you've never seen before walking up to ya.

I popped open my flask and held it at the ready, like a snake ready to strike. The moment I realize it's a night terror incarnate, I'll drink enough to stop feeling my legs. Sounds like a good battle plan for now.

The first thing I noticed as I pretended to wipe down the counter was the lack of clothes. Naked from neck to toe. Other than the skin being blue with yellow bars running horizontal every foot or so, it had a fairly normal body. Human enough. Toned to perfection: thin with a veneer of muscle. Looked like the kinda body you find on signs in orbit around pleasure moons. Seems like an ideal body type for horny execs. Then again, their 'ideal body type' is just about anything they can afford.

The fact it didn't have anything below the waist might not make for an ideal body type however. Just... smooth. But there was something poking out above the waist.

Well, multiple things. It had four tendrils poking out from around belly button level. They were obviously mechanical but definitely weren't augments. They were attached far too naturally, like a part of it. They moved with a sort of stutter. Almost like each segment of the tendril needed to be moved separately. They continued to snap into place as the thing walked forward, constantly hitting the ground or chairs as it advanced. Part of me wanted to start charging them for damage to the floorboards, even though it was mostly just hitting the artificial dirt. The thing is...

I'm pretty sure it's blind.

It seemed pretty obvious. I've seen a few folks who can't afford any kind of eye augment and this is about how they move. Although they have canes and sticks rather than a belt of

mechanical tentacles. And well, not to mention the fact it had some sorta tan sack covering its head. Guess it might just be this specie's head, but it looks like a bag to me.

The probes finally knocked into my counter, not making a scratch unfortunately. Could've charged for that at least. Another probe hit a stool nearby, which seemed a bit too lucky to me, and the thing moved to sit down. And... well... I don't know how to explain this bit.

A sound started to come from it. Some rumble or mumble. Guttural.

Not exactly comforting.

The flask went to my lips in an instant. Time to steel my resolve then. "I don't know what passes for language where you come from, but we stopped using grunts a while ago around here. Maybe try pointing, huh?"

That's when I realized I'd need a bit more than what I've got in my flask. The hand it brought up had five talons attached, razor sharp, with flaps of skin about two feet long coiling up and down each finger. Like writhing snakes latched onto its dagger-like fingers.

It seemed to have some control over those fleshy tubes. It rolled some back on both hands. It brought one hand up and used it to remove the sack, while the other went straight for its mouth.

Now, I'd like to say something. This thing is already horrifying enough, right? I mean, God did quite a job with this already. More than enough. Damn fine job of making a walking nightmare to scare the kiddies... and the adults. So why, why did the face look like that?

Again, the shape was human overall, but the eyes and mouth were sewn shut. But the 'thread' looked more like pulsating sinew. It dug fingers underneath the muscly-string, or stringy-muscle I guess, and began to cut through.

And so, with a bloody mouth and sewn shut eyes, this abomination gave me the brightest smile I could ever imagine seeing and said, "Hahaha, terribly sorry friend. Really, you'd think I'd

stop forgetting about these things. Bit of a bother that they keep growing over my mouth again and again. I guess people can get used to just about anything though, can't they?"

Not... not what I was expecting. The voice matched the body more than the face: pretty normal. "Listen, I'm a bit confused. You mind ordering a drink? I think I might be able to understand a paying customer a bit better."

He tossed out a polite laugh, "Ah, yes. Sorry again. Tends to be a bit shocking for people. Hence the bag. Although it doesn't seem to work as well when I take it off, huh?" That same smile, "Well, now I'm really screwing over your night, aren't I? Should probably just order instead of talk." he swallowed some blood that had been seeping into his mouth. "Tell ya what, I'll have whatever that guy's having." He nodded in the direction of Boozie, "Man like that probably knows the best drink to get. Well, the best drink to get yourself drunk, that is."

I'll say this first: I'm still gonna keep drinking to shore up my will. But I'll admit the good-natured attitude is a bit contagious. "You've got good eyes. Well not really considering they're sewn up, but good senses at any rate." I turned and pulled a bottle off the shelf to pour a glass, "How'd you notice anyway? That Boozie's a hopeless drunk that is."

"Boozie huh? Now that's some foresight on his parents' part isn't it? If anyone's got good senses, it'd be them. Actually," he tapped one of the four metallic wings sprouting from the sides of his head, "these guys here have something like an echolocation function. It's a bit more complex, but also a bit much to bother explaining. At the end of the day, they send out a signal and can map out terrain for quite some distance to a *very* high detail." He rubbed his fingers around one of the broken wings. Two of the four were snapped off at odd angles. The flesh coils squirmed around the jagged cut, maybe feeling the grooves of it. "Ever since the slavers got to me, they haven't

worked quite as well. But that's to be expected. Hardly fair to blame a slaver for doing their job well. 'Blame the work, not the worker' or something like that, right?"

It acted like it was some big joke. Amazing. I've seen escaped or freed slaves with clipped ears that used that freedom to blow their brains out the very same day as their release. This thing seemed to be taking it all as 'stuff happens'. I pushed the glass toward them. "What kinda species has a set of eyes but still develops some other way of 'seeing'? Seems redundant. Well, unless your kin are all born with mouths and eyes sewn shut."

"No, no. This is just me. Slavers were getting sick of my, how did they put it? My 'disgusting smile and hopeful eyes' or something." He took a drink, and obviously didn't enjoy what he tasted, "Although I think it would have been a bit nicer if they fried my taste buds. No offense."

"You made one vital mistake: Booze isn't just any normal drunk, see? He's on his own level. I've been giving him three parts water for the last six months and he still hasn't noticed." I leaned back onto the shelves behind me, "Just gotta watch out for the days when he's sober. Doesn't happen often, but when it does, he's a bit more perceptive."

"Sounds like you really care about him."

"Where the hell is that coming from?"

"Well, you are watering down his drinks, right? To keep him from drinking himself to death?"

"No no no. You've got it all wrong. I water down his drinks for profits. Also, if I didn't, I'd need new shipments of alcohol at least three times as often. Don't ask me how, but he's got quite a bit of money. Aside from being a pretty nice source of guaranteed cash, he's also bought some fancy augments for his internals. Not invincible, but booze won't kill him anytime soon."

It turned its head over toward Boozie, who was already slumped onto the counter and using a series of connected straws to drink. “So, just because you humans found a way to live longer, that makes it ok to hurt one another? Even if he was just going to end up throwing himself in one of those simulations your kind developed, don’t you think he still wants to live a good life? I mean, just because someone gets to live forever, they don’t lose their emotions, right? They still want... you know what? I’m out of line. It’s not my place.”

Damn right it’s not their place. Who the hell does it think it is? Comes in here and starts bleeding all over itself and telling me how to treat my customers? Yeah, living for ages or forever *has* changed things. What does it matter if I hurt someone if the end result’ll be the same for them? Shorten a bit of their life at the worst. They still live forever though, least most of them do with how cheap this stuff has become, so what’s the harm? Just another memory to forget sooner or later, “Listen pal, if these wastes of space are gonna live forever, then whatever hurt I do to them won’t even register. It’s just a moment in time when their moments are endless.”

“So just because they’re immortal, they’re also stripped of their emotions? Just because they live forever doesn’t mean they can’t feel.”

“No, that’s not the point.” bah, this isn’t the argument I wanna have right after waking up. “Emotions, even strong ones, fade with time, right? ‘Time heals’ or whatever people preach to ya at funerals. It’s a good enough idea though. Brains, no matter who they’re in, don’t work as well as we’d like. Stuff seeps out all the time. So,” seriously, why am I even bothering with this, “so whatever pain we inflict on each other will only last for a fraction of an endless life before the memory slips out. Yeah. Essentially, whatever pain I put Boozie through by letting him drink his fill will be pain he’ll forget and so, at the end, it won’t even matter to him.”

It looked down, some of the frays of skin from its mouth dangled and looked like they were moving all on their own, dribbling more blood, “I have to admit, it’s odd how many cultures show immortals in such a light. I’ve actually studied humans a bit, and I found their stories about immortality to be pretty interesting. Vampires, for instance. So many stories about love between vampires and humans. Generally dreadful stuff, but an idea almost always tends to pop up: the human’s life will just be a flash in the pan for the vampire. It’s like they assume it will all pass in an instant or something.” He tilted his face back up and leaned across the counter, staining it with droplets of blood, “Since your race is new to this, let me give you a hint: time doesn’t change just because you live longer. A hundred years will always be a hundred years.”

I reached my hand over toward it. They kept still, not backing down. I picked up its little paper bag it had over its face not too long ago and used it to wipe the blood off my counter. I like my dish rags dirty but having them blood soaked is something I try not to do so often, so the paper bag’ll do, “Alright, alright. Us little humans have plenty to learn. I get it. Coming in here preachin’ at me like this, well, makes ya seem like the sorta shifty, ideology peddler that’s gonna try to steal a bottle and run. So, maybe you give me a name just in case I have to hunt ya down, ok?” I hate to admit it, I really do, but maybe this thing really did have a better grasp of this living forever business. I don’t know, I guess it still sounds a bit farfetched. Or maybe I’m just that resistant to the idea. I mean, I forget more and more every year, that’s a fact, right?

...

but... I guess the *experience* itself still happened, even if I forgot it. So maybe, maybe the question is whether forgotten experiences still shape you... agh, I’m hardly drunk enough for this. I’ll just write his name down then drink myself to oblivion. Sounds like a plan.

“Ah, of course. My name is, hm, well it’s technically Surveyor Type 12M Experimental, but that’s a bit of a mouthful isn’t it? I think it’s easier to just call me Yorm.”

“A surveyor model? Shouldn’t you be in the depths of space painting on uninhabited planets?” A surveyor, huh. Guess that explains why it’s getting hung up on the immortality bit, I’ve heard these things are built so well that no one’s seen one break down before. Wonder if the bio bits of it help with that? Maybe it’s why the sinew nets around the eyes and mouth keep closing in again; like the bio garbage running through helps with healing or something. Bet those slavers got some pretty good scientific findings out of it, that’s for sure. I mean... if they were smart enough to realize what Yorm here was, that is.

“Well, like I said,” they wiggled their ears a bit, some metallic flakes falling off of the two that had been clipped, “these don’t work so well anymore. Can’t survey without them.”

“So, why not just get ‘em repaired?”

“Maybe it’s for the same reason that you seem not to have any augments.” It wiggled its two good ears, or antennae, or whatever they are, “At least, no augments from what I can tell.”

I decided to let it think on that by itself. I’m already getting too personal in all this.

“Ah, not my place again then? Well, I’ll tell you my reason. After all, that is my reason.”

“I don’t do riddles Yorm.”

“Neither do I. I decided to leave myself like this,” it rubbed its broken ears and ran another finger across its eyes and mouth, those little tentacles coiling on the surface, “because they make a good excuse for me to tell my story. A story I hope people get something out of.”

“You must think pretty highly of yourself then, to think you’ve got a story worth telling.”

Yorm laughed. Laughed and laughed and laughed, “Most people wait until after I’ve told my story to tell me it’s worthless.” They rubbed their eyes, some fluid leaking out from the cracks, “I think you’re exactly the person I’ve been wanting to tell this story to.”

I guess this’ll keep me busy, although it would’ve been nice if whoever is pulling strings up there gave me something better than ‘preaching robot’ to deal with. Beggars can’t be choosers I guess, which reminds me, “Well Yorm, you gotta understand something first. This here’s a bar for making money, not hearing stories. I don’t suppose you have some way to convince me to sit here and listen to your story instead of tending to my bar?”

“Hm, it would be difficult to pull you away from such an obviously strenuous job.”

“Ah, I guess you’re not drunk enough to fall for that yet, huh? Guess I’ll give ya the gift of honesty: if you start paying double, I’ll sit and listen.”

“Sounds like a win win for you. But, a win for me as well. You have yourself a deal friend.”

I took the money and, just for an instant, wondered if I’d give it back to him at the end of the night.

Huh.

Then I pushed Yorm a glass, “Don’t call me ‘friend’ bot, my name’s Old Man.”

“Ah, it seems like I’ve started to bother you already. I hope you at least stick around until the end.”

“I have to. I live here.”

“Great. Well then, let me tell you about the life of a surveyor.”

Give his money back? What the hell was I thinking? And why am I still thinking it... this bar, these *things* and their stories are getting to me. I took a drink and wondered, briefly, if this

was all one giant conspiracy where my patrons were trying to slowly change me into a man that wouldn't pull a gun on them so often, a man that didn't charge 'em double so often...

“Approaching planet 1285.47-4h. Disengaging deep space capabilities. Prepping forward thrusters. Would pilot Surveyor Type 12M Experimental prefer manual controls for descent? Commence input in yes/no configuration.”

“No.” You would think with a race as advanced as ours we would have ships that could take any input and understand it. Then again, that's why we're fit for the job. We specialize. Maybe we can't make the best ships, but we make the best planets. Pretty decent trade off all things considered.

I've been locked in this cramped shuttle for about thirty years. Long, long years. Who the hell thinks it's acceptable to throw a living being in a chair that doesn't allow for any movement whatsoever for *thirty years*? I think having every race we've come across treat us how they normally treat machines has started to rub off on our designs.

They hear we're manufactured and suddenly we become equal to a toaster.

Well, maybe not that bad, but close. We just... suddenly weren't real beings, all because everyone else said so. And so, now I sit in a chair that binds me in place. A feeding tube shoved in my mouth to provide an energy source. And that's it. Nothing else.

Ahhh, what an awful way to travel. At least I didn't get sent on one of those multiple century or multiple millennium... or worse trips. Although, I guess living forever means I'll end up picking up one of those assignments at some point. Eternity, and the infinite possibilities of it, really leads to a lot of stress.

“Forward thrusters engaged.”

The jolt was immediate, although I didn't actually move a fraction of an inch.

I swear, the way they tie you into these things. They really protect the merchandise I suppose.

“Assistant, could you bring up my orders? Er, wait, that’s a bit too complex for you isn’t it.” It’s times like these where it would’ve been nice to have some level of movement so I could reach the manual for this brain-dead hunk of metal. Do I remember? Hmm, it’s been three decades. Would have been better to pay attention back then. Ah, I think this is it, “Assistant, access mission orders for Surveyor Type 12M Experimental in regard to planet 1285.47-4h.” That should be the right wording.

“Accessing... Accessing... Accessing... Retrieved. Displaying orders on HUD.”

That’s right, the planet is marked for potential agricultural capabilities. Not often we get one of these. Hard to feed a universe this big. Probably why so many starve. So, hm, just ‘recon’ and ‘basic prep’ then. Shouldn’t take more than a few weeks to map the planet and get it ready. Wonder when they plan on actually starting colonization?

Someone else’s job. No need to think on it. I ran a quick diagnostic on myself to make sure nothing had decayed during travel. Of course, that’s a stupid thing to do. Our systems never mess up. Never have. Built to perfection. Maybe the emotional range isn’t perfect though. Why bother putting that in? I wonder what our creator wanted for us. Maybe we don’t have a creator at all, maybe we were born from the universe and happenstance. I mean, is a mix of metals and skin really so different than a mix of bone and meat or otherwise? Ah well, plenty of races, plenty of opinions. Opinions I don’t need to really think about, do I? Time to get this job done and get back home. That’ll be nice, have a few days of rest while they prep me for the next mission.

“Caution.”

Huh?

“Caution.”

The shaking started to become worse. I was starting to think the straps immobilizing me were actually giving some slack now. Not a great sign, “Assistant, report.”

“All functions normal. Caution.”

What? All functions normal? The g-force was starting to affect me. That shouldn't be happening. Damn this archaic piece of garbage, if all functions are normal... double damn, something from the outside is messing with us, “Assistant, expand on caution.”

“Craft has been destabilized by... scanning... scanning... object or entity unknown, and descent speed is increasing. Caution.”

That's... not good. “Assistant, switch to manual control.”

“Unable to switch control format during the process of descent. Caution.”

This... isn't looking good is it? Calm down, calm down. Plenty of materials in the ship to do repairs. As long as I survive, it shouldn't pose an issue.

Wait.

What about dangerous wildlife?

The planet is undeveloped. Argh, this won't work well. It'd be safer to leave this until the craft is fixed. But dying to wildlife would be a bit of a bother if I manage to live through this.

“Assistant, begin de-cryo sequence for Security.”

“Warning: early de-cryo sequence poses severe risk to Security. Do you wish to proceed with de-cryo sequence? Commence input in yes/no configuration. Caution.”

“Yes. Just hurry up.” The front metal plating on the inside was starting to glow red. This really isn't good.

Any part of me that hadn't been latched in and tied down directly was shaking all over the place. The marking tubes protruding from my fingers were whipping around wildly. One of my probing cords had slipped between some of the torso restraints and the segments looked like they were about to be ripped apart one by one.

A bark from behind me meant my Security was waking up properly. Sorry friend, we've only been together for two years of surveying and I'm putting you into a situation like this. Hope you don't hate me. If we live, that is.

“De-cryo sequence successful. Warning: approaching surface. Warning: superstructure integrity at severe risk. Warning: pilot is not securely fastened. Please, return all body parts to seat. Warning: approa-”

“Then you died?”

“Well, believe it or not Old Man, I'm very much alive. I don't remember much of the crash. I was knocked unconscious immediately. I woke up, maybe days later, on a flat plain. It was completely covered in low grass. Nothing above ankle height. The color was odd, like some mix between yellow and green, like grass that was about to die, but was still very much so alive.”

“So, what's this bark about? Some sorta robot from your home world?”

Yorm took a long pull from the drink I poured, coughed a bit, and continued, “Actually no. Just a dog. Like the dogs you know. Er, actually, have humans kept dogs since that war? Well, I'm sure you've at least seen a picture. I mean, they are specially trained to function as our security, but normal dogs besides that.” Yorm smirked at me, “Don't tell me Old Man. You didn't realize planets could share species? It's a big universe, there's bound to be plenty of overlap.”

That smug little smirk nearly had me reaching for the empty bottle near Boozie. I'm sure this bot could take a couple bottles to the head without dying. I suppressed the urge... barely. But that's also when I realized something catastrophic: Boozie finished his drink. Which meant-

“Oldsh Man! How'm I 'sposed to-”

He was moving too fast. His body wasn't prepared to get up and start moving at the same time. He made it about two stools away from us. Which meant he got past three, which, I think, is a new record for him. Nonetheless, he fell. As he always does. It was a perfect disaster. That two stools worth of distance was perfectly aligned with his height and the distance to Yorm. His head landed directly at the feet of the bot.

“Woah! Um, Boozie was it? Are you ok? Do you need some-”

I don't take joy in many things, but the way that Yorm's grin turned to shock and then disgust was something of beauty. The sorta thing that brings joy to children and adults alike. That universal language of all species. All people.

You see, Boozie didn't just fall. No. That's not quite how Boozie operates.

He also managed to spew whatever he had in his gut into a... by the sound, I'd guess more so a pile than a puddle. Must be eating better. Worse for Ol' Yormy boy though. Must've coated his feet, maybe even up to his ankles.

Yorm gave a swift kick. Whether that kick was purposeful or pure reaction, I don't know. But it was funny.

“Ough, gahdamms. Another metalsh man.”

“Sorry. Sorry. I didn't mean to.”

“Looksh like we'll have to be settlins this the ol' fashion waysh.” Boozie barely managed to climb to his feet, then fall immediately, and then pull himself back up again. Unfortunately, he

used one of my larger patrons as a support. They didn't like that. I watched for a few more solid hits before walking out from behind the bar. A threat of no more drinks and a bit of gauze had the situation mostly handled.

Yorm was standing over me and Boozie. Lookin' like a startled animal. "Well? You got a story don't ya? Can't imagine it ends at 'I crashed'." I started to wrap up Boozie's head, making sure the leaking blood stayed in between the counter and the tables. I'd really rather not have to move stools and chairs to clean up the blood. It's why we bartenders leave the spacing pretty large. Or at least why I do, "Go on. I can listen and wrap at the same time."

I woke up to something licking my face. I shot up immediately, nearly headbutting my security dog, "Come on Laika, get off of me. I thought you were an animal."

Laika barked, not too pleased with that I'd guess.

"Sorry, my bad. I thought you were a 'wild' animal. Better?" The sun was oddly dim. Maybe not the sun. One of my functioning probes started to take in air samples, "Hm... breathable for most species. But, dense? Thick? Something. Like an endless fog I guess, although the planet itself is still warm, though a little damp. Guess this is why it's going to be an agriculture planet."

I stood and started to survey the crash site. Heh, survey. Already getting started on my work then, it seems. Must be too used to it.

The ship was pretty busted up, "Guess we're lucky we survived at all Laika, but I'm not liking our chances of getting this ship fixed."

There are some basic materials in a storage compartment for repair in case of crash landings. The issue seems to be that that section of the craft broke off before we 'landed'. Most of the material ended up melting on the descent. Bad luck.

I started laughing, Laika looked at me like I was crazy. ‘Bad luck’ huh? I think the bad luck started the moment I left the home world with this assignment. Oh well. No better time than the present to accept your situation for what it is.

I pulled a few useful bits off the ship and started to fill my pack. I set up a rudimentary beacon, mainly to notify myself of where the crash site is. The beacon will only reach a couple planets away or so. Not much hope for someone picking up a distress signal in an undeveloped system like this.

But that doesn’t mean there aren’t locals. “Maybe we’ll find some friends, huh Laika?” She barked at me, a bit happy sounding. Guess I should follow suit. I breathed in and looked around. A flat plain stretching out in every direction. Nothing but ankle high grass everywhere. It was pretty beautiful, all things considered. Or simple, maybe. A simple beauty. Better looking than the factory dotted and resource mine pitted scenery of my home world at least.

I smiled, maybe a bit happy as well, and we were off.

I decided we’d walk west. We’ll cover more ground when it’s light out if we can keep up with the sun a bit.

My feet flew underneath me. The walking was almost unnaturally easy on this planet. I decided to use my echolocation to get a feel for where we were going and what we might run into. It takes a lot of energy out of me to run the functions, but once a day shouldn’t be the end of me, I’ll just be walking a few miles less. What I learned from this bit of echolocation was mildly horrifying. Not a single tree, much less a building or rock formation. All around me, it was just flat.

Perfectly flat given the planet's dimensions. From what I can tell right now, this planet is a perfect ball. A perfect ball of short grass. Essentially no incline and no trudging through difficult terrain.

There were occasional weeds that added some color to the landscape. Not flowers. Just weeds. Weeds in shades of oranges and purples and blues. Not quite normal, but surprisingly edible.

I stopped at one of these patches of weeds to collect myself. I'd already gotten lost in thought with my initial survey. The few samples of soil I was taking along the way were telling an interesting story as well.

I dug down after eating my fill and, just as my sample showed, there was absolutely soaked dirt. With only a few feet of digging the ground already became spongy enough to sink in. I took a sample of the waterlogged soil to make sure it was somewhat safe. But that takes a while. And Laika was already about to lap up the muddied water.

"Laika!"

I jumped at her, but as I pushed off with my left leg, something snapped. Just eating a few plants wasn't doing wonders for my bio rejuvenation processes. I tried to reach and strain toward her. I kept shouting. It felt like far too long as I looked on at my dog drinking what could quite possibly be poisonous water. It's only been a day! What kind of luck is this! What kind of cruel joke-

beep

The sound of Laika rubbing her tongue on the dirt was a bit rough. An occasional swallow was the only sign that she was getting water instead of just mud. The clouds overhead were large and white and numerous. The breeze was slight, and the sound of each blade of grass bumping into the next gave an odd feeling to the scene. It felt lonely.

beep

The makeup is...

I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe breathe isn't the right word. I nearly coughed out my innards from the tearful sobs I was choking back. Can't go losing my Security. The water is pure. I guess the soil must have a disinfecting quality.

Laika nudged her wet, muddied, nose against my face. She was well trained as a security companion. She didn't care that my leg broke. She knew there was no real danger. Just my own clumsiness. She knows I'll heal soon enough. But she still likes to check on me.

It didn't feel as lonely.

We slept there that night. It was warm with a cool breeze. The kind of weather that'll put any species to sleep, and sure enough, a dog and a surveyor were out in an instant.

The sun rose all too soon. But, really, the timing of days was about the same as my home planet. Maybe yesterday's exhaustion was still clinging to me.

I took out a metal tube that was capped at one end and filled it with dirty water. I packed a few dozen weeds into what few empty pockets I had left on me, the others still filled with scrap from the crash. Laika was patrolling around. She hadn't given any sort of bark. Looks like we're still alone.

I threw my pack over my shoulders. It's only been a day.

I went ahead and readied my echolocation function again. Guess I'll just try to do it at the start of the day from now on. Maybe I'll get lucky, maybe some blip will pop up for something other than flat land. Maybe a mountain, or a tree, or maybe even a buildi-

"Laika! Here!"

She was at my side in a moment, snarling at an enemy she couldn't see. She trusted me to know what was out there.

But I didn't know.

I stared ahead. Dammit. Dammit I know. My left and my right. East and west. But I still stared toward the north. I was a bit afraid. Toward the west was a pack of... I don't know. They were big though. Too big. It seemed like they were big enough to graze the top of the troposphere. At least... oh please let it be a false reading, at least *ten miles* tall. That had to be dangerous. They were moving slowly though. Very slowly.

That was the issue with the east. They weren't moving at all. Five figures. They seemed too thin to be real. Like sticks. I have no idea where they would put the organs. But... they still hadn't moved yet.

How did none of this show up yesterday? The big beasts I can understand, that's the direction I've been walking, but from behind? From the East? Did they catch up with me only to stop moving? I couldn't have missed them.

Something about this endless flat plain... something about such a wide-open area that couldn't hide anything made me nauseous. These were species that evolved *not* to hide.

What did they evolve to do instead?

Laika's tail started to hit my legs. She was still snarling, and she could sense my fear. "You're still here Laika. You're right. You're still here."

I turned east. These things were smaller. Maybe they were the inhabitants. Maybe they wanted to observe me for a while before making contact.

Five figures stood about three miles away. Just on the edge of what I could view. It was hard to tell even for me at this distance, but a few features stood out. I was sure they were thin, but

they had something larger around them. It drifted up and down in the breeze. They looked like a scarecrow from one of my human texts, except they were draped in this black, tattered tarp. They had faces though, I think. The overall shape of the thing was similar in a sense. Well, a body and a head.

I reached in my pack and brought out a looking glass. I attached it to my face and took another look at the scarecrows.

The looking glass was dialed a bit too close. I decided to leave it like that, a closer examination might help me see danger better than zooming out to see the whole thing, for now at least. I started by raising the looking glass to see their feet. But there weren't two. Just a single stick. It had some odd shavings that fluttered about. They looked like living splinters. I continued up to see the cloak they were wearing. It was just a tattered black cloth. Nothing special. There didn't seem to be any openings for their arms. If they had any. The neck was the same structure as the stick at the bottom, except the splinters were longer and a bit more active. I brought the looking glass ever higher.

The face was more than unsettling. It looked like a portrait... a portrait of me. A near realistic face that looked far too similar to my own. But, to top it off, it was warped. The basic portrait was there but it was stretched and crumpled at odd angles. Changing bit by bit as the wind came into contact with it. It was... it was a sheet?

The expression was still, the eyes were unmoving. I guess... I guess they really are just scarecrows. Or whatever this planet's variant of scarecrows are. But if they really are scarecrows, why didn't I see them yesterday? And why my face?

I decided to chalk up the uncanny resemblance in that portrait-like face to my own circuits being damaged. There was just no way...

I took off the looking glass and stuffed it in my pack. I ran my hand through Laika's fur a bit. She felt warm. Well, maybe I am a bit damaged, I did crash yesterday. Not exactly something to walk off, I'll need more time to heal up properly, especially on the meager energy I'm getting from this planet.

So now, to the west. The direction we were supposed to travel in. The direction that held a handful of ten-mile-high objects that were *moving*. Not likely a building.

I turned and almost couldn't believe my eyes.

It was beautiful.

The sun rising behind me coated everything in a golden hue. Shadows were practically non-existent, even with light coming in at an early morning angle. The lack of any topographical differences meant the only shadows that existed came from us. But these things, they casted shadows far off into the distance. It was incredible, like somebody had painted a massive four-legged creature onto the very surface of the planet in all black. It was hard to even believe that that shadow was attached to something.

They were even taller than I imagined. Three of them, inching their way to some unknown destination. The lower hanging clouds in the sky made one of them seem like just four legs leading into the sky.

It was otherworldly.

"I guess that makes sense though, huh Laika?" She'd already calmed down. She could read me like a book. The moment I calm down, she calms down. I stretched my arms to the sky, taking just another moment to appreciate the fleeting sheet of gold that was disappearing as the world continued to turn. "Think we can catch up with the morning rays pal?"

She nudged the back of my leg, “Alright, alright. I’m going ok?” I took the first step of the day and started probing the ground and doing a few checks on my antennae to make sure I could run them again tomorrow. I may be stranded, but plenty of surveyors get stranded. Doesn’t mean we don’t do our job. After all, there’s bound to be a colonization crew at some point, even if this planet’s paperwork gets held up.

Just like yesterday, the miles flew by. It felt like we would be able to walk to the other side of the planet in a few more minutes.

In reality though, now that we have a physical marker to look at, it was obvious just how large this planet was. We were getting closer to the massive beasts, but it was slow going. I must really be pretty banged up from that crash. Laika hadn’t even picked up on them yet. I think I liked it better when I could pretend we were traveling fast. I wonder if something about this planet makes walking more enjoyable?

I’ve never been a good surveyor. The singular task I was built to fulfill, and I can barely manage it. I take samples of the air and the soil and the plants and the water. I review whatever scans I take and try to figure out which areas look promising for which sorts of facilities. But no matter how much information I gather, I can’t tell why it’s so enjoyable to walk on this endless plain compared to walking on my home world. I can’t tell why one chunk of land might be more comfortable to live on than another. No matter how many scans, no matter how many probes, it’s all just a mystery to me. I just end up reporting numbers and marking locations.

Then again, does that really mean I’m not good at this? Maybe this was exactly what we were built for. Maybe I’m doing exactly what every other member of my race does when they survey. Maybe I expect too much of myself. Maybe I’m expecting the impossible.

Laika barked and I realized the sun was already high overhead. She finally sensed the creatures in the distance.

It was odd they weren't traveling faster. I thought something so large would take one step and be halfway to the equator or something. But, as I got closer, I realized how wrong I was.

They were barely taking steps at all. They inched forward with feet that were at least a mile in circumference. Tiny movements, only leaving a single foot in the air for a few seconds. Of course, if something that large, with only legs, fell it would be a death sentence. It would never get up again. So, they take the cautious route then.

I looked up to see all three creatures' heads. They had long necks and oval shaped faces. I couldn't actually see the details, even with the looking glass, they were just too far away. They had their necks wrapped around one another though. As if they were tying a knot out of themselves. Probably another precaution against falling over. Trying to support one another. I wonder what kind of predator could knock them down though? That's something I'd rather not end up running into.

You know, I wonder what they even eat? Or how they even eat? There's certainly no food up there, and they wouldn't have a chance of reaching their heads down here. The neck wasn't nearly long enough. Are they a plant-like lifeform? Maybe they live off of the sun? I guess I'll have to take a sample when we reach them. Knowing about the wildlife is important in the process of colonization after all.

I hope it doesn't step on me, "This is why I like smaller things, less dangerous." Laika growled and stepped on my foot. "Well, no, I don't mean like you. You're plenty dangerous Laika. It's just... actually, am I... talking to a dog?" I thought it took longer than two days for people to start losing it. Must vary surveyor to surveyor.

And so we continued to walk. Slowly closing in on the beasts as the sun went from chasing us to running from us. By the time the sun set, we were right by the feet of these animals. The plan was to wait until morning. That way I could be rested up in case I had to run when I went to take a sample. If this thing has some sort of parasites on it, they'd probably still be twice my size. Not a very comforting idea.

But I didn't think I could wait that long. I had to get a sample; curiosity demanded it. I had to know what they were made of because, for some reason, they weren't leaving any tracks.

Something this large should be sinking into this soggy grassland and leaving craters, but they had barely even disturbed the grass they were walking on. I stuck the probe into the mile-wide foot that, thankfully, didn't seem to have any other creatures on or around it.

It was hollow.

It had a basic support structure that held the skin and a bit of muscle, but other than that it was hollow. No wonder it took such small steps and ties itself to others; this thing would fall at the slightest breeze, and this planet's wind hasn't stopped blowing since we've arrived.

Quite the hostile environment.

I unloaded the pack, ate a bit and drank a bit more. Just barely enough to survive on. Better to start rationing now. I gave some to Laika as well, "So, I guess no inhabitants today either. We did find out what these things are though. To think, I started the morning afraid of these guys only to end up realizing they're way too focused on not being killed by a slight breeze to do anything to me." Laika laid down next to me and I rubbed one hand through her fur, careful not to hit her with my claws. She was asleep in an instant, "Guess I should get some rest too. Maybe it was a hard day of work after all."

I slept well again, surprisingly. You would think having ten-mile-high creatures just steps away wouldn't make for a sound sleep, but the sound of the grass being stepped on and the low rumbling sounds that seemed to come from the heavens as the creatures breathed were far more comfortable than they had any right to be.

The morning sun woke me, just like yesterday. No hiding from the start of a day here. The beasts, that I've decided to name Jotunn, had barely moved. They were maybe a hundred feet away. I started to take some probes of my surroundings. I was too shocked yesterday morning to remember to, but sometimes the makeup of a planet changes depending on time of day.

Something odd did show up in the probe. Some sort of nutrient, edible, but it came from the sky almost directly above. I looked up and saw those massive white clouds. I couldn't be sure, but maybe those are actually the sources of food for Jotunn. I guess that makes sense since some of them were craning their necks into the clouds yesterday.

Interesting. This could probably be a valuable food source for the colonizers. Hopefully I'll find out if it's a renewable resource or not. It wouldn't be good to starve out the Jotunn. But that tends to happen doesn't it? This planet will be turned into an agriculture world. The colonizers will find some way to say the world would be better without the Jotunn, and then they'll kill them off. I hope things are different on this planet.

They probably won't be.

I did some stretches to prepare for the day. Ran some basic checks on my echolocation function. Checked on Laika. Everything seems to be working well enough. I turned to face the sun, the morning is always such a beautiful time of day, but something wasn't right. It was like the sun had some black spots on it. This system shouldn't have any star harnessing technology though, so

machines orbiting the sun wouldn't make sense. Maybe it's busted ships and debris from a past journey?

I took out my looking glass hoping to get a bit of a better idea.

But I wish I didn't.

They were there. Just outside the reach of my echolocation today. Those sticks with paper faces. Laika sensed my tenseness and angled herself in front of me, looking where I was looking.

This didn't make any sense. My knees began to shake, sweat started to pour down my face. This didn't make sense. They were on the very edge of my sight yesterday. Did I make a mistake? Were yesterday's visibility conditions bad for this planet? Are they better today so I can see further?

No, I'm right. I was *built* to be right about these things. Are they the inhabitants? Wouldn't they approach me? At the very least they would've come when I was sleeping, right?

I'll admit, I'm on edge. But this is horrifying... especially being alone with all this... *unknown*. "What is it about loneliness that stokes the flames of fear?" Laika's tail hit me on the back of my leg, "Too poetic?" My voice was shaking, Laika gave a short bark, "No, you're right. Stupid is what it is." Having such an idiotic conversation with my dog was calming me down a bit. Not much, but a bit. There's really only one thing I can do, isn't there?

I raised my arms and shouted at the scarecrows, as loud as I could, "Hello! I'm looking for the locals!"

"Firsht ya start talking to your dog, then you starts talking to sticks? And I bets you think I'm the crazy one for peeki- pokin- pukin' on your feetsh." Boozie's cheeks puffed up, like how kids look when they hold their breath. He stared at Yorm's knitted up eyes and it seemed like he was thinking about something pretty important, I'm sure.

“I did apologize, didn’t I? I didn’t mean to hurt you, it was just a reflex and-”

“Don’t bother robot, trying to reason with Boozie is hard when he’s sober, so when he’s this drunk... well, you’ll have a better chance of not getting mugged when ya leave tonight.” Oh wait, Yorm’s a pass-through patron, probably doesn’t know how things work here. You know what? Better to let people learn their own lessons. I shouldn’t have to work as a tour guide for every mark that walks onto this rock.

“Don’t you think ‘robot’ is a bit degrading? I did tell you my name after all.”

“Hm, ‘spose ya did.” Yorm’s glass was empty so I tapped the bottle I was holding loud enough for it to hear. They put their money on the counter, and I poured it another drink, “So what happened robot? You get thrown a welcoming party?”

Yorm sighed, “I’ll take a shot in the dark here, but I’m going to guess that telling you I have a name again isn’t going to get you to call me by it, is it?”

I shrugged. “Anything’s worth trying”

“I think I’m starting to understand why you have customers like Boozie. No, to answer your question, they didn’t welcome me. They didn’t respond at all after that shout. I kept shouting for about an hour before Laika bit my leg. I think she realized I was losing it a bit.”

Gotta say, I really like this Laika. Wish I had a dog like her around. Chase out the drunks... or just chase drunks in general. Maybe not even drunks. “Sounds like you owe a lot to the mutt. Seems like she was doing a better job with the situation than you were.”

“Ha, well, that’s certainly true. She was bred to be Security after all. She really held me together.” Yorm smiled as it held its drink. The sinew cords dangling from its mouth had mostly stopped bleeding.

That's the exact face that's about to reminisce about good times and pile on about how wonderful things were. Not very fun to hear about peoples' happiest moments. In my opinion, that is. "So, then you just kept on after that? Kept wigglin' your ears and sticking your tendrils all over the place?"

"When you put it like that, I sound like a monster."

"Well... don't worry too much about it. Everyone who steps in this bar is a monster."

"Ah, I wonder if there's a deep meaning in there somewhere?"

"Nope."

The silence stretched for about a minute before Yorm burst into laughter, somehow managing to light up the dim bar. Really startin' to wonder if I should start thinking about changing the lightbulbs. Just *start* thinking about it; might as well wait till they go out y'know?

"I actually decided I couldn't stop there. I mean, in my mind they had to be living creatures, and they were following me. So they were either predators or locals. I started to run toward them, thinking they might not have been hearing me..."

"Laika scare 'em off?"

"No... they kept that same distance. It didn't even look like they were moving, but they were always right on the edge of what I could see. I started running in different directions. I started screaming more. I ran to one of the Jotunn and climbed about twenty feet up it, thinking it'd give me a different view." Some drool was leaking out of Yorm's mouth. The sorta thing you'd expect from a rabid dog. "I kept trying. For three days I kept trying. I was so afraid that first day. It was horrifying to know something was just... watching you. The second day I tried to convince myself it was all fake. An illusion, a hallucination. Some sort of plant or animal. But it didn't behave like

a plant or animal. It came into my echolocation range once and then never again. It knew. It *knew*.
The third day... I think I lost it.”

“You think you did?”

“Well,” Yorm wiped the drool from their chin, “I’m not sure. Sorry, the memories still get to me. I never figured out what those things were. But they were always there. It’s a weird kind of a horror; to know you’re always being observed by something. Something you have no understanding of. Something that doesn’t make any rational sense.”

Down on the blue dot, twenty-four-hour surveillance is commonplace. But I have to admit, if the cameras looked like crumpled self-portraits attached to scarecrows, well, that might be a bit unsettling.

Hm, no. Maybe ‘very unsettling’ fits it better. Yeah.

I checked the bar door subconsciously. No floating paintings on sticks, but I can’t really see behind me, can I? Maybe they’re waiting right behind me. “Y’know Yorm, these are the kinds of stories you keep to yourself.”

“I can hardly handle the trauma on my own.”

“That’s what you got the dog for right? Or does she just growl and bite?”

“Well, dogs don’t live forever you know.” Its smile seemed a bit forced.

“Thought you only had her for a little while? I mean, she was in some sorta cryo-stasis, right? Can’t imagine your race couldn’t figure out how to use that properly.”

“Oh, I guess I hadn’t mentioned it. I was on that planet for one hundred and twenty-six years. Plus a few months and days and what not.” He smiled, the sorta smile that oozes with some hoity toity, holier than thou energy, which was impressive considering his mouth still looked like

a pile of strings made from skin, “And to think, the memories are still this strong after all those years.”

...

Huh, it all does seem pretty raw for the robot.

Even after all those years...

No, I can't go along with Yorm's little philosophy. They're a whole other species for the holy beast's sake. Does Boozie really look the kinda guy who'll remember me or this bar in a hundred years? It won't matter a bit to him. Maybe these surveyors have a different sense of time. They are robots after all. Doesn't make sense to try and compare us to them. We're different, I'm sure of it.

Then again, that sounds a lot like trying to say humans are special, some sorta exception. I popped open my flask which I'd apparently emptied when Yorm took off that sack on his head. Probably needed it, all things considered. I let Yorm keep that smug little expression as I cracked open a mid-shelf bottle. No point in pouring the good stuff back in since I'm already too drunk to appreciate it. Gotta ration when you live on a rock. Humans ain't special, that's for sure. We're just as bloodthirsty and awful as the rest of the universe. But I don't think we're the type of people to hold onto memories for centuries. We toss out memories left and right. Maybe that's just what we tell ourselves... I took a quick test; awful. But, that's what buying cheap booze'll do.

“Sorry, I didn't mean for that to sound so pretentious.” Yorm bowed his head a bit, “I'm afraid the drinks must be getting to me.”

“I'm real hurt Yormy boy, deep wound and all that. But, on the bright side,” I pushed them another drink, “sounds like you're just about to hit your runner's high.”

“I have this odd feeling I'm going to wake up broke.”

“Oh, don’t worry friend,” now it was my turn for the smug smile, “here on GC 213b you wake up broke every day... whether you like it or not.”

Yorm brought one hand to its face and started to shake its head, “This is a bit more out of my comfort zone than that ship captain said it would be.”

“A captain that tells you the truth is an awful captain. Good to remember when you’re in the solar system.”

“I’ll be sure to keep it in mind.”

“But, a hundred years and change huh? I’m guessing you found some friends then?”

“No, I’m afraid I didn’t find much of anything. I mean, it’ll be a great agriculture planet. It was like the whole planet was built for it. But no. No other intelligent beings. After Laika died, that was what started one hundred and thirteen years of complete isolation. It was...” Yorm breathed in, causing the frayed skin to blow around like streamers on a windy day, “lonely.”

“Why don’t you surveyors just take on robots as your security? They’d live forever, right? Seems like a lot less worry that way.”

“From what we’ve seen in the field, beasts have a better sense. My echolocation may not be able to pick up a lifeform that adapted in a way we couldn’t have foreseen, but animals have a sixth sense with them. I think even you humans have some stories about them seeing ghosts and the like. Asinine, but they were certainly seeing some otherworldly creature that you had no way of sensing. The issue is the life span, obviously. We’ve tried to augment them, but they reject the augmentations every time. Also, well, it’s a bit easier to form a bond with an animal than a machine. I’m sure there’s some irony in an AI coated with skin and metal saying that though.”

I don’t know about that, but I know there’s a pun in there and it makes me sick.

“Can I...” Yorm paused. It almost seemed surprised by itself as it said, “can I tell you about her? About Laika?”

Boozie, the man of many talents, the man of the highest class, the man on the highest rung of the hierarchical ladder chose that moment to open his mouth, with cheeks still puffed out. “Ain’t you ‘sposed to be tellin’ a storys?”

And what, you might be asking, is the significance of Boozie’s puffed out cheeks? Well that’s simple. When he opened his mouth, a waterfall fit to grace any mountain range poured out of his mouth.

I went ahead and ran his card for the most expensive drink... a couple dozen times. Waterfalls shouldn’t be that green.

“Alright Laika, think you’re about ready?”

She tried to stand, legs wobbling under her. After about a minute she lowered herself back onto the water-logged grass.

“Don’t worry friend, we can wait a bit longer.” Laika turned her face to me, eyes tired, tongue hanging out, and chest heaving, “I mean it, I really a- heh, no. You see right through me, don’t you? Been together too long.” I stretched out onto the sweet-smelling grass. The weather never seemed to change on this planet, so the day was perfect as per usual. Warm with a slight breeze, massive white clouds dotting the sky. The perfect weather for napping, which meant taking breaks was all too tempting, “Anyway Laika, we aren’t exactly in a rush, are we? We’ve been at this for years. What’s a few extra minutes of rest?”

Her eyes smiled, I’m sure. Or I was going crazy, which I guess I was also sure of at this point. At any rate, she fought her eyelids as best as she could, but they drew shut within seconds, and her breathing was the kind of shallow you only hear from those locked in sleep. A tiny snore

escaped every now and again, which made for a perfect marker of time when we took these little breaks.

Little breaks that had been growing longer recently, and more frequent.

The sun really did feel nice on this planet. I've decided to occupy myself with trying to record as much as I can about this planet for the surveying report. This bit has been extra difficult. It's far too hard to find empirical evidence for things like why the sun feels perfect.

Ah well, I've already started the nap. Let's make it a problem for later again.

I woke up to a far too dry tongue licking my face. Laika seemed ready to go today. "Got a proper rest then? Oh come on, don't look at me like that, you were the one that wanted to take a break." She bit my arm a bit, "Ow ow, sorry. I promise I won't make fun of your sleeping habits... even if you snore." She bit me a bit harder this time. I've really lost it haven't I?

I levered myself up, thought it was a 'just barely' sort of thing if the sound of rusty gears was anything to go by. I portioned out Laika's food for the day and gave her a bit extra. I dug a hole and we both had a bit to drink as well. It was at this point I realized the sun wasn't setting, it was rising.

"Ah, it's tomorrow isn't it?"

She growled in a way that made me sure she was saying how it's impossible for it to ever be tomorrow. After all, she says, it can only ever be today, idiot.

"I'm not an idiot."

She gave me the silent treatment. Classic Laika.

Since it was morning, I figured I'd get started on my morning routine. I used my echolocation and took a couple samples of my surroundings. It's gotten to the point where I can only do all this twice a day without my systems completely shutting down. It all just took too much

power. If I was in a particularly good area, I'd use the ink tubes that hung about two feet off each finger and I would throw down some markings to designate it. This used up my bio-blood though, which was a bit harder to replenish than regular old energy and also probably why my gears had gotten a bit rusty. The stuff took longer for my body to produce, but I'm sure I'll have plenty of time to save some up and let my body do some self-repairs later on. I mean, we are stranded. Laika grunted in agreement. Or growled, I guess.

After all that, I went ahead and did some stretches. I don't think it particularly helped; my body certainly didn't need it. Perks of being mostly robotic, I guess. But I saw some images from other surveyors about biological species doing this sort of thing, so I liked to do it too. It was also a good chance to get Laika to limber up with me.

Once all of that was handled, I'd turn to the five figures standing just barely within sight. This was where I gave myself some creative license.

Somedays I would scream and rant. Other days I would wave. Sometimes I would use whatever rude gesture I could remember from the books I used to study. Those were truly inter-cultural mornings.

Other times I would just sit and cry for a bit. And occasionally, *very* occasionally... I would try to pray to them or worship them.

I tried not to do that too often. It was a bit scary to go that far.

Today I decided to wave. They didn't wave back. They never do, "They might though. What do you think Laika?" She was already about ten feet ahead of me, traveling west. I decided I'd leave her some space today, so I kept my distance as we walked.

Days like these were nice too. I got to be alone for a bit. But I got to be alone while still having someone there. It was comforting. We both had our own worries to handle, so we took days

like these to focus on them. Once in a while, when I'd be on the verge of snapping, I'd think Laika's thoughts for her: 'That nap sure was good. I hope we find friends today. I'll make sure to keep extra good watch today. I'm hungry. I'm tired. I'm dyi-' and that's where I stop.

"Laika! You can't think things like that! You know what it does to me when I have to realize that right?" She didn't even look back, she just kept on moving forward. I think she's lost her hearing a bit, but that didn't stop me, "I can't take those thoughts. You know that. I'm weak Laika, not like you. Who would I have if you were gone, huh? Scarecrows that watch me every day and Jotunn that probably can't even hear me? Bad company, that's what that is. So, you can't leave me. Anyway, you know we have work to do. Neither of us have fulfilled our end of the bargain. It might be inconvenient without the ship, but we're still supposed to map the planet, so you have to stick around. It's in your contract, if you had a contract. Do they give you contracts? No, that would be silly. You couldn't sign it... maybe a paw print would work though? Are paw prints specific for each dog?"

This was one of the best parts of the day. I'd be having an awful conversation that brought me too close to madness and then accidentally run into a topic that had no real answer. Then, well, I could talk about it for long periods of time since there wasn't any end to get to. Laika usually didn't respond during times like these, but I'm sure she was just absorbed in thought like me. I'm sure of it. Complex subjects need a good think. Right Laika? Oops, didn't say that one out loud. Ah well, I'm sure she understands.

She always understands.

She's good at that.

There were clouds piling on in the distance. Slightly dark and growing darker. These tended to make for the worst days. On a planet where there was nothing but plains, you can't exactly hide from a storm.

We kept walking. My legs managed to fade out of existence as the miles kept accumulating. I lost all feeling but kept moving forward. Laika was better than me at this. She'd keep trekking no matter what. Through thunder or calm days, she'd never lose her pace once she got started.

She was losing her pace recently though, wasn't she?

I guess that makes sense. We've been walking for too long. The sun was already nearly overhead. We had to have been walking for at least three hours. That was a lot. *That was a lot.*

Laika kept limping on though. Her hind legs were practically dragging behind her when I put a hand to her head and told her to stop. She didn't listen.

Her eyes were fixed on the gray clouds that were creeping up on us. The gray clouds that were slowly giving way to black. The rains would be heavy, the thunder would be loud, and the storm would be long. Too long.

They always are on this planet.

The clouds kept stalking closer to us. Laika didn't seem to mind. Probably because she was nearly blind, or at least I think she is.

Plenty of healthy dogs are blind.

The thunder kept making me jump. Laika didn't.

Plenty of healthy dogs are deaf.

Laika's legs kept shaking.

Plenty... plenty of dogs get tired...

Plenty.

“Laika?” a crash sent a jolt through every circuit in my body and the flash of lighting, well, it threw a halo around Laika, making her look like some descended angel.

She probably was.

“Laika, you aren’t planning on leaving right?”

Another crash of thunder masked most of my words. Laika kept marching west. Her eyes locked forward. She was probably trying her best to see any threats.

I think she was feeling desperate. Her whole purpose was to serve as my Security. Now her ears didn’t work as well. Now her eyes didn’t work as well. Now... now she didn’t work as well. But she was trying. She was trying her best for *me*.

For me.

“I um,” another crash of thunder at just the right moment, making a dramatic pause in my stupid sentence that my AI knew would never be understood by a beast, “I...” but, “I love you.”

Laika tossed her head back toward me, illuminated by a billion volts.

I think she knew. I think she feels the same. I know she feels the same.

Her legs were shaking even worse than usual, but she kept walking forward. I wanted to scream, to yell, to tell her in any way that she needs to stop. That she needs to rest. That she needs to wait. That she needs to heal. That she needs to live.

I don’t think she would’ve listened.

She always plays by her own rules.

The rain was pelting us. It was torrential. The grass beneath us became quicksand; it was sucking us in with every step. Every inch forward felt like a risk to our very lives.

Each and every step felt like ten, no, twenty steps. I was tired, “Laika! We’ve gone far enough for today! Let’s take a break! I want to take a break!”

She didn't stop.

She growled. She kept growling for a couple of minutes as she forced herself, step by step, to keep going west.

I think she knew why we were here. I think she knew that I was supposed to be discovering all this world had to offer. I think she was trying her best to help me. To help me with all she had.

I think she knew she was dying.

“Laika! Please!”

She didn't stop. She kept going. The sky was far too dark and the ground was far too wet. I just wanted to sleep. I wanted to forget.

I wanted to forget that she was going to die.

That she was bound to die.

I don't want to lose you.

I don't want to be alone.

I'm so selfish. But... but that selfishness is justified isn't it? “Isn't it?!”

Laika finally stopped. The smallest sliver of golden light found its way out from behind blackened clouds. Her gray fur was suddenly silver as bits of the sun found its way into the space between hairs.

All around us, lighting crashed down. It spread webs of electricity through the dampened soil. You could see the power coursing through the muddied water.

“Laika!”

Her hind legs started to buckle beneath her. She turned her head back toward me. It felt like she knew. It felt like she understood.

I ran to her. I held her. I screamed at her. I cried into her. I begged her. I begged just about anything.

And then I whispered. It was the kind of whisper you use when you don't want to admit something. It was the kind of whisper that was proof you were nearly broken. "Laika, I don't want to be alone. Please, please. I don't want to be alone."

She died.

I held her body in my arms as I stared at the broiling sky.

That sliver of sunshine was long gone.

It wasn't the only thing that left.

They always tell us our Security is just that: security. They say we'll form bonds, we'll grow close, but when they die, they'll just be bags of meat. They say there's nothing in there. They say there's no pomp and circumstance, no religious significance. Those trainers on my home planet aren't the only ones. Every book I've read, everything I've studied on other races say the same: death is simple. There's nothing to it. Just meat. Just gears. Just circuits. Etc.

The storm was battering the planet. I wondered for a moment if the lighting would crack the crust open. Maybe something incredible or horrifying was underneath. Or maybe it was just more dirt. The only light came from the lightning crashing all around me, throwing my probes into chaos as electrical pulses shot through me. My echolocation system was fried. A few Jotunn walked in the distance, slowly inching forward. They weren't stopping for the storm.

People who fight seem to say it a lot. They say there's nothing to it. Death. They say when they pull the trigger nothing beautiful or impactful occurs. Just a dead body. A bag of meat. That's all. They say the fiction is just fiction, that those writers paint death with too many fancy words. They say religion is all lies. They say... they say there's nothing to it.

The rain kept falling. It almost felt like I was underwater. I didn't even feel any droplets; just a sheet of water that hit me and didn't stop. The ground beneath me looked like a raging river. Roaring white caps, just a foot or so tall, caused by the endless pouring. The lightning strikes sent strange strings of blue and gold through the waterlogged ground. Some strings shot up the white caps. I kept waiting for them to jump out of the water again, to go back to the sky and start the whole process over. But the lightning that came from the ground was too hard to see. I'm sure it was there though. I'm sure it was beautiful.

They lied. They all lied. Instructors, books, soldiers. All of them. Liars.

"LIARS!"

I don't think anyone heard me.

Oh, that's right.

No one can hear me anymore.

No one's here.

Something left her though. I saw it. Her eyes. The tiniest spark of life, flitting around, managed to escape. I saw it. I did. At the very last moment, Laika left. Some part of her, at least. There wasn't just 'some sack of meat'.

I won't act like I knew where she was going now. But I know she left.

And I don't know if that's more painful or not.

At least a week passed. I think. I don't really remember. My systems usually shut down after seven days without an energy source, and considering I wasn't eating, the sun was my only source. Must've been a long storm then, for the sun to not power me up.

Half my body was submerged in the ground. I was caked in mud and most of my systems weren't working properly. A sound in my head continued to tell me how things were

‘malfunctioning’. I’ll get used to it eventually. Not like I can fix this much. Not with what I have on hand anyway.

I started to claw myself out of the ground. It took a couple more days.

The Jotunn hadn’t gotten very far. I guess they don’t even try to move faster during the storms. Slow and steady probably gives them the better survival rate.

I managed to drag myself from the clutches of the planet. I rolled onto my back and stared at the sun through that pile of towering white clouds that seemed to never leave the sky. I stayed that way for a while.

“Can’t believe we made it through. Right Laika?”

Hahahaha, no that’s crazy.

Dogs can’t talk.

I waved to the figures standing resolutely, nearly out of sight. I walked past an odd lump of something that was also submerged in the ground. It didn’t look natural to this planet, a bit too meaty, “What do you think Laika? Should I take a sample?”

I decided not to.

I walked west.

We walked west.

Even Boozie was quiet for once.

Yorm was even quieter though. I don’t really know how that’s possible, but I know the thing was quieter.

Maybe it was something in its face that seemed like silence personified.

Maybe it was the tears that squeezed through their knitted eyes.

Maybe it was the drool that dripped from its mouth as it stared down in a perpetually silent scream of grief.

Maybe it was the fact the ceiling fan above them stopped working and so there was less sound from their direction.

Don't know.

I pushed Yorm another glass. I figured I'd give him a freebie. Just one, promise. I started to feel like I needed to say something. I wonder why? To keep it drinking? So I can rob it? That sounds like me, but for some reason those weren't at the top of the list.

Did I... feel *bad* for it?

Before I could reflect on how bad for my business this new personality change might be, Boozie started to move. He wasn't being quiet out of respect. He just passed out with his eyes open is all. Incredible. "Nowsh waits a minutes. Noactaullys wait more than a minutsh." Boozie wobbled back and forth for a while, his arms flailing around trying to find himself some balance. Finally, his palm slapped the counter and walked his fingers to his drink. He fumbled around for a moment before he had a bit of a hold on the glass. He got most of it in his mouth when he went to drink, "Your doggens was still livens?"

Almost English. You'll get 'em next time Boozie.

Yorm closed their mouth and seemed to snap back to the bar. Like they were far away and only just managed to find their way back. "No... no." Yorm took a deep breath. Too deep. Probably steeling himself, "I just broke is all. I lost it."

"Losstin what?"

Oh Boozie, you always know what questions not to ask. I kept a bit away, absentmindedly polishing a glass. It's a damn good 'go to' for a bartender. It's why I use it so often, as you might've

noticed. This little trick... actually, I don't think it's really helped me out that much has it? Well, it makes me look busy at least.

Quite frankly, I wouldn't mind not hearing what that lump of 'something' was supposed to be. Madmen tell the sorta stories that make you think in ways you never wanted too. I don't wanna think that way at the moment.

Quite frankly, I wouldn't mind just seeing Boozie get another boot to the face.

And then he'd have another painful experience. An experience that would stain his life. That's what Yormy's trying to get at, isn't it? It may well just be one night out of thousands for the drunk, but that experience will mix in with him nonetheless. Can't say I care for that way of thinking, it would make every moment significant. Even the tiniest event could change someone for decades, or centuries, or more... I've buried a lot of memories, but does that mean they're really gone? Or are they shaping me to this day, whether I realize it or not...

"My mind, Boozie. I lost my mind. It was just too much for me. I couldn't take the loneliness. It was... it was too loud."

"Loud? On a planet where you haven't met a single person?" Seems a bit farfetched. Maybe just a poor choice of words. Maybe its senses sharpened once Laika died. Does grief do that? Doubt it. Oh god, I hope this isn't the part of the story where the scarecrows start coming into play. I'd really rather not drink myself catatonic tonight, cause those things will most certainly haunt me.

Yorm looked at me with that same smug look they gave me before, "It's cliché, but silence is deafening you know? It got to a point where not hearing anything became too much. I kept searching for any little sound. Every time a blade of grass bashed into another blade of grass it was like the whole world was trying to make me go deaf. It didn't take long for whispering to myself

to be the same as shouting. Then I just started keeping my thoughts inside. Hell, when I got picked up by the slavers, I couldn't even work my vocal system, and hearing them yell at me nearly *did* have me deaf. It was a century and change at that point. It was just... too much."

A century and more huh... and the thing was absolutely mad for most of that it sounds like. And yet those emotions, no, no not the emotions. The experience, right? The experience stuck with it. Stained Yorm to the core. Rewrote his existence... maybe Yorm's right. Maybe time doesn't do as much as I thought. Emotions and memories fade, but the experience...

"Hey! I wanna hears about 'dem big ol' walking ones! The ones that, uh, y'know, theysh weres walking and what not? And, um, weren't-" Boozie's face contorted, lips puckered, Yorm went into a defensive stance. Boozie picked up his glass and started to drink, "Sosm... someins... uh, sometimesh ya gotta convince the booze back downs, y'know?"

No, I don't think I do Boozie ol' boy.

"The Jotunn right? Well, like I said: I broke. I only remember pieces. I may have just been stopped in place, shut down, for most of that time. But, well, I do remember the bits near the end a bit better. I guess that'll be a story about the Jotunn."

Where does that leave me then? Forever trapped by the experiences of my childhood? Dammit, that can't be right. What kind of world would that be? You screw up once, even if you got nothin' to do with it, and you're scarred for life? There's gotta be something...

And how... where... where does that leave her? I was an experience for her wasn't I? Is that experience burned into her? I wonder how she feels about that...

"Hey Laika?" I don't really think I even spoke. I just mouthed the letters and a bit of air escaped.

It was still too loud.

“Where are we Laika?” She didn’t respond.

She never did, she’s a dog. She can’t respond.

But she used to bark.

It’s been a while since I’ve heard her bark.

Years.

Decades.

Etcetera.

I wonder if she’s feeling ok. I pulled some of the grass out of the ground and piled it next to me. I didn’t feed her these days. I just left piles of grass. She’ll get to them when she’s hungry, I’m sure.

I turned toward the rising sun and waved to the figures in the distance. They didn’t wave back. They never do. Ah, ah. Oh creator, why do they still ignore me? Are my sensors busted? Did they break during that crash from so long ago? Are these figures just static from a busted antenna?

My memory’s foggy, but I’m sure I’ve had this conversation before. Probably multiple times. Thousands? More? Yes, more.

Those cloaks on sticks swayed in the slight breeze. Back and forth and back and forth. Why? What kind of creature waits for so long? Why would they follow me for all these years? To torment me? What kind of creature stalks its prey but never makes a move? None I’ve heard of. Maybe they aren’t creatures at all. Maybe they’re something far more horrifying. Or maybe they’re just static in my systems.

I didn’t like to think that though. If they weren’t real, then I’d probably be due for a factory reset.

I stopped waving. My tendrils had already probed the ground and I ran my echolocation once. I threw some paint down on some promising farm ground. I don't think I was conscious of these movements anymore. I was just running through the motions. I think something in me had gone a bit haywire, but I couldn't place it. I've mapped the entire planet. The whole thing. Every inch has been marked or probed or mapped. It's more than ready for colonization. I should be going home. Oh, yes, the crash. Never mind then.

Yes, that's right, "We're waiting for the colonists now aren't we Laika? They'll come faster if the world is better prepped." She didn't respond.

The sun was already high in the sky and I still hadn't moved. I've grown slow in my duties. I turned away from the figures just out of sight, carefully avoiding eye contact with the piles of grass that stretched for miles and miles and miles.

She'll eat when she's hungry.

My feet began moving west and the rest of me shut down. I'll get back to work when night falls.

It's a good planet.

They're sure to come soon.

I didn't seem to get tired anymore.

Or maybe that's not quite right.

Maybe I've grown used to the grinding gears and rotting biomass. Maybe the cracks in my surface have just become a new feature for me to get used to. "I guess as long as it doesn't interfere, it shouldn't be a big deal, right Laika?"

Silence. I turned around to look east. I don't usually do that until morning. It's a bit unsettling to see unmoving scarecrows keep pace with you. It's easier to just think they travel while I sleep. It helped me to feel like I had some privacy. A nice little delusion.

The blood red moon, normal for this planet, was just starting to crest. Five shaded figures stood right in front of it. Little shadows painted onto the moon itself.

“Do you think they exist Laika? You barked at them, remember?” A warm breeze wrapped itself around me. Too warm for this time of the day. I tried to shake it off, but there was no way that would work. It kept blowing and started to suffocate me. I thrashed about, “Dammit, shouldn't be this warm. Hate nights like these. You uh, damn. You haven't barked at them in a while, huh Laika?” I couldn't shake it. It was starting to get on my nerves. Shouldn't be this warm. Too late in the day. I don't like it. I threw myself on the ground and tried to cover myself in the damp grass and mud. It wasn't helping. “You do see them though, right Laika? I remember. I'm sure you saw them. Right Laika? Right?” The muddy water felt like it was boiling me alive. I checked my sensors. They said the temperature was within normal bounds. Something strange was popping up though. It was saying my logic function was malfunctioning. “That doesn't make any sense, right Laika?” Odd, those last few words caused a massive error spike. Why? “Laika! What's going on? Laika! Answer me!” The numbers were all over the place. The shadows on the moon stayed in place, unmoving, but my whole world was infected with bugs and error messages. It wasn't hot? It was hot? I don't know. “Laika! Dammit Laika!” My sound system was being pushed to the limit trying to deal with my screaming. I could feel the heat as gears whirred and buzzed inside my head. “WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU!?” I kicked to my side. You forced me Laika. This is your fault. I have to punish you. You can't just act like you're not even there. Not for a hundred years. You brought this on yourself. “It's your fault! It's your fault!” But my leg didn't hit anything. The

moisture from the ground was seeping in through the cracks and crevices in my body, rusting my insides. Rust I'll have to clean out later. I always do. My sound sensors had overloaded; I couldn't hear anything. It looked like they'll come back online, but not for a while. Because of that, I'm not sure if I actually said this next part, but I tried my hardest to even whisper it, "Where the hell are you..."

I was thrashing on the ground; my body felt like it was disintegrating but, other than the errors for my sound sensors, the rest of the red messages flashing in my mind were screaming about my logic functions. I closed my eyes. It didn't make sense. Is this pain not real? That doesn't make any sense. It can't be true. But something... something is eating me from the inside. Oh creator, what kind of pain is this? What program allowed for this? What bit of my body can I rip out to make this stop? I opened my eyes again, hoping to see something that would make this go away.

They were there.

Surrounding me. Looking down at me. Those faces, warped and crumpled and very nearly unfamiliar now. I couldn't move. I don't know why, I should be able to, but I can't. All I could do was stare helplessly while they stood over me. The faces... they... started moving. The mouth was moving, the eyes were moving, emotions flitting across each of those canvas-like faces. Oh please, please don't. No. No. Too close.

"Laika..."

The faces painted on those scarecrows shifted into visions of abject horror. I could feel my mind melting inside of me as they screamed silently, mouthing the word 'Laika'. The fear, the confusion, it was consuming me. But, somehow, I managed to find *it*. The switch inside my mind.

One little input, just one input and I can end this all. What was my designation? Agh, it was... s-u-r-v-e-y-o-r -t-y-p-e aghhhh, please... 1-2-

When I came to, it was the deepest part of the night. The stars above shone so brightly. I don't think I ever really took the time to look at them. Not for a long time at least. I watched the universe above me move, as if everything was on some sort of track. Everything moving along on predetermined courses, the planet I'm on doing much the same. I'll watch these predetermined courses play out for all of eternity, and I don't think I'll ever forget the paths and probabilities my species is required to know. The wind was cool. It was normal. My body was slowly calming down. In those moments of transition from a walking error to a green checkmark, those *things* were there. What did they do? I don't know... I wonder if I waved. Another memory that will never truly leave me. Even if it's all just a dream right now, somewhere inside this memory will be a part of me forever. Even when the details fade and it becomes harder to open these files, the experience will still be there. An experience of some unknown species that stalked me for a century and more crowding around and watching my unmoving form. I wonder... I wonder if experiences are the greatest weakness of immortals?

Maybe guns take first. Experiences are a close second at least.

The sleep passed all too quickly. The blood moon gave way to the reddish pink rays of sunlight snaking their way through the wispy clouds above. Those enchanting rays you only ever see one morning out of a hundred cascading down onto the surface. I propped myself up into a sitting position and checked myself over.

The damage wasn't awful, but it wasn't great either. All that thrashing about in the mud has made most of my functions unusable. I can't probe the ground, I can't use my echolocation, I can't produce any bio-paint. Ah well, I guess I've done my job here anyway.

I guess I finished quite some time ago, actually.

Something in me felt lighter at the prospect: stopping. It was the first morning in a hundred years and more that I just... I just waited there. Nothing to do, and somehow there was even more to see.

Those reddish pink rays faded. They never lasted, but I always remember them. I always wait for them. No matter how short, their beauty is enough to stay vibrant in my mind for... well, forever I think. They gave way to the normal golden light that crawled toward the afternoon's light that didn't really seem to have a color at all.

An error message had been sitting, unread, in the corner of my vision. I ignored it. How long have I ignored this message I wonder?

I'm just...

I'm not ready is all. I don't have the pieces and parts to fix myself. There's no point in looking at a problem I have no chance of fixing, right?

Right. I'm right. So, while the early morning light had been turning into that 'rest of the day' light, I focused my attention elsewhere. In fact, I just looked straight ahead. Directly to the west, a pack of Jotunn were marching along. Something was odd though, one of them seemed to be slanting at an angle. Not by much, nearly not noticeable, but it was tilting to one side.

I stayed in that spot. I watched until I realized it wasn't a trick of my eyes. It was falling. So so slowly, it was falling.

It was using its neck to hang on to the Jotunn beside it, but it wasn't enough. The feet were already too out of place for it to recover. But it still seemed to reach out. It still struggled. It struggled as it slowly, oh so slowly, started to fall from the skies to the planet underneath.

It was the first day I didn't look at those scarecrows. In fact, I didn't look at them for a full week. A week that I spent sitting there, watching this Jotunn fall. It was incredible. It took so long to fall. It was like watching one of the massive freighters that hauled scrap metal back on my home planet sink into the ocean. It was a slow process. But, back then, when I saw that ship sinking, I just took note of it and went on my way. A lost cause, some money down the drain, and everyone went back to their lives.

This was different.

Through day and night, through the start and all the way to the end, this beast kept trying to save itself. It kept lifting its legs those few inches it could, trying to resituate itself. It kept coiling its neck around the Jotunn beside it. What little muscle those hollow boned appendages had was pulsing and rippling along the skin. The Jotunn was using absolutely everything at its disposal to survive. Even when it was too far away to grab onto its neighbor, even when its feet had no chance of recovering, the muscles stayed bunched up. The exertion was palpable. It was as if the very air around it was burning with effort.

For that whole week, I just watched. From the first day where there might have been a slight chance of living all the way to the point of impact when the Jotunn's fate was sealed. It fought the whole way through.

It must have known. It had to know it had no chance of living. It had to know it was dead from the start.

Throughout the week, its body slowly made contact with the planet. With how light it was, there wasn't much of an impact. The head, however, was so heavy that it seemed to fall like a comet. It was a streaking ball of flames as it approached the surface. I'm sure it was alive through all of this. The temperature around the troposphere varied wildly from the samples I was able to

get. The skin of these beasts, at least around the top, had to be able to withstand extreme heat and cold.

But it wouldn't survive the impact.

When the head finally crashed down to the surface, miles and miles away from me, a shockwave felt like it traveled all the way through the planet. The waterlogged ground beneath me started to rise and fall as if an entire ocean was beneath it. I guess that's why I've never seen a crater even though I'm sure these things have died before; the world just absorbs the impact, and the body will be absorbed and used by the planet. All that struggle for this? What's the point of that?

I don't know.

The waves calmed down. The land returned to its naturally flat state. The lifeless body of the Jotunn laid there, sprawled out for miles and miles.

My body was in a bit better shape. Sitting still and collecting energy was enough to allow me to walk. I stayed sitting though, on that damp grass, surrounded by endless plains. My only company being a Jotunn carcass and five scarecrows that may not exist outside of my logic functions. It... it was so lonely. Soul crushingly lonely. It was just me, alone on this planet.

No. That's not right. I still have you La-

"You're gone. You're dead. And... and I'm alone, aren't I?"

That error message that sat in the side of my vision for so long finally disappeared. The spot beside me was empty. It's been empty for a long time. I've been alone a long time.

Part of me wanted to scream and shout and blame some cosmic being, but I've done enough of that.

It was then, sitting on damp grass, surrounded by endless plains, my only company being a Jotunn carcass, five scarecrows that may not exist outside of my logic functions, and a ship making its descent to the surface, it was only then that I realized:

I'm not going to truly forget any of this.

Light was just beginning to stream in from all the cracks in this run-down shack I call a bar. Somewhere around noon then I guess. Opening late last night meant the bar was still fairly packed. I'd say things were dying down though. The couple in back... well, I call 'em a couple cause they always show up together and drink together. Anyway, they got past the stage of beating each other into a bloody pulp and got to the point where they were in each other's arms singing a song. Not the usual lively crap people start out the night with, but the real tear-jerker garbage people end the night with.

Speaking of tear-jerkers, Yorm, the walking GPS, managed to get three other patrons to listen in through its little story. All three tearing up real poetic like.

Now, so far things seem about par for the course, right? Tears and closing time and Boozie unconscious for a couple minutes. All's normal and all's calm and all the rest.

Here's the odd bit: Yorm may have been looking a bit drunk, but they still had the same smile they came in with.

Not a bit of difference.

"Sounds rough, robot." After that kind of story, why the hell wouldn't it be breaking down? Yorm started out sad, but now they're not? That ending didn't seem terribly happy to me. Experiences stay with you, yeah, I get it. So shouldn't this glorified toaster be... experiencing that pain? Dammit, why am I getting worked up at all. It's not like I was planning on robbing the thing,

so what's the point of making sure Yorm's emotionally wrecked. They'd make a better mark, but like I said, for whatever godforsaken reason I don't have plans on robbing it.

“Oh, it was. It was horrible.”

My hand convulsed around the glass I was holding. What am I? Some hormonal teen? Why'd that set me off? I eased my hand open and set down the glass; the crack wasn't very noticeable. Something about that smile. What is it? “Ah, yeah. Sorry, guess I mistook the lack of a response as apathy. A smile and an even voice? How could I have missed the signs of how horrible this all was for you?” It'd be easier to read this robot if it was drunk. Hm, I guess that's been the only way I've understood anyone... maybe the emotions are simpler. Simpler to understand for someone who... who missed out on that emotional development, I guess. Not my fault, it's hard to experience those kinds of things with my childhood the way it was. Not my fault.

“You know, not all robots are the same. Your toaster might not be able to tell what sarcasm is, but I'm actually pretty good at it.”

“Probably shit at making toast though.”

“Fair point.” The bleeding from those little flesh ropes hanging off its mouth stopped a while ago. Now they were starting to gravitate back toward themselves. Yorm's mouth was slowly knitting itself back together. “I wonder though,” sights like this could probably turn a normal man's stomach, “why do you seem so defensive?”

It was about time to start closing things down. Gotta get all these mutants and freaks out of my bar so I can go back to bed. Or maybe I should be trying to watch that CD Gorata gave me. I mean, I can put it off a bit, can't I? Just need the right moment is all. The bar had mostly emptied out, all at once it seemed. In fact, it seemed a bit worse off than usual. Uprturned tables and chairs scattered all over. Usually a few are put back though. Glasses shattered? Not too unusual, but

glasses shattered when there were still drinks in 'em? Now that doesn't happen. Guess I should give this robot some kinda sardonic reply and get to fixing this place up a bit. Get it a bit angry and get it the hell out of my bar. If I'm not gonna rob the damn thing then what's the point of letting it keep on talking.

Why the hell did I bother listenin' then, huh? I coulda ignored them at any point, but here I am nearly breaking glasses because of their story. What am I getting out of all this? Answers? ... damn.

I took my eyes off the rest of the bar and focused back on Yorm.

The twin barrels of my shotgun that I kept under the counter were pointed squarely at Yorm's metallicly chiseled face. Those three sobbing wrecks who'd gathered around were long gone. Boozie was still around though. Boozie, Yorm, me, and a shotgun. My shotgun.

Don't think a sardonic reply will work as well at this point.

"Extremely defensive, I mean."

"Get out of my bar." I tried to come off as snide, but with how difficult it was to pry my finger off the trigger, I think it came off more threatening than anything else.

Yorm walked out, just like that, and I managed to get the shotgun back under the counter.

What kinda answer did I just get from that story. What kinda answer would rile me up like that...

I put my head in my hands, elbows propped up on the counter, trying to make sense of the pattern of the grain. Real wood or fake? Hard to tell these days.

Usually I can take other ideas. Other ways of thinking. Why did Yorm's way of thinking about immortality get me so worked up?

I looked at Boozie. Still unconscious. Glass was empty though. I've only ever seen him pass out with an empty glass. Damn fine drunk.

I scratched my head and turned my attention back to the counter. If that robot's right, then what does that mean for Boozie? He said it before: he's got his reasons for drinking. So, I'm just piling on? I just keep adding to his list of reasons to drink?

That can't be, right? People forget all the time. The longer we live, the more we forget, right? That's not so crazy is it? It's crazier to think we're going to remember anything. But can we forget experiences just as easy as memories? No, no. We've been through this; experiences stain a person.

I slumped down to get a closer look at the wood... who the hell am I lying for? No, I sunk onto that counter like someone was calling the match after ten rounds in the ring. Ten rounds that I think I lost all of. I still remember those feelings, don't I? I remember Gorata and the orphanage, I remember how it felt to take those seedy jobs, I remember the emotional puke of every god-awful story my customers tell me. It's all stuck with me. Maybe it's not fresh, but it is *there*. I can feel it.

And... and those experiences have shaped me, haven't they?

Alright, alright. I get it. The burnt-out lightbulb above me started to hum. I gotta change these damn things. I mean, all that makes sense though. Not the lightbulb, although I guess that makes sense too: not changing 'em leads to dead lightbulbs. But I get what Yorm is talking about. Hell, I've accepted far more outlandish ideas spouted from drunks. So why'd I get so worked up?

I'm a big baddie to Boozie. Point taken. I'm throwing unneeded suffering on a guy who hasn't done wrong to me and certainly doesn't need more pain in his life. I get it. Shouldn't I feel better? I learned my lesson, right? 'Don't be an asshole cause people will remember it'.

Aren't I leaving someone out?

I wanted to grab the nearest bottle from the shelf and start chugging. My stomach, however, was intent on reminding me I shouldn't drink anymore.

If what Yorm says is true. If it's right, that means she hasn't forgotten. I feel sick. If she remembers then she's either suffering and trying to find out about me or... well, or she doesn't give a shit.

I wonder which I'd prefer?

The humming lightbulb above me flickered on, casting a yellowish haze around me that didn't quite fit in with the yellow haze of the sunlight peeking in. Ha, I get it. Hey divines? Do me a favor, instead of some 'eureka moment' garbage how about using your infinite power to let that lightbulb last forever?

It flickered off again.

I wonder if there's a message in that?

No, probably just faulty wiring.

Well, bar's empty and I'm tired. I locked up the bar and got the tables and chairs back in order. I picked the bigger glass shards up and kicked some dirt over the rest. Can't keep the place too clean. Reputation, remember? I turned to Boozie's unconscious form.

"Don't drink me into debt when you wake up, alright Boozie? And... well," thanks the Goddess he was sleeping, "sorry."

I took Boozie's unconsciousness as agreement and climbed the stairs to my bedroom. I thought about collapsing into my bed and skipping right to the hangover. Might be a good distraction. Come to think of it, they're probably better distractions than listening to these stories has ever been. Maybe I should make my bar take out only.

Better yet, I'll just install a drinking fountain you put coins in and call it a day.

That's a thinker. But not why I haven't gotten in bed yet.

No, the reason for that was sitting on my desk: that CD.

I popped the CD in. I just want to get this over with, that's all. That's all.

...

A progress bar? You're kidding me.

The booze was really hitting me now. Maybe it's for the best. It'll be ready when I wake up, I'm sure. This'll be the last excuse, tomorrow morning... tomorrow morning I'll go ahead and throw the rest of my hope at this video and see if I get lucky.

A tiny screen blaring out blue light, a splinter covered floor, a faint electric hum, and a rickety ceiling fan.

Goodnight.

Sixth Draught: To Tether Your Childhood

“You’ll tell me when you hear something.”

“You’re lucky you’re such a good customer lady, people that talk to me like that usually leave with less limbs. How about you tell me if I’ve gotten anything outta this little bargain yet?”

“You think I’m an idiot or something? I led the single most important battalion in liberating the capital of this solar system. I know the people that developed these planets into what they are! I’m the sole reason you even get to do business without a gun shoved halfway down your throa-”

“Keep your glory days to your drug trips gutter rat. I don’t give a shit about the battles you won, you still lost the war and, more importantly, you’re an addict now. Hell, far as I’m concerned, that’s all you are. You better learn your place.”

“You hit me? You hit me?”

“Go ahead, keep reaching for that shank. Even if ya did manage to lay a finger on me, it’ll only mean no more supply for you, and I have a feeling you wouldn’t last long. Now, lemme make it real clear so even a worthless hag like you can understand: Where. Are. The. Guns.”

“... the guy working with the rebels said he wants an agreement for a constant stream of crank-sticks. Their soldiers won’t fight without it, so they need a supply. He said he’ll have the guns, but if you agree to go with a proper trade agreement, he’ll have some bots to hand over as well. Before you ask, yes, you can trust him. He was the High Commissar back when I served. He’ll do anything to get his planet back.”

“You sound a bit too full of yourself for a bitch with a broken nose. Alright, alright. Whatever. Sure, we’ll supply ‘em. Just tell him to get me my guns before their little rebellion fails.”

“You’ll need to meet him tonight then.”

“Wha- you’re kidding? She’s gonna make her move tonight? Well damn, Gorata really has lost her mind then. Whatever, I’m sure all the war cripples like yourself will make for some great customers when this is all over.”

“I gave you what you wanted. Now tell me.”

“Still acting tough? Listen, I’ve got eyes everywhere. Who knew addicts made such a good spy network? So I’m gonna really enjoy hearing about your little reunion if ya ever find him. Just imagining it... god that’s gonna be a good sight. The drug addled failure of a mother who treated her kid like a walking contract meeting back up with him after his life went straight down the shitter? Won’t be any happy tears at that reunion.”

“SHUT UP!”

“Oh? Soft spot? You’re a real changed person now right? Hell, I bet you don’t even want your next hit. I may as well just throw it away. Oh hoho, looks like you didn’t like that idea. Anyway, your kid’s trying his best to fade into the background, or maybe he’s too worthless for anyone to notice, just like his mother, but last I heard he was working with Gorata herself. You may have walked right past your own son without even noticing it. How sad is that? Now get the hell out of my sight.”

The video stopped. I took a deep breath and stared at the corrugated metal ceiling.

Looks like Yorm was right. She hadn’t forgotten about me at all it seems. I guess the question is why? Did she actually want to meet me again?

Doubt it. The moment people hear something like ‘rebellion’ they start scrambling for allies, trying to stack their decks, I’m sure she’s just the same. I stood up and heard more pops and cracks than I’d like to admit. Tried doing some morning stretches and gave up halfway through.

Other than watching some pixelated to hell and back CCTV trash, my morning was going according to the script. Well, I use ‘morning’ loosely, since it’s more like late afternoon at best.

I breathed into my hand and smelled my breath. Not pleasant. I smelled drunk, but not quite drunk enough, so I took what was left of my flask and used it for mouthwash. All about appearances, the bartending business.

Hard to believe Gorata gave me this though. Sounds like her rebels are mostly drug-fueled. Ah, I guess that would explain the zombified looking soldiers I saw that night, wouldn’t it.

It also sounds like they’re making some shady deals to keep their troops high. Bad PR for the ‘valiant’ rebels fighting the ‘evil’ corporations to be making deals with mafias. Mafias that are just corporations with different names and tend to be a bit more up front about their illegal business. Wonder if she even had a chance to look through it, after all it seems like it was taken that day. Or maybe the night before? Hard to tell with the garbage quality. I scratched my stomach and pinched the fat between my fingers.

Here’s the worst thing about looking at your body closer than usual: you only do it when you’re suddenly conscious of something. If you think you’re healthy then you’re not pinching your fat rolls, so you don’t know you got ‘em. Then, the moment you think you’ve gotten a bit soft, BAM fat rolls. All you can think about from then on.

I flexed a bit and the fat was mostly gone. I figure that’s good enough. My chest is barely thicker than my gut so I’m still in the clear for now... shut up.

Ah, classic. I’m really not interested in giving this a proper think am I?

Well, I don’t know. Cut me some slack, huh? I watched the CD, now I need to let myself... let myself settle a bit. Then I’ll think. Right? Right.

I started to button up the shirt with the least amount of... I don't know what the hell these stains are. I need to wash this stuff. Or burn it.

I taped the CD to the top of the ceiling fan. Probably make for good blackmail if Gorata wins. Wonder if I'd even use it though, seems like I'm a real changed man lately. Certainly hasn't been great for business. I mean, I was pretty drunk yesterday, but I seem to remember giving a, Ad Astra forgive me, a *free* drink to Booz-

"BOOZIE!!!" I ran down the stairs and started to unlock the door. That last lock was still bent outta shape and wouldn't budge. I took my trusty stair gun (the gun I keep on the stairs, see?) and shot it off without a second thought. I can't believe I forgot I left him in here.

What if he drank my booze?

I ran through the door and hit a pretty solid object. Strange, I don't usually keep things in front of this door, "Oh, morning Boozie."

He groaned like an old man. An incredibly old man, "Morning."

"You didn't drink anything, right?"

"Not yet. But I'd like to get something."

"Sure, lemme just fix the door. You mind grabbing that melder from behind the counter? No, not that one. The smaller- no, yup. That's it."

It didn't take long to get the door back to... well, 'usable condition' is probably close to being right.

"By the way Boozie, you're paler than usual. And bleeding."

"Hm, well. That'll be the gun shot I think."

"Oh, yeah. Guess you were standing behind the door, huh?"

"That I was."

“Ah. Maybe you should clean yourself up then. Kinda bleeding all over.”

“Good point. Mind if I use my shirt to tie it off?”

“A bit.”

“Oh.”

I threw him a dish rag, “Sorry for... well, for shooting you.”

“It’ll happen. Gotta say though, a clean rag and an apology? Really rolling out the red carpet for me.”

“Just order a damn drink.” I walked to the front door and unbarred it.

“Thanks though, for uh, for letting me spend the night here. You don’t have to go that far though. Street’s fine by me.”

“I just forgot Boozie, that’s all. Don’t read into it.”

“Well, if I’m gonna get to the point where I can’t read, then I better start drinking now. Set me up Old Man!”

There, that’s more normal.

Everything’s back to normal... again.

Is normal good though? I mean, I’ve been living with it for a while so it can’t be that bad right? I guess an onlooker wouldn’t think of it as a good life though. But it’s comfortable. I think. Well, I’m used to it, and people find comfort in things they’re used to.

But does that always work? Would someone living in a warzone think of snipers taking pot shots as comforting just cause it happens every day? Maybe this isn’t comfortable.

I guess that makes sense though. The whole ‘not knowing what comfortable is’ bit. I haven’t exactly had any comfortable points in my life. Just a constant stream of bad news. At least this bar is expected bad news more often than not. It’s the kinda bad news I can anticipate. Unlike

the missions from Gorata, or the tests they ran on me in the orphanage, or whether my mom would come home out of her mind or not at all. What the hell is comfort?

Well, the answer seems obvious right? I'm a bartender for some holy or unholy being's sake. Or 'beings' sake' maybe. Bartenders serve comfort, don't we? Drinking is a way for anyone to be comfortable for a bit.

But maybe that's not comfort at all. Boozie had already started lining up glasses to prepare himself. Almost frightening, watching that man drink. Doesn't quite seem like 'comfort' is the right word for drinking the night away. I looked at the flask tucked in my shirt pocket, its simple composite skin shining dully. I'm not terribly comfortable.

That's right, I'm not comfortable at all. 'death bed early, God willin' right?

I leaned back against the liquor cabinet and surveyed my little abode. Late afternoon and yet there wasn't a speck of natural light able to snake its way past all those apartment compactors. The buzz of cheap lightbulbs, the metallic clicking of the dying bulbs trying to spring back to life, the creaking of ceiling fans that were just waiting for the right moment to finally break off the roof and kill the poor soul underneath, or at least maim them pretty well. Everywhere I looked was a haze of dust that constantly floated around and formed a little capsule around everyone and everything. The floorboards that were more splinters than anything else. The patches of dirt that pushed their way up through the floorboards, or lack of floorboards. The yellowed dandelions that sprouted out of the soil. They were fake; placed by some new-age botanist from some solar system with some odd ideas about what can be considered a plant. No music. Not here. Couldn't... hmm... *wouldn't* pay for it. No sir. No ma'am. No. People can sing all on their own. Hell, Boozie's already beltin' out some sorta music.

Y'know what? I lied. Hard to call that music actually.

“You’ve got the best booze on this whole rock Old Man.”

“Is that a joke?”

“Something like it.” He drained the next glass down on his conga line of booze and continued to happily use his rhythmic gibberish as an impromptu mating call.

The door swung opened and the folks who were sleeping outside started to pour in, though not for Boozie’s mating call. Seats filled up and I started to fill more and more glasses with watered down booze.

Do you wanna know the best part of being the only bar on a rock? Customer service is just icing on the cake for these people, and these days, well, no one gets icing on their cake. Most people don’t even get cake. Long story short, I can take my sweet time pumping out garbage drinks and my customer base still won’t run out on me. It’s convenient. Extremely convenient.

‘Convenient’ huh? Maybe that’s a better word for it. Not comfortable, just convenient. A place to rest my head and a steady flow of money to feed myself. Yeah, like a truck stop. A truck stop on the road of life. A place to stay and wait for the truck willing to take me to the end of this mess. Some people ignore the stops and just keep on. Some drive cars and others walk. Some try to go back the way they came, and others try to break off the highway and find other roads.

I took a pull from my flask and thought about whether or not a stare would be enough to get this guy to pay for the drink he was trying to sneak. I started to let the knife tied to my wrist slip out, but he threw his money on the counter before I could take any fingers. He ran into two of my regulars behind him. They were like brick walls. Some mass of... I dunno, a fleshy substance? Maybe more scaly. Lotta metal like bars running up and down their torso too. *Reinforced* brick walls then. I dunno, best I got.

Speakin' of the best I got, that garbage metaphor for life. What sorta person stays in the truck stop?

Am I really that person? I've tried to move forward haven't I? Working toward getting all that information on my mother. Trying to find out about her. Watching that CD? That's moving forward isn't it? Of course it is.

"No, that ain't right Old Man. You losin' it?"

Hard to not see that as divine intervention. I poured the drink the customer asked for and started dumping the wrong order back into its bottle. He was a bit too brawny for me to want to tell him to stuff it. No, I'm not moving forward. I haven't done a damn thing. So, the question is... the question's what the hell I'm supposed to be moving *toward*.

"Um, sorry."

"Listen pal, I fixed your order. Whine about anything else and I'll throw you out." Kinda on the brink of something here.

"Ah, no. I'm not him."

Yeah, something didn't match up now that I think about it. That wasn't the voice of some angry drunk, it was too lethargic. I'd barely call it a voice at all, actually. More like a whisper. Maybe not even that. I'm pretty sure I was the only one who could hear him. It was like he was putting in the bare minimum effort just so one person could understand him. Like he couldn't be troubled with speaking any louder, but not in a 'high and mighty' way, no, more like a 'this is all I can muster' way.

Both are irritating in my book, "Alright. Congrats. So?"

"Yes... well, I was hoping for a drink actually."

My mind was slowly being pried away from that metaphorical truck stop. Part of me wanted to stay, to figure it out. The rest of me wanted to stay in another sense; conveniently in the truck stop, ignoring all these bothersome thoughts. Bah, dammit. I gotta job I'm supposed to be doing, don't I? I finished prying every last piece of gray matter off that truck stop, which sounds a bit more grotesque than it should, but I was able to focus back on my bar.

"Sorry guy," I looked him up and down, which didn't take much, he was obviously a kid, hell he even had some cliché red balloon with him, "what're you looking for?"

"Well, like I said: a drink."

Maybe not cliché, guess tacky works better, but that makes me sound pretentious doesn't it? "Listen kid, this may come as a shocker, but 'a drink' ain't an order. There're different kinds. Maybe ask someone who looks the least likely to beat or abduct you what they're drinking and meet me back here."

"Oh, sorry. Most people ask about my age first."

"Don't care." Y'know what? 'Stereotypical' is probably a good word to use.

"... ah. Then, um, I'll have a Xilson's. The darkest you have."

Expensive beer. Foreign too. Something like four galaxies away. I took a glass to one of the kegs locked in the counter. I chose the dark tap and filled it up. I marveled, briefly, at the fact I'd been pouring full drinks since the bar opened, huh. "Money."

"Yeah, sure. Sorry."

He slid over his card and I ran it for what I just poured. I slid the drink and card back over the counter as he struggled to climb his way into the two-and-a-half-foot tall stool.

Comical.

Well, as long as you can ignore the whole ‘underage drinking’ thing. Which I can. Which, by the way, doesn’t make me an asshole. Sure, it might *look* like a kid, but what if he’s actually some thousand-year-old time-guardian-galactic-dragon-space-lord? I’d look like a grade A intolerant humanist bigot. Not me. Not I. Real ‘equal opportunity’ bar I like to keep here.

I was about to head to the other end of the counter. It was empty so far, so I figured it’d make a good place to look busy scrubbing the counter and not be bothered. Before I could get a step in, however, the kid tried to reach out, probably trying to get my attention.

But the guy, being a kid and all, his arms didn’t quite make it to the counter and instead he found himself nearly falling out of his stool and spilling his drink all over my counter. Boozie sprang into action: he had his glass hovering under the counter catching all the spilled drink, and had his other hand using his bloodied rag to mop up the dark brown beer. I shuddered, if this happened even ten minutes later Boozie would’ve been too plastered to pull that off... I would’ve had to clean it up. Small miracles. Equally off putting was the fact that Boozie was using his elbow to keep the kid from falling. As if he was being considerate or something.

Not as comical.

“Hey! Alcoholic toddler sonofa-”

“Heh, would you call him a... a ‘toddlin’ toddler’ Old Man? Like, like ‘waddlin’, y’know, like he’s too, uh, like he’s too drunk to walk! Bahahaha!”

“Something like that comes out of your mouth again and I’ll make you swallow coals. And this time they’ll be hot. Anyway, kid, watch the counter. Cleaning is a thankless job so don’t make me bother with it any more than I have to.”

“Well, you probably would get more thanks if you cleaned... at all.”

Boozie was quick to retreat to his seat on the counter. He threw a few sneers and wads of phlegm my way, like a rabid dog backed into a corner, but he was back to his pacified self once he started drinking again. Maybe I shoulda kicked him out like usual last night. He's gettin' real uppity.

The kid kept talking, "Well, I'm uh, sorry."

"Yup."

"But..."

"Kid, suspense kills. You mind hurryin' it up?"

"That's... well yes, sorry. It's just this, well, this isn't a Xilson's."

"No, it's not."

"But I ordered-"

"A Xilson's. Sure."

"And this-"

"Isn't. Yeah." I leaned in close, staring daggers at the kid. He really did just look like a normal child. Maybe ten? Twelve? I dunno, anything past eight and under twenty looks about the same to me anymore. I stared at him until he finally brought his eyes up from the counter to look at me, "That's expensive beer. I can't afford expensive beer. Sorry kid. But hey, beer's beer, right? I'm sure this'll floor you just as well as any other."

"People," he took a deep breath and swallowed, as if this much talking was already taxing on him, "people don't always drink to get drunk."

"They do here."

"Here' must be a very sad place."

I took another look around my bar. The dust, the dead lights, the people. Some were singing, sure. Some seemed to be having a good start, sure. But they all end up at each other's throats... every night. Yeah, not very comfortable at all when you take it all into consideration. For a moment, just a tiny one, I thought about how I might've looked in that bar.

"No kid, *everywhere* is a very sad place." That's right. Everywhere. Happy endings? Good deeds? I've been here long enough to see that's all just imaginary. Stupid little stories we tell kids and idiots to keep them in line. Yeah, it's all sad, it's all uncomfortable. We just try to make it a little less uncomfortable, a little more convenient, that's all we can manage.

"I don't, I don't think that's true." His voice kept on with that lethargic tone to it. He still looked half dead, or at least he looked like he wished he was half dead. But something was a bit odd as he was speaking, "It's not true. That's just... you're just immature." Some fight crept into his voice at this point, "You think you've seen the whole universe? You think you're so smart? There's good out there! There's happiness out there! All you have to do-" That 'odd thing' changed, and he was back to normal. It was if he ran to the end of his leash and the collar stopped him mid stride; yanking him back away from whatever the hell he was bolting toward.

It was a lot to try to take in. A sudden change in personality and some random, heated monologue.

Dammit. Looks like another tiring night. I was so close to getting away with scrubbing an empty counter space. Can't exactly leave in a casual way at this point. I took a breath, and a drink, and renewed my staring contest with the kid. He failed immediately, looks like he had the confidence yanked out of him, "Getting lectured by children? Bit hard to take ya seriously. How many years do you have under your belt, huh? How many opinions have you bothered to consider?"

I might be old and jaded, sure. But I got the years under my belt to at least make me tolerable when I spout my worthless opinions.”

“I’m not sure how old I am. I,” he took a breath, then a drink as well, “I can’t remember. My memory... it’s gotten pretty bad. I think I must be pretty old then.” He tried to take in another gulp and ended up coughing. Down the wrong pipe or something, “At the very least, I’m... I’m old enough. I’m old enough to know you’re wrong.”

This little alien sad sack is starting to get on my nerves. Preaching at me? In my own damn bar? And what the hell does ‘wrong’ even mean, huh? At least that fish, Musta-something, had an intro before the right and wrong shit. “Listen kid, how ‘bout you just let me know when you want another ‘Xilson’s’ and I’ll give you a drink and you’ll pretend it really is a Xilson’s. Sounds like a pretty good deal, right? And, if I’m being honest with ya, I’d rather not be lectured by some twerp who’s walking around with a carney balloon.”

“Itsh notsa balloon.”

“A bit early to be slurring, isn’t it Boozie?”

Boozie was quick to turn his attention back to his glass. A bit too quick. Drunk already? That’s not like Boozie, especially with how much of what he’s drinking is water... or other fluids. As you know by now, I don’t run the tightest ship. Can’t keep track of all the bottles all the time. So this little degenerate being drunk can only mean one thing.

He did it, didn’t he? He drank while I was sleeping. I’m gonna flay him. I’ll find that psychopath on that Pluto pirate base and get her to melt him into a puddle. Boozie, you poor, stupid sack of-

“He’s right.”

“Huh?” It was hard to hold back my rage. Boozie’s drunk little head just looked so incredibly stab-able, y’know? He had his head cocked to the side, downing the rest of the bottle in a few moments, refusing to even look in my direction. I let out a sigh, I guess I’ll let Boozie think about his actions while I think about how to resuscitate him so I have more than one chance to kill him. I sighed again, wow two in a row, I guess Boozie’s paid his dues, so I doubt I’ll go through with any of that. Woulda been quite the show too. I turned back to the kid and waited. Seems like he wants to talk. It’ll be easier to let him work his own way through this conversation. Easier for me, that is, so I stayed silent.

“I’ve heard a few of your race say it looks like that. I don’t actually remember exactly how it looks anymore. My people, we’ve always called it our ‘curse’ but... well, I guess it’s best to let you see for yourself. The explaining can come afterward.”

“I’d rather the explaining not come at all.” But I realized this might’ve been a lie the moment the ‘balloon’ got a bit closer and I could really see it. It floated out from behind him, a bright red ball in the dim and dirty yellow light of the bar.

It was, well it was kinda like a separate being. Somehow, it managed to be less horrifying and more so on the grotesque side. This meant that I didn’t go about steeling my gut with an extra-long session with my flask of mystery booze, no, instead I nearly puked at the idea of ingesting anything.

Like I said, red balloon was a pretty apt description for the top bit. As it got closer you could see it was pulsating a bit. Semi-transparent so you could see all the things you would imagine make up a living organism inside it. Clumps of darker red, meaty bits all connected by glowing strings of neon scarlet... or some other color? I’m not much of an art student, and don’t want to be, so to make it simple it was just some sort of light filled red that made the inside look more like

a ball of yarn that was oozing out raw meat. It was moments like this when the smell of this bar came at me full force. Come on, I just managed to get used to it again, now I'm already back to desperately trying to hold back the contents of my stomach. Bad luck so far. Shoulda stayed on Earth. Gorata's revolution was still going on apparently, which would've been vastly more fun and much more likely to end up in my premature death.

Ah, God, have you no blessings for this one? Or, whatever else a properly religious person might say.

Hardly matters. Not many Gods or Goddesses that would willingly kill you.

Maybe I should start my own religion?

No gods here though, so I passed on the praying. The 'string' that hung down from the ball of seemingly breathing meat was just as... I dunno, meat-y? I guess. It started out like a thin string, only slightly organic looking. But, as you looked further down to the base of it, the 'string' became wider and more tail-like. Veins, or some form of them, as well as clumps of muscle formed up the rest of the thing.

It was obviously a tail. The red bit on the end was odd, sure. But the shape seemed pretty tail-like, as I said. But, well, it wasn't attached to anything. It just floated right behind him. *Literally* floated.

Well, this is new. Haven't heard of anything like it. I've seen metallic floating bits and I've seen separate organic *things* floating about. But this'll be the first time seeing floating organic appendages that aren't attached.

Can't say I like it, "Alright kid," I took a look around the bar and wondered briefly why floating unattached appendages didn't seem to rouse much interest in my clientele, "guess I've got some time to spare."

He looked at me. Really looked. It seemed like the first time he'd done anything outside of what was necessary. It was like something finally piqued his interest just enough for him to wake up properly, "Glad to hear it." Something close to, but not quite, a smile flashed across his face for the briefest of moments, "You look like someone... someone who might help."

"Yous got a bad sets of eyesh balloon mans."

"Balloon man? Oh, yes, you mean me. Actually, well, I have a name if you would use it. It might... I think it could make things easier. I'm Izmennik... or at least, that's what they named me. My real name was Zelotes, but I'm no longer him."

Ah yes, here comes the tiresome bit already. 'Oh geez I'm so sad and here's my story and here's my name and, oh, by the way *they* gave me this name. I'm not who I was! Wink wink nudge nudge, ask me about my subtle hints.'

There is a... sickness, in me.

As in, literal. My stomach was roiling in protest before, but even alien appendages don't get me as queasy as people thinking they're far more interesting than they really are. Stories about dragons and pirates and planets devoid of life and more and this little stain of an existence starts his story with a call to action on my part? Izmennik, I'm gonna do ya a favor and teach you what life is all about.

And so, instead of responding in any way whatsoever, I just waited. Completely uninterested, not willing to take the bait and give him legitimacy. I'm too old for these kinda games. Too old and too damn tired. I could be figuring out what the hell is wrong with *me* instead of listening to this brat. Or at least listening to someone that could actually give me a few helpful hints instead of this self-important garbage. I kept myself busy picking out the larger clumps of stuff stuck to my dish rag.

After a while, he carried on, “I... I guess I should just start, shouldn’t I? I just, well it’s tough is all. It’s hard. I’m not very good at it. But I’ll try. You see, I was a leader. But... but I was the leader at the wrong time. My people, we... war came. True war came. For the first time in my world’s recorded history, war came.”

“So Zelotes, what’s the plan today? I was thinking we could hunt some rabbits. I know it didn’t work out so well last time, but this time I sharpened the stick.”

“Maybe you should’ve listened to me the first-time idiot. Then we wouldn’t have to go search for food AGAIN.”

“Listen to a *girl*? Think about my pride Reina!”

“If your pride keeps making us go hungry, I’ll beat you over the head with it. Remember the last time we had a *real* fight? You wouldn’t stop crying for hours.”

“That’s not fair Reina! You were taller. Girls are always taller at first but look at me now.”

Aleksander, we call him Al since he hates it, started flexing and comparing his height to Reina. He was a foot and a half above her, and she wasn’t all that short. Reina still liked to act like it was only a matter of time before she hit her growth spurt, but our people’s little ‘gift’ meant we stopped growing while we were still young. We looked like kids now, but it’s been a few decades since we stopped growing. Or, maybe a better way to think of it is that we are kids. Even at thirty some odd years.

Who would’ve thought a curse could be so great. What a wonderful gift.

A truly wonderful gift.

“Hey guys?” Reina had one of her hands tangled in Al’s short blond hair, pulling him down to her level. Al, on the other hand, was about to lift her onto his shoulder. If things play out like usual, he’ll throw her into the river, then Reina will get serious, then they beat the crap out of each

other for a bit. Al usually wins, but he never gets away without a few battle scars. A few *painful* battle scars that is.

“Yeah Zelotes?”

“What is it *King* Lot?”

Al really drew out the king part. He’ll mock me for anything. I swung the stick I had on my shoulder down and hit his foot. A quick yelp followed by a push from Reina and he found himself butt to ground.

“Sorry, sorry... I meant Tyrant Lot.”

We all laughed. It was stupid. There really wasn’t anything funny about it, but we just felt like laughing, I guess. I tried to remember where we started, “Oh yeah. So, I was thinking today we’d go hunting, right? But then I thought, hey, we still have enough food for a day or two. Then I saw the clouds and it was like, wow, this would be a great day to climb a tree and just watch them. So uh, Reina, I guess you’re overruled.”

She looked slightly annoyed but mostly tired, “Can’t argue with the king. You’re an idiot too, though.”

I reached out my hand to Al, and Reina did the same. We lifted him up off the ground, “Calling your own king an idiot? There’s gotta be a punishment for that. Guess you’re carrying the gear today Reina.” She groaned. We laughed. It was a nice day.

Reina was right. We probably should’ve spent the day gathering food. Our food bags were looking pretty barren actually. But I think we’re probably just a bit lazy. Too many Al’s and not enough Reina’s, I think.

We made our way further into the plains. It was a pretty cool day, mostly cause of the clouds. The trees were scarce, but the few that were out here managed to grow real big, so they were perfect for watching the day go by.

Al lifted both of us up to the lower branches and then snaked his own way up the tree. He was almost *too* athletic. He beat us both to the top without spilling a drop of sweat. Reina made second place, only her stuttered breaths betraying her outward calm. I didn't actually finish at all. I stopped about three fourths up the tree and leaned into the tightly packed branches. After pushing a few leaves out of the way, I had a pretty nice view of the sky.

Alright, sure. I was also a bit too tired to make it all the way up. I didn't become king because I was the strongest or the fastest. I'm king cause I know how to think. That's why I made a comfy bed while those two are stuck clinging to branches at the very top.

And so we stayed there. Laughing and talking and comfortable silences. We named some clouds and thought about what kind of sky fortress might be behind others. Al was sure one of the bigger clouds *had* to have giants on it.

To be honest, I believed him. Who wouldn't? Clouds are so big. Anything could be behind them. Why not giants? I stared up into the bright blue sky with smears of white liberally painted on and just started to daydream. Giants and sky castles. Sometimes I was the great warrior sent to fight back their evilness and other times I was just an adventurer learning about their world above the clouds. It's nice to be a kid. It's nice to have these thoughts.

"Zelotes? Zelotes." Reina was calling out to me. I decided to ignore her a little bit. She hates that. But she'll hate this next bit even more, "*Zelotes!*" She swung her hand down, aiming to crack my skull open like usual. Well, maybe I'm exaggerating, but it does hurt. But, like I said, I'm the smart one. Fool me once... or five times. Whatever.

I reached both my hands up to grab her incoming hatchet of a hand. I caught it just above me and opened my eyes. Her face was over mine and her fiery hair formed a kind of curtain separating us from the outside world. I grinned and winked at her to let her know about my overwhelming intelligence. She smiled back, and I realized my miscalculation.

Reina has two hands.

Her left palm slapped across my cheek. The force of it was pretty light, Al and her usually go easy on me. The issue is I'm a bit of a flincher, so I managed to roll myself right out of my little nest of branches and plummet to the ground.

I landed on my back and had the wind knocked out of me. Ouch. I could just barely make out Al and Reina's faces cocooned in the tree's branchy web. They looked worried. Stunned to silence, which isn't like them considering they're loud all the time. I groaned to let them know I was alive, and their laughing followed it up. I started to wonder who was having the harder time breathing as their laughter only went on and got louder.

I love these days. I really do. "So uh, ouch. Um, Reina? Augh. You needed something?"

"Hm, 'King Lot the Faker' has a nice ring to it, doesn't it Reina?"

"I think this is the first time we've agreed Ally old boy." She swung her way down a bit too gracefully, would've been nice to see *some* remorse after being pushed out of a tree. I guess it was more my fault though, huh? "I was gonna say 'look at the horizon!' but now you seem a bit preoccupied."

"Thanks for the consideration. You know, some kings would call this treason."

"Good thing you're not just some king."

"Oooh, a compliment from you?"

"We're watching clouds instead of getting food. No, I didn't mean it as a compliment."

“But the clouds were nice, right?” She was always a serious girl. Kept everything running mostly smoothly. But, no matter how responsible she might be, this curse means she still sees the same clouds I do. They aren’t just floating things of water. That’s something adults see. Well, that’s something adults *don’t* see I should say. Once you lose this child like carelessness, clouds aren’t mysterious anymore. Clouds aren’t worth looking at anymore. Or so I’ve been told.

She nodded her head and her eyes filled with wonder as she got ready to tell me all about the story she’d made up for what those fluffy charlatans were hiding.

Before she could start, however, Al broke his uncharacteristic silence, “You were right Reina; a couple of reborns are coming this way.”

This woke me up a bit. I bolted upright, and immediately winced. Guess falling from tress will do that to you, “Is their curse attached?”

“Hmm, hard to see from here,” Aleksander had both hands brought up to his eyes like makeshift binoculars, “no wait. Yup, they’re definitely attached.”

“It’s been a while.” Reina was looking out to the horizon like someone with too much on their mind. I don’t know what she was looking at; the hill was blocking our view from down here.

“Seems like we’ve been clipping more and more tails recently, and yet less people are coming back.”

“I thought we agreed not to call them tails, Al. Too animal like. Kinda gross.” I guess they were like tails thought. They’re not very fun to look at. The good part is that, for some reason we don’t understand, you can’t see your own. Only others. They were the key to our curse. Our curse of seeing things through the eyes of that childlike wonder most people only get for a couple decades at most. Usually less.

We went to meet them. They both seemed tired. They should be, it's quite a ways to get from the exile lands back here. I asked them which village they were heading back to. They told me they didn't care anymore. They just wanted some food and shelter.

So, as the sun set my mind was refocused on my duties as king. I'll take these two to the nearest village and gather some information while I'm there. Al and Reina followed close behind. They managed to clear up the mood right away, which is saying something. Both of the reborns were barely able to walk when we found them and now they were choosing sides in another one of Al and Reina's stupid fights. They probably would've made bets if they had anything to bet with.

We found our way to the closest village, which happened to be one of the border villages between us and the exile lands. Plenty of villages want me to come settle things or look over stuff. The downsides of being king I guess. Usually they find out how to solve things on their own though. Maybe it's a part of childhood; trying to push work onto whoever's above you. Maybe that's just a part of being alive. Food for thought.

Speaking of, we took a quick detour to their storehouse before stopping in with the chief. Easier to apologize than to ask. Hmm, that sounds like something an asshole would say. Well, if that's the case, then an asshole I am.

I watched Al scarfing down food for two while Reina handed him a loaf of bread she dug into and filled with dirt. Al looked wary though. Too suspicious Reina, far too suspicious. I drank a bit more water and tried to think about how I was supposed to respond when the village chief inevitably gives me bad news.

Things weren't working how they were supposed to over in the exile lands. Ever since that girl got exiled. She broke the law, so we clipped her tail and sent her to the exile lands. The usual

punishment. But they're supposed to come back. Learn their lesson. But she sent word that she would never come back the same. Which sounds, oddly, like she still plans on coming back. It's a bit ominous, but it's not like she can do much herself. Not to mention, the exile lands are a punishment for a reason: they're barren. You can barely live there, much less prosper.

And yet, for some reason, almost no one has been returning from the exile lands for three months.

So, I figured it would be a good idea to see if a border village has seen anything odd. Figuring out which questions to ask was easy enough. Do you see any exiles? How many? What are they doing? Etcetera. I dug my fingers into my hair and twisted them around, it was kinda calming for some reason. What do I do?

Only the ones that have been reborn are supposed to cross back over. It's a trip that takes more than one person, no matter how you do it. And if you find someone to go with you, why the hell wouldn't you ask them to help you get the curse back?

It's as easy as handing them their tail, then they hand you yours. You can see theirs after all. It's supposed to be easy. It's supposed to be obvious. And it has been, for all the kings before me, so why is it different now?

"Gah, augh, Reina, you little piece of crap."

Reina stood, pretty loftily and self-satisfied looking, at the door for the storehouse, "You were a fool to trust me Aleksander! And now, I will away!" She spun around, letting her burlap sack cape flow in the wind, and laughed hysterically while she sprinted as fast as she could to put distance between her and Al.

I'm starting to wonder if Al is too stupid to pick up on obvious hints like gifts after fights. I doubt it. I think he's just a bit too nice.

Although, definitely still angry. He was off and running before I could even turn back to look at him. “Well, there goes my honor guard.” I turned to the reborns who were still preoccupied with eating, “You two go try to fit in. Shouldn’t be too hard. Or maybe it will. Good luck!” Ah yes, I make a fine king.

I left the storehouse and started to walk around the wooden shacks. The construction was pretty subpar, but the organization was impressive. Every shack was spaced equally from its neighbors, allowing easy walking between it all. It looked like everyone followed the rules too, not one house out of place. The golden grass that was native here lined everything; stuff grew like crazy. The paths that were walked on most were easy to see since it was the only place where the grass was stomped down instead of being knee high.

The issue with everything being so uniform, however, was that I had no idea where the village chief lived. Like a needle in a haystack. Guess I’ll just... keep walking?

This sucks. Something I don’t even *want* to do and now it’s gonna be hard to even start? Just as I started to think I should push this off again and find a different village, preferably one with a sweets shop, a guy wearing a wolf pelt that covered him head to toe stopped me in my tracks.

“Finally! What kind of king comes to visit and then disappears? I should set you loose and have a hunt.” We all stopped growing at different points, this guy had stopped pretty young. It was hard to see him as anything other than a snarling brat. Especially when the wolf pelt was almost entirely covering his face. “Whatever, I don’t care. You suck at being king.” The guy who seemed glued to the chief’s side tapped his shoulder. The wolf chief yelped, “Aw crap, yeah. Sorry, this guy just pisses me off. Hey, sucky-king, my scouts told me it’s happening.”

“Happening? What’s happening fox kid? I don’t read minds.”

“Fox?! This is a *wolf’s* pelt. Wolves are way harder to hunt, it’s why I’m chief and you should shut your mouth before-” His aide tapped his shoulder again, “Crap. This guy sucks. Whatever. A buncha people are coming from exile lands. They’ve been gathering on the border for a while now, looks like they’re finally coming over. You’re kinda our king right? Maybe you should know this stuff.”

“Oh I’m real sorry I can’t know *everything* that’s happening on the whole planet.” My stomach was starting to act up, was it something I ate? No, that’s wishful thinking. It’s probably because I’m about to ask a question and he’s gonna let me know I’m wrong. And then everything is going to change, “That’s a good thing, right? The whole issue was that they weren’t coming back from the exile lands.”

The wolf chief looked a bit more like a wolf as he narrowed his eyes on the horizon, spear in hand, “They *aren’t* reborn. They’re still just criminals. Except now they’re out of their cell.” There was a hint of bloodlust in his eyes. There was certainly a part of him that was ready to fight. But that was just a hint. What really shone through was an overflowing pool of fear. I guess hunting animals is easier to stomach... maybe easier in general.

I looked to the horizon and saw black specs standing out against the setting sun. There were a lot. And yet they kept coming. But we can do this. We can win. Because, because...

we’re the good guys.

I turned back to the chief only to see him and his aide long gone. On their way to meet this enemy. In their place was Al about to catch up with Reina. She turned to taunt him and ended up being tackled to the ground. Al held the half-eaten loaf of bread with dirt still inside and started to push it toward Reina. They were practically drowning in laughter.

Some small, distant part of me wondered... will I still be able to see these things when this is all over?

Izmennik was getting woozy pretty quick. I decided not to pour him another unless he asked for it, I mean at this rate the little monster will be dead before he finishes his story. Huh, when have I ever cared about that? Shut up, it's my own damn decision.

A world of kids though? Er, not quite I guess. A world of people who still had, I don't know, childlike senses? "So these 'rejuvenated' or whatever you call 'em, they're adults?"

"No, not them. Reborns are the ones thash... ugh... that got the curse back. The um, the adol, adolz? Adults. They're just, they're people who didn't getsh the curse back. Well, these didn't *want* it back."

Izmennik was swaying pretty decently in the too-tall stool. Boozie had been creeping closer, but he wasn't near enough to pull off the same trick he did last time. Not to mention there weren't any spilt drinks involved right now. So, invasion of the adults, huh? Sounds like a metaphor... no, probably an allegory. Wait, was there a difference? I thought about this and probably looked pretty sagely as I stared off at the corrugated metal walls, making mental notes of which holes would need to be repaired and which could be left alone. Should've wringed that money outta Cap'n. Though I probably wouldn't've lived through an exchange like that. Tangents like these helped the flow of conversation. Like I've said before: I like to think I'm pretty good at this. I'll give Izzy boy here a minute or two to think about what he just told me.

More often than not, they'll realize something they left out or start trying to cover up something they said. Means they talk more and I talk less, which is the ideal scenario.

He continued to sway back and forth, rocking the barstool in the process. I remember the doctor at the orphanage, I use 'doctor' pretty loosely here, but he used to have a tall wooden block

in the middle of his shop. He'd tie us to it during experiments and a metal rod would swing back and forth, marking something... maybe screams, maybe not.

It looked like a grandfather clock that real rich folks used to use to show off their 'human heritage'. That sorta practice phased out once we all lost our pride as even more new races were discovered, races that could wipe out humanity with a slight sneeze pointed the wrong way. Given how my mother turned out, humanity must've had a lot of pride ripped from them.

One of the downsides of tangents is getting lost in the wrong ones. My past being pretty high up the list of 'wrong ones'. I suppressed the urge to sigh, worried that Izzy here might take it the wrong way. He wasn't talking, still just swaying. Guess I can't be right all the time, that would make me far too pretentious. Hm, maybe I already am. Maybe it's a preemptive pretentiousness.

Nah, couldn't be, "So, it sounded like these kids who got their tails clipped were criminals or something, right?"

"Yesh."

He swayed just a bit too far and came crashing down. Luckily, or unluckily depending on how badly you wanted to see him take the plunge, he swayed slightly forward at the last second and planted his face directly onto my counter.

A tiny groan, befitting a child, struggled out of him. His tongue unfurled and found its way to a puddle of booze that, if I'm bein' honest, may not have been particularly 'fresh'.

I don't usually see drunks who just took a fall move that quick, but he popped up in an instant, like a shock went through his body. The soured look on his face mixed with the heavy-lidded stare of a drunk made for an interesting combination to say the least. So, probably not fresh at all.

He pushed his card toward me so I poured another glass, stopped for a moment, then regained my senses. He paid for the damn thing, didn't he? I pushed it his way. Is this what he meant by helping him? He tells half a story and I get him wasted? I mean, that seems weird right? It just, well, it feels odd I think. The guy was obviously expecting something. So, against my better nature, I figured I'd press the issue a bit, "Hey kid, I think you were just gettin' to the good part. Big bad adults come in and ruin your pillow fort or something."

That got a chuckle outta Boozie.

Or maybe it didn't. Hard to tell if he's reacting to what people are saying or if he's already off in his own little world of alcohol poisoning.

Izmennik seemed to sober up a bit out of nowhere. He went from disoriented drunk back to depressed toddler. Hm, I guess he only sobered up a *bit* though, so maybe 'drunk depressed toddler'? That sounds pretty unhealthy. And likely unethical.

"Sorry... ugh, sorry. It's... well, it's not the easiesht thing to talk about. I... ah damn, I had something. If I just, if I could just rememn- remember."

"Come on Iz, I just gave you your place: 'baddy adults invade'. You can remember from there can't ya? I mean, it sounds like a pretty big deal, something you'd remember, right?" He wanted something, I can at least try to hear him out. Not like I can solve any problems, can't even solve my own, but if the little bastard wants someone to listen to him, who better than a bartender right? Right.

Tonight... tonight's been weird. Maybe it was the video? I took a long pull from my flask. Maybe I just wasn't as drunk as usual? Not like me, not like me at all. Why should I care about this kid's issues?

I don't know. I don't know much of anything it seems.

“It’s- that’s not what I, augh, can’t rememem-”

“Remember.”

“Yeah.” Izmennik stared into the frothy beer, maybe searching for something in it, maybe just wondering how badly he was getting ripped off, but he took a deep breath as well as a sip of his drink, “Yeah. I guess... you can’t help until you know it- know it all.”

Back on track, for better or for worse. The bar was functioning normally, which is to say poorly. But, it was odd Boozie hadn’t chimed in. I cast a bit of a side glance at him to make sure he was still alive.

He was staring at Izmennik the same way Izzy boy was staring at his beer. First he keeps the kid from falling and now he’s hanging on every word? What the hell is going on in my bar?

“King Zelotes? I thought you were visiting a border town? If we knew you were returning we could’ve made proper accom-”

“Can it, guardsmen. You look fresh, head to the western town gate and take position. Start forming groups with whoever shows up behind us. I’ll be down soon enough to fix whatever you screw up. Go.”

“Commander Reina? You- holy crap you’re bleeding. What the... is something happening? I mean, not that I’m scared, just wondering if I should-”

Reina lifted her blood-soaked hand from her wound, leading to a brief gush of gore. She laid her hand on the guard’s face, making a blackish-red palm print, “We’ll all be spilling blood soon enough, but this’ll make you look like a warrior for now. Now go, before I have to drag you to the gate myself.”

The guard was off and running. His eyes were different from the wolf chief’s. Instead of being partly filled with fear, this guard’s eyes were all fear. I guess standing watch and foraging

for berries isn't a very good preparation for war. "Reina," I guided her hand back to her wound, it was only now that I was thinking I should've tied something around her, stupid mistake, "keep the pressure on it. Just a bit further."

She knocked my hand away, weakly, "Focus on yourself king, you kinda got a war to fight. I'll be fine soon enough, you'll see. I mean, I'm *the* Reina! This is barely a scratch."

I looked away. Her face was a bit too pale. A bit too hard to look at. 'Just a scratch'? Hard to believe that. It was deep enough to see the sickly yellow globes of fat in her skin. It looked like a meat pie with raw beef and corn. I squeezed my eyes shut; this isn't helping. I just want to go back to that tree.

No, no. Now's not the time. We entered into the only stone structure in town. Hard to convince anyone to help build a stone house. Hard enough to get anyone to help build a wood house. The court doctor fell in step with us as soon as we entered. He began applying all kinds of ingredients to the wound on Reina, constantly asking her to stop, or at least slow down. Reina refused, of course. She's in charge of any large-scale events, including fighting. Though we never thought we'd have a fight like this.

The building wasn't too large, so we found ourselves at the center within a minute. We took our seats around the maps and assorted papers set out for us to use. Good attendants. I should give them some time off, but instead I'll probably be pressing them into service. I stared at the papers in front of me: scattered scouting reports and village evacuations and death tolls. The map spelled everything out the best though. Plainly put, we were losing ground.

Reina started the conversation by suggesting we counterattack. She said we had enough people to fight them back on all fronts, if we forced everyone to fight, that is.

I countered with my own idea of focusing on defense. Repelling them. Maybe if we held out long enough, they would open up to negotiations.

After ten minutes of back and forth between the two of us, I leaned back in my chair, stared at the ceiling, and said to no one in particular, “Childlike ideas. Childlike simplicity. Coming from childlike minds.”

Al had been silent the whole way back from the border town. It wasn’t like him. He spent a lot of his early years in a border town. He was a natural born fighter. I think the toll of not keeping us all safe during our months long retreat here, to the capital, was eating away at him, or his idea of what he should be.

Panic always grows in weird ways. The hushed whispers we heard on the way in had turned into panicked shouts already. People were trying to figure out what they were supposed to do. They were probably wondering what the gates closing and guards filling up the walls meant. They probably had a pretty good idea. As soon as those curseless traitors start filling up the horizon, that’s when people will start thinking about how to escape. But that won’t last long.

We’re surrounded, after all.

Al’s voice was quiet, yet somehow it still carried, maybe even beyond the doors and out to the town, “We fight.”

“Yeah, we’ve figured that part out genius. This might be a bit too much for that pea-sized brain, but we’re talking about *how* to fight.” Reina wasn’t being nearly as playful with her insults. That wound must really be getting to her.

“No. You’re both thinking too hard. We’re surrounded. For today at least, all we can do is fight. Everyone out there, they don’t care about the rest of this war, they don’t even care about tomorrow. Today is all that matters; and they’ll break today if no one’s out there to lead them.” Al

stood, swelling with either pride or nerves, “Reina! Take the south gate, I’ll take the north. And when you screw up, I’ll circle around and pick up your slack.” He smirked, not trying to egg her on, but to remind us who we were supposed to be.

Reina bolted up, wound forgotten, and charged out toward the south gate. She was laughing.

I tried to smile at Al but found it a bit difficult.

Al covered for me, making his own smirk twice as big, “You should start planning king.”

“Didn’t you just say not to?”

“We’re here to fight Zel, that’s what we do. We only get to think about today, it’s all we *can* do. But you? Well, looks like you got stuck with the brains, which means you’re stuck planning for tomorrow. We’re just here to make sure that tomorrow comes, you’re here to make it a good tomorrow.”

“Oh, you’re a genius! I’ll just draw up some battle plans for every possible outcome of today. That shouldn’t take too many weeks.” I was tired. This isn’t how my time as king was supposed to go.

Al slammed his fist onto the table, that smirk still anchored to his face, “There’s only one possible outcome: total victory. Did you forget? We can’t lose,” he turned and started to run toward the north gate and shouted, “after all, we’re the good guys!”

The good guys?

Well... I guess we are, aren’t we? We’re the ones being attacked, and we haven’t been doing anything bad. No, if anything we’ve been doing good by keeping this curse alive and well. We’ve been doing nothing but helping each other to hold onto this childlike frame of thought. This sweet bliss.

I swept my arm over the table, grabbing as much paper and information as possible. With my arms filled with rolls of paper and a pencil between my teeth I started to climb up the building's central tower. It should give a good view of the whole battlefield. Maybe I'll see something that can help.

One foot after the other, stone steps disappearing behind me as I made my way to the observation deck. Of course I'm going to see something helpful. They're going to have a glaring weakness. That's how these things play out. I'll watch them fight for a bit and I'll realize some stupid mistake they're making could be exploited. Then we'll press the advantage and win the whole thing!

I made it to the top of the staircase and opened the hatch above me. As my head rose up out of the tower's insides and onto the deck a gust of wind crashed into me. If I was even a few seconds earlier, I might just be stumbling off the tower to my death. Small miracles.

But small miracles make for great signs, don't they? The sky spirit must've just saved my life. If he saved my life, that must mean that we're not meant to die yet. Not here. Not today.

At the end of the day, it's just a simple fact: the people who fight for days filled with watching clouds and climbing trees *have* to be the good guys.

I started to lay out maps and scouting reports around me. Making sure the northern reports were matched with the northern vista and so on. It wasn't long before everything was set up and I tried to piece together what was happening.

It seemed like the scouts were pretty sure of the positions. But... well, it was odd. They really did encircle us. Completely. It looked like they started their little trip out of the exile lands with this result in mind. Approaching on every side, pushing all of us to this center point. The city was practically bursting with refugees from all across the hemisphere.

The shadows were beginning to appear on the horizon. I gazed out and saw banners and rows upon rows of spears splayed out against the setting sun. The further my eyes wandered away from the horizon, the less visible that wall of spikes became, but I was sure they were out there in the encroaching darkness. Marching on us from every single path. No escape.

Heh, I bet that's nearly word for word the speech Al's giving to his warriors down there. I'm guessing they aren't enjoying this as much as he is.

All those refugees were still trying to find out where to go during this attack. Some chose to fight, others tried to find places to hide.

There sure are a lot of them though.

I ripped my eyes away from the spear-filled sunset and started to dig through a pile of papers that I may, or may not have, organized. Alright, I didn't. Should've. But didn't. What would Reina say if she were here? Probably nothing, she'd just put me in a full nelson and tell me I'm a disgrace of a king. That's the kind of encouragement I could use right about now. Ah well, found the report anyway. I stuck my tongue out at the imaginary Reina.

Not as fun to have a back and forth with yourself. I'll have to reenact this with Reina after we're done here.

Which I'm starting to think will be pretty soon. This was the report: 'Casualty Counts for the Southern Lands'. It actually covered about a third of our territory. The numbers were low. It looks like this curseless army might really be a joke. I mean, how do you advance that far without being able to strike any killing blows?

It makes sense. Teamwork is a part of getting the curse back. Trusting someone to reattach your curse and you to reattach theirs, that process can only function with trust. If they couldn't do that, it must mean they're having a hard time working together at all.

This is great. An army like that will scatter in moments. If we can keep them off the walls for even a couple minutes, this whole thing will be over, and I'll be back to making stupidly fun childish memories with Al and Reina. My heart was already feeling lighter.

The torches on the city walls had been lit, casting a dull, barely worthwhile, light over our warriors. I couldn't make out Reina or Al, but I was sure they were down there, pressed in with all the other bodies crowding the defensive fortifications we never thought we'd have to use.

I licked my lips, it's too dry, always is in the capital. The sun finally managed to retreat fully behind the mountains. They were out there. A lot of them. All we could do now was wait. I kept switching from railing to railing in the tower, trying to get a better vantage point, to see something that others might not, to help somehow.

I hate this. I can tell our warriors hate this too. All we can do is stare off into the darkness, straining our eyes and ears to a breaking point hoping to catch some early warning of the enemy. Hanging on the slightest abnormality. The wind turns into marching soldiers and crickets are some coded language. It's the worst kind of paranoia, not to mention it spreads. Whoever's beside you sees you tense up and suddenly they're just as tense. Then the cycle continues until your whole army is ready to fight the first ghost they see. Or run from it.

Was that it?

Was that the sound?

Were those footsteps?

I tried to pry my mind away. I focused on finding where Reina and Al were in the formation. I scanned our lines a few times but still couldn't make them out through all the bodies.

I was starting to think I should send an attendant out to find them and keep tabs, but then the screams started.

Maybe not screams, more like a banshee howl. A high pitched, ear piercing screech that stuck somewhere deep in your brain. The kind of sound you would always remember as simply meaning 'die'. But we had to stand our ground.

And most of our forces did. They readied their weapons; forming lines filled with clubs and spears and swords. Anything that could be used as a weapon was brought to bear.

The screaming didn't stop until enemy came crashing into our ranks.

Even I could feel the force of impact. Watching the lines bow with the force of the clash was frightening, but it was important information to gather. Figuring out which parts of their army were subpar and which parts of our army were over-performing would be good to know for a counterattack. That is... if we had the chance to launch one.

No, of course we would.

The fighting was fierce, with both the eastern and western defensive lines being pushed further and further toward the walls. It was like they were just phasing through the trenches and barricades that were set up. None of it slowed them a bit, especially on the western flank. It looked as if they were only feet away from the city wall, some sort of cart with a tree attached was being inched up toward the western gate. They're gonna use that to break down the gates, aren't they?

On the other hand, the north and south were faring just fine. They may have blended in at first, but now Reina and Al were like shining stars. It was impossible not to notice them as they hacked their way through the enemy, their warriors pushing themselves to new heights to try and keep up with their generals, their heroes.

In the north, Al had reached a similar cart with a tree attached. He brought down a hammer as big as a child and began to smash the thing until it was nearly a liquid. His warriors surged at the sight and began to push ahead of him while he finished up.

I turned to the south expecting to see a similar sight. Instead, it seemed like Reina had moved too fast. She was surrounded by enemies as her own warriors were separated from her by ten feet worth of enemy soldiers. They started to close in on her, not even pretending like they wanted a fair fight.

A sound from my right caught my attention. I ignored it. Come on Reina, get out of there. How can I help? What can I do? The sound came again, louder this time. Like wood splintering against wood.

Come on, it's Reina. She'll be fine. She can fight her way out of anything. Anyway, there's no way she can die. It's impossible. I turned to the sound only to see that cart with the tree trunk slamming against the western gate.

The warriors on the gate were faltering. Some had dropped their weapons out of shock, others out of fear. Those gates we thought were invincible when we built them were bending and bursting apart with every strike of that machine. One man stood out. He was standing just inside the gate, spear leveled. His presence was much smaller than Reina or Al's, but he managed to rally a few of his soldiers, slowly forming a line to guard the gate.

I was gripping the railing, my knuckles turning white. Come on. Come on. I glanced back to where Reina was. I couldn't see her. Come on. This is exactly the time when the good guys get some sort of boon right? This is when some miracle evens out the playing field right?

“COME ON!”

And just like that, the machine stopped.

Reina was standing there, halberd in hand.

Somehow, she fought her way all the way through to the western gate, leaving a literal wake of bodies.

Her presence alone was enough to rally the defenders. Weapons found their way back into numb hands. They wouldn't be useful for much other than looking dangerous, but that might just be enough. The lone guardsmen and his few rallied men surged through the gate to join Reina.

Everything and everyone seemed stopped in time. Both sides were staring at each other, waiting for someone to make a move.

A moment passed.

And then another.

Reina was staring at what seemed to be the leader of these curseless rebels.

She lowered her halberd, trying to get her to agree to a duel. But she didn't agree.

Instead, she ran.

Just ran.

She dropped her weapons and bolted in the other direction. A few of the soldiers next to her did the same. Then more. And more. As if they really were ghosts all along, the entire enemy force was sprinting away and disappearing into the night. Running from us.

"Did we... did we do it?" I muttered the words under my breath, trying to process what just happened.

A few cheers went up, but they didn't catch. It seemed like everyone was more confused than anything. I thought the fighting would go on all night, but they broke at the slightest touch. We really are the good guys. That's the only explanation. Of course the bad guys break in an instant. Of course we beat them back. I laughed to myself, could things have gone any other way? No, of course not. Al was right.

I leaned over the railing and tried to put on my orator's voice. I don't know what it was, maybe it was feeling like a king for the first time since getting this title, but my voice seemed to

carry through the whole city. Maybe the whole world, “Well? Let’s finish this up! Chase them back to the exile lands! They’re on the run, and we’ve got more than enough good luck to burn! So, Reina? Al? You up for it!”

I couldn’t hear them specifically, but the entire city erupted into shouts, so I think I’m safe in assuming they were ready to get this done.

Everyone began to flow out of the city. Everyone. People that had been huddling in their houses came out with wooden boards and kitchen knives in hand. I ran down the stairs and found a few of my attendants waiting.

“We figured you’d want this sir.”

I gripped the hilt of the sword. The sword that our first king used to earn us this curse. A sword that was only bestowed upon true kings of the land. And they were giving it to me. I smiled uncontrollably and laid it on my shoulder, “We can’t let them have all the fun, right?”

The youngest attendant looked at me, seemingly lost in the moment, “I uh, wow, this kinda seems like the moment that gets made into a statue.”

I turned to the door and started to jog out, ignoring him, “After all, if Reina or Al hear I just stayed in my tower they’ll bully the crap outta me for at least a year.”

“But that,” the attendant that had served under the king before me was burying his face in his palms and turned to the younger attendant who had spoken, “is the moment he’ll want everyone to know about.”

“A good king then?”

“A great one.”

The kid was bawling uncontrollably now. Making an absolute mess of things. A bit revolting, honestly. And maybe a bit sad.

Trusty rag, trusty rag, where might you be? Hm... it started out on Boozie soaking up blood. Then... what happened? Oh yeah, no that's it; then Boozie used it to wipe up the beer.

I took the rag and wiped down the snot that had dribbled onto my counter. Looks like this one is goin' in the burn pile tonight.

Izzy's face slowly became a little less twisted with grief.

He looked like he wanted to speak. It was easy enough to tell. Mouth opening and closing, eyes darting around but always landing back on my own. For some reason he just couldn't manage.

I don't know why, but I figured I'd give him a hand, get him back on track, "So... 'chased back to capital' 'stunning victory' you suddenly have a larger force on the run. Sounds suspicious."

"Yeah..." Izmennik was staring into his glass. It was practically empty, just the final film of beer that ends up tasting more like backwash than anything else. He seemed back to normal. Normal in the sense of how he was when he showed up at least. "Yeah... thatsh... that's how an adult would think. Blind trust, ugh, blind trust is for... it's for kids."

"Ah."

Izmennik showed me a real broken smile. Wavy mouth and twitching bits. Eyes that are crinkled in pain rather than joy. Didn't say a word. Just tried to hold himself together. But he didn't have tape. Didn't have glue. Didn't have friends. No, he had to hold himself together with booze and some pathetic validation from strangers that nod along to his story.

It's like a sideshow act.

But less funny.

"I thought... I thought I was so smart. I thoughtsh, er, I thought I understood." The bar was loud. The novelty of a kid in a bar was nonexistent to everyone else. They just kept on with their nights, not about to let a drunken schoolboy ruin it for them, "We chased them, we chased them

all the way back. Back to their, their... their house. Their capital. Then... the gatesh, the gatsh, the *gates* closed. The arrowsh, they didn't stop. Like rain."

Morbid thought, kids dying and all.

"They didn't stop. They didn't stop, they didn't stop they didn't stop theydidn'tstop."

He went on like that for a little while, slurring his words together further and further until it became more of a guttural, agonizing growl rather than any sort of language. I took a quick survey of my bar. Time had been moving quick, or so it seemed. Plenty of drunkards, but the brawls had already been sorted out for the most part. It was that part of the night where people who wouldn't exchange two words with each other in the daylight were singing shoulder to shoulder. That low growl was still right there in front of me. Hard to see him as anything other than a kid, but I guess these feelings aren't very childlike, are they? A bit too much despair.

Then again, with my childhood... well, lack thereof, I suppose I really don't know what the hell a kid should be feeling about all this. What sort of emotions they would experience.

I unscrewed the cap of my flask. Y'know, if I was willing to confront myself, I'd say I seem to drink anytime I bring up the past.

And so I'll drink myself to oblivion. Then the customer will have an emotional break down. Then I try to pry some meaning out of whatever story I get told. All while avoiding any inconvenience of actually trying to help the customer, all while avoiding any inconvenience of actually applying those little meanings to my life. This is my routine, huh? Just like always. Just like forever. A coward who talks and thinks but never... goddamit,

what a way to live.

“Well Izzy,” I slapped his shoulder, a bit harder than I planned, “you lived, right? Silver linings aren’t something to cry over. Hell, for most people it’s the only thing they can be happy about.”

“You, you callsh this livings?”

“Well, it’s something like it. No offense kid, but you’re fairing a bit better than some of these other wastes of space.” I swept my arms around, trying to get him to look at the other customers, before bringing both my hands onto the countertop right in front of him. I stared him down with my dead and tired eyes, or deathly tired, one of ‘em. “Think on it this way Izmennik, Zelotes, whichever. My customer base changes daily. Wanna know why? Some of ‘em don’t come back. Some go off in search of purpose and some of the poor bastards get their bodies found the next day. Sometimes they’re murdered, sure, but usually? You can fill in the blanks, right? Despair is a heluva thing. So yeah, you’re living. Maybe you’re not living well, but if you don’t like it,” Who am I saying all this for? I reached my hand up and turned his face to some chick on the end of the counter. She’s only been around a couple of days, used to be a technician or something over on Mars. Now she’s looking at her pistol like some long-lost lover; her eyes tainted with that sort of tired that you can’t fix with sleep, “you can always call it quits.” Seriously, who the hell am I saying all this for?

He stared at that Martian chick. Stared for a while. Trying to figure something out.

I let him think.

I let him think while I tried desperately not to.

And, like usual, I failed.

My eyes glazed over as I was invaded by my own thoughts. If I hate being here so much, doesn’t that mean I must’ve felt better somewhere else? Is that somewhere else supposed to be my

past? What the hell was 'better' about being abandoned by my mother and stuffed in an experimental program painted as an orphanage. Or, wait I'm sure this is it, am I missing the days of going to bed only to wake up to the sound of my mother getting back and puking and screaming and hallucinating? Yeah, then I got to clean up the mess in the morning while she avoided looking me in the eyes, which was easier for her on the mornings where she had an extra dose. What the hell was so great about that, huh? What was 'better'? Just nightmare after nightmare. Cowering under my cardboard bed while dealers came to collect whatever money my mother could scrounge up. Then the screams. The screams of an addict sobering up off those crank-sticks and realizing their life was still just as miserable. Yeah, those memories? Those are real keepers.

Ah, dammit. This feeling again. The pit in my stomach is something I've gotten used to. I can write it off as too much alcohol killing me off, but this damn feeling. It's like the hole keeps growing. It keeps expanding inside me, filling me to bursting. Creeping its way out toward my chest and then working its way down through my arms and legs, sliding under my fingers and toes. Like pumping a balloon full of helium until the rubber is about to break. Then the stabbing. Gods, the stabbing. After this pit consumes everything inside of me, it tries so desperately to escape. To push past that last barrier of skin. Pushing wherever it can, probing for the weak points by needling into me.

It hurts.

My flask was still half full, but I drained the rest of it in one go. Like the tiniest light in a dark tunnel, I could feel it: I wasn't empty, not yet. There's my mouth, my tongue. That's my throat. Then the warm liquor hits my stomach, and a dull flame stays for a while. I'm not empty. There's still something in there.

Why now? What's going on with me, huh? Just because I miss something about a god awful past? That's it? You're kidding me.

My childhood? You're kidding, right? I barely had one. Nothing special, and certainly nothing to-

My childhood. No, no not my childhood. Maybe it was being a child.

Maybe... maybe-

I lost it. Of course I did. I started to reach down beneath the counter to grab some of the good stuff to refill my flask, who am I kidding, I'll just take the bottle. I wrapped my fingers around the glass neck.

I stayed there for a moment, looking at the reddish gold liquid. Yeah, this really isn't comfort is it. It's weakness in a bottle. Running away isn't comforting, just convenient for adults I guess.

I took my hand off the bottle and grabbed the cheap stuff on the bottom shelf.

Did I lose my train of thought, or was I on the right track and just didn't want to know what I lost?

It hardly matters, Izzy boy seemed to have made up his mind. I need the break anyway. Wouldn't do to have the bartender start crying. Wouldn't do at all.

"Could... can I te- ugh, can I tell you the next part? I promishz," he swallowed something down, "I'll waitsh to passh out till the end."

I nodded. Some part of me was definitely against letting him finish his story. No, no point in lying. That part of me isn't 'against' it, no, that part of me is horrified, but I've let things be convenient for a bit too long. I settled myself in. I looked over at Boozie. Still passed out, thank the goddess. If I break down in front of him, I'm sure I'll never live it down.

They threw me in a prison.

To be honest, it was a bit novel. We never bothered to make prisons. Actually, I guess this is more ironic than novel, considering these lands were supposed to be the prison.

A prison in a prison? Maybe there's some philosophical nonsense that could be paired up with all this as well.

I gripped the iron bars in front of me... again. And again, they didn't budge. Useless thoughts. I'm just trying to distract myself. Not what a leader should be doing.

Being all alone didn't help though. Hard to think and struggle when you're all alone. Part of me wanted to just sit and wait for Al and Reina. It sounded like most of the fighting stopped not too long ago. Once they realize I was captured, they're sure to find me.

I tried to wipe the sweat from my forehead but there was too much. I just smeared the droplets all over my face. I was too afraid to give myself a whiff, but at this rate I'm sure the stench will be enough to get Al and Reina to me. Well, actually, Reina's smart, so she'll probably steer clear. But Al on the other hand... yeah, he'll investigate.

I slammed my head into the iron bars, creating a somewhat satisfying vibration in my head.

Focus.

I can't just wait for them to rescue me. These curseless traitors set a pretty decent trap. A lot of arrows. There may still be some fighting going on. So... how does one escape from a prison cell?

The only view from my comfy little cage was a seemingly endless hallway with too few torches. No keys dangling close by, no guards to persuade, and no windows to slither out of. Those were the ways the heroes in our stories always got out. Well, except when they just bent the iron bars.

I spit on my hands, not exactly sure if that would help, and gave the bars another pull. But the rust was working against me. It was slowly turning my fingers into mincemeat and ribbons of flesh; the blood was making the bars harder and harder to grasp. The pain was bearable though. I know, there has to be sacrifice, even from the good guys. I hooked my forearms around the rusted metal and nestled it in the crook of my arm. This has to do it. I put my feet against the side of my cell so that when I pushed off I'd get the benefit of my leg strength to try to pry open the iron bar as it was clamped in with my forearms. I turned away and squeezed my eyes shut. I wasn't sure if I should clench my teeth or not since I had nothing to bite on. I figured I'd clench them. Ah, if only my legs weren't so tiny. Oh well, they'll get the job done for now. I pushed as hard as I could off the wall, a forceful explosion as my muscles uncoiled and sprung me back. I heard a loud crack, and just like that, I was on my way back to the fight.

Or so I thought. The bars didn't budge a bit. But the crack?

Streams of blood were pouring from both arms, mixing with the sweat to give me a deep crimson sheen. But blood was also pouring out of my mouth. A lot of blood. And some white shards.

I screamed. I don't think I've ever screamed like that in my entire life. I've broken bones falling out of trees and been latched onto by a hungry wolf during a night of exploring. But those didn't even compare. Not in the slightest. I laid there, gasping on the floor watching a stream of blood pool onto the ground. When my breathing steadied a bit, I reached a hand into my mouth and traced a line around my teeth.

Most were still there, but every single one was a jagged mess. Tiny strings of something dangled from a few of them. I tried to pull them out of my mouth.

It was a bad idea. The pain. Please... the pain. I slammed my head into the stone floor. Apparently it's harder to knock yourself out than you might think. But the new pain covered up some of the old pain. It felt a bit better to be honest.

I stayed in that position for a while. On all fours with my head pressed against the stone floor. I don't know how much time passed, but when the pain became bearable again, my mind was left to wander.

Good, now I can get back to thinking about how to escape...

but I've ran out of options, haven't I?

But my mind kept wandering, and it landed on a single realization:

I struggled.

I struggled quite a bit. This is more than I've ever heard from one of those damn stories. Where the hell is the payoff? What's happening? This doesn't make any sense! I suffered. *I suffered*. I'm the good guy. I did my part, I fulfilled my part of the bargain, so why? The blood hasn't stopped flowing out of me, I'm getting weaker and weaker. It's far past the time when Reina and Al should've swooped in and saved the day. It's too late for the villain to come down and give a little speech and give me the chance to stop her. It's too late. It's too late. It's...

"It's not fair..."

"Ah ha ha, there it is. That's the line. I'll admit, you held out longer than I thought you were going to."

I lifted my head off the ground.

It was much harder than it should've been.

I don't know when she showed up, but she was standing right outside my cell now. The lights behind made it impossible to see any features. She was just a blob of darkness with a golden

outline due to the lights behind her. The only thing that was really noteworthy was the fact her curse, her tail, wasn't attached. This wasn't a last-minute rescue.

“Amazing, you hardly look surprised. I was thinking you'd throw a bit of a fit once you realized I wasn't one of your friends. Reina and Aleksander, right? Ah, to have friends like those. You're a lucky man. Hard to find friends that would fight to the end for you.”

What? What... what does she mean... this doesn't make sense...

She crouched down, squatting just above the stone floor. My blood had been seeping off in that direction, making the floor seem a bit blacker in all this darkness, “If only I had friends like those. You wouldn't believe how many of my friends ran today. More than I thought, that's for sure. I guess that's one of the downsides to this adulthood business, harder to get that, hm, fanatical belief? No, fanatic devotion. Blind devotion. Adults they, well, I guess they think about mortality a bit too often.” I wasn't sure because of the darkness, but for a moment it felt like I could see some horrible gleam in her eyes, “Listen to me, babbling on. It hardly matters, just a few more executions, that's all.”

Executions? Is... is that what this is? Oh no, please no, that's not fair. What if Reina and Al- what if they already...

She rose up from her crouch and the harsh sound of metal scraping against metal pierced my ever-growing fear. The cell door was screeching open. I want to run. I want to go. I want to be back in that tree, I want to watch those clouds. The woman turned around and started to walk down the pitch-black hall, “Come on then traitor king, you want to see your friends, don't you?” Her chuckle, low and devoid of any joy, bounced off the stone walls and replayed in my head over and over, “Who knows my little friend, this might even be a chance to be a hero!”

A hero... yes. A hero. I'm a hero. *I am a hero*. I'm the main character. I'm the good guy. This is it, right? Ha ha, I almost lost. It was a bit more suffering than I think was necessary, but it looks like it's going to work out. I struggled to stand, using my hands to guide me up the wall and to keep myself from collapsing. Unshackled? No guards? And she's taking me straight to the strongest people I've ever known? This, this is exactly how the stories play out. I had a hard time keeping myself from laughing. I shouldn't have doubted something so simple, I mean, obviously the good guys always win.

I limped out into the light. The woman had disappeared ahead of me, but it hardly matters.

“Ladies and gentlemen, here he is! Do give him a proper welcome, after all my friends, he's a rare breed.”

An uproar that could just barely be considered laughing surrounded me as I stepped out into the light. It was too bright. Too loud. I couldn't adjust. I couldn't even think. Rare breed? What is that supposed to mean? A king?

Something slammed into my head. It wasn't heavy, but it was followed by a cascade of similar objects, “Come now friends, that's hardly kind. This is the man that helped us keep such a wonderful *curse* for so long.” She put a real twist on the word curse, as if even saying it disgusted her.

The pelting stopped and I was able to open my eyes a bit, although the sun was still a pain to put up with right now. I was in the center of a stone structure, with people surrounding me on every side. I didn't spend much time looking at them, instead I focused on the two cages that were set up to my left and right. I couldn't tell for sure what was in them, but one thing was for certain: they weren't curseless. My warriors?

I can't see, I'm too far away. I started to inch closer, as fast as my blood-drained body could move me.

“Well then, it looks like we're starting already! You didn't even give me the chance to explain the game little traitor. Ah well, impatience is a trait amongst your kind.” I couldn't be sure, but it looked like a second shadow appeared from behind the cage I was closing in on. “I'm giving you a great gift! The gift of choice! A gift you never gave us. No, you expected us to follow along mindlessly, because it was *good*, right?” Again, she added that twist while she was speaking. “Because we're the bad guys, aren't we ladies and gentlemen? How could we have ever wanted something as sickening as choice?” The crowd roared again, but not with laughter. They started to throw things again. “So traitor king, here's the choice: you can stay and try to save your friends or you can surrender and go into exile. If you want exile, we'll let you keep your precious curse and you'll get to be the sole inheritor. The only cursed bastard left. If you try to save your friends... well, it hardly needs saying, right?”

My eyes were pretty well adjusted at this point, and I had a better idea of what was going on. Reina and Al were both in cages, curseless soldiers were standing behind them. It was hard to look at my friends.

They were roughed up pretty bad. Eyes swollen shut, gashes covering their bodies, limbs pointing in the wrong direction. They were still cursed though. That had to mean something, right? This is my chance. No, this is *the* chance. The chance that heroes have to take.

I was tired. The blood loss was getting to me and all I wanted to do was sleep. What I wouldn't do for a warm breeze and a comfy cradle of branches and leaves. But the most heroic actions always happen during this kind of exhaustion. It'll make sleeping through all of tomorrow

all the sweeter. All I had to do was get to them. Then everything would work out. I urged my broken body to take a step forward.

“If that’s your choice then that’s your choice. Well friends, you know the rules by now. Thirty seconds. No more, no less. I hope you’ve got a last spurt of energy little traitor, or else you might not save either of them. Let’s start it! 30!”

The crowd started to countdown. There was no time for thinking, but I didn’t need to. All I needed to do was reach the cage, that was it. The rest would be handled.

“25!”

My legs were already burning. My chest was heaving, and I think I felt blood sloshing around inside my lungs.

“20!”

I stopped pumping my arms. It felt like my muscle was ripping itself apart every time I bent my elbow. Blood was starting to bubble up on the cuts as the clots began to liquify.

“15!”

I still hadn’t reached Reina’s cage. Half the time was up. Half. No, that’s fine. I’ll rescue Reina and then she’ll get Al. She was always faster than me. She was always stronger. I’m sure she’ll get to Al with time to spare and never let me live this down.

“10!”

Haha, it’s almost incredible how slow I’m moving. Could you even consider this a walking pace? Is there such a thing as a limping pace? Haha, that’s the sort of thing Al will end up bringing up and then, yeah and then he’ll keep on asking. He’ll need an answer, but he won’t stop guessing.

“5!”

He'll bug Reina the whole way back. 'Hey Reina, you're supposed to be smart right? What do you call this?' and then he'll start walking. Maybe Reina'll say something like 'Hm, that's a bit fast, isn't it? He was waaaay slower.' yeah, yeah and that's when Al, he'll start crawling instead.

"O!"

And then we'll just keep laughing, and we won't stop. No matter what. Nothing will stop our laughing. Not a thing. It'll be so carefree, so joyous, so stupid. And not a damn thing will stop us.

Not even those cuts across their throats.

"Oh-hoho, listen to that gurgle! And would you look at that thrashing? Those monsters sure don't know when to quit, do they folks!" The laughing... the damn laughing, "Alright, let's get those bodies with the rest."

The woman jumped down into the arena, but I barely noticed her. I was focused on getting to Reina in time. I was almost there, just a bit further.

Something hard hit my back and sent me onto the ground. My mouth filled with sand which didn't mix well with the mouthful of blood. I couldn't get up, that thing was still on my back. I urged my arm forward, trying to start a crawl, but it wasn't moving so well.

"Hey, king, what're you doing?"

"... nearly..."

"Nearly? Nearly what?"

"... hero..."

"Hero? Nearly hero? Oh no. No, you're kidding me? That's *absolutely* rich, you still think you're gonna be like, a hero or something? Holy shit, that's amazing."

Just a bit further. A bit more.

“You know, part of me wants to just let you live in this little fantasy you’ve got for yourself. But, false happiness? I’ve tried my hand at torture but letting someone live their little delusional life is a bit much even for me. So,” she leaned down, whispering directly into my ear, “I’m gonna be the good guy. I’m gonna grant you sight. I’m gonna let you see reality my friend. Sorry in advance, but there’s a bit of a downside. See, this is gonna be a bit of a traumatic day for you, and that childlike mind of yours would have an easier time of dealing with it, or at least hiding from it. But hey, maybe you’ll be different, maybe you’ll be just as special and different as an adult as you think you are as a kid. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

There was... a ripping. It didn’t feel physical, but something inside me was being ripped out. No, no she can’t be. Not my curse, not my curse.

“PLEASE NO!”

I opened my eyes and saw my dead friends being dragged away. No miracles, no fairytales. Just bags of meat.

“Bagsh of meat. Just... nothing but bags of meat.”

Izzy was pretty far gone. Not just in his story, but pretty damn deep in his drinks as well. He kept pushing down glass after glass. For these last few drinks he’d had this look on his face, the sorta look you get when you damn well know your body doesn’t wanna take that next sip. But he kept going, looking like he’d nearly puke each time but managing to hold it down. Mind over matter I guess.

He picked up his next glass in shaky hands. He wasn’t crying or anything right now, just looked empty I guess. I saw him swallow something down one, two, three times then down his drink in one go. This kid’s probably on par with ol’ Boozie. Well, I guess the kid’s got beer rather than hard booze though. Still, he’s a promising case for being as worthless of a drunk as Boozie.

He pushed his empty glass forward, staring it down as if it took a force of will to be a drunk.

Y'know, some things are real mysterious. I mean, I guess this whole damn universe is mysterious. All sorts of horrors walking all kinds of lives. It might be even more mysterious that so many of these twisted, malformed messes of flesh or metal or scale or paste have stories you could put just about anywhere. They're all human, aren't they? No, that's not right is it. For once, it didn't feel like I was just staring off into my prison cell poised as a bar, it felt like I was seeing something inside. Something that was coming from me:

Maybe all this emotional crap is universal. Maybe that's why all these odds and ends can still end up in a bar at the ends or middle or beginning of the universe.

And here I am barely able to piece this all together. Can barely tell if these emotional wrecks in my bar are all one in the same or not. But they gotta be. Even if I can't quite understand what their emotions are, something about them seems too familiar.

Hell, maybe I'm a bit too broken. Maybe I already know what broke me. Maybe I need to face her.

Well, mystery of mysteries. Hell, to top it off I did something I've never done before. I turned over Izzy's cup for him. Cutting off a paying customer? I wonder if I'm sick.

He seemed pretty lost. Staring at the cup, or maybe staring at something I couldn't see.

Maybe he was just trying to keep himself from puking.

"Can... can you, could you help me?"

Whatever he was thinking about seemed to give him a strange sense of lucidity. His eyes were still looking elsewhere, but something about him was obviously right there in the room. He had some kinda 'final stand' about him.

Hm, what a question. Can I help him? If I squeeze my eyes shut real tight, I start to see all the times I was ‘helpful’. Helping my junkie of a mother clean up whatever she managed to wrench out of herself or helping a drunk do about the same... seems like helping people usually ends with a mop for me.

I sighed. I usually try not to, given that sighing usually just invites people to get involved and make things more complicated. Kind of an exercise in futility... you know what? That might not be the right phrase. Whatever. A sigh nonetheless. Help him?

“Go on.” Yeah, that sounds like me. Completely noncommittal. No risk. Just gather information and never act. Just observe and learn and forget about the ‘put it to practice’. Keep my distance and piss off on my own terms. Dammit, isn’t it closing time yet?

“That tail... the tail from my story. The balloon. The curse... it’s, well, I can’t see it. Like I said, we... my people need to get someone else. Someone to reattach it.”

Touching an alien’s tail to give it back its sense of childhood? Let it imagine maybe its friends escaped by being superheroes or some fantasy garbage? I guess touching some amalgamation of muscle and alien... skin, maybe? isn’t *that* high a price to give this thing some false sense of happiness. I looked at the flask in my hand. Hell, false happiness is a pretty good term for what I give out here anyway. “Could you give it a wipe or something first? Looks a bit... y’know, disgusting.”

“I’m not-” he started swallowing convulsively and staring at the floor. I think that lucidity is about to get overtaken by the sheer power of booze. “There’s more, geugh, agh. If... if you do, you lose... you lose it.”

“It?”

“Your childhood. The, ugh, the memori-” he covered his mouth, his eyes nearly bulging out of his head as he tried to hold back nature’s flow. Nature’s flow of ‘this is what you deserve for ingesting poison’.

Lose memories? I guess that’s a pretty good curse, isn’t it? They help each other out when the tail comes off and they get to run through life all over again. No bad memories or painful scars. A restart button. Probably a pretty good system for a society of children. Until someone breaks the chain, obviously.

Too bad he’d be stuck with his memories, unless he finds a friend I guess. They’ll be tinted though. The difference between seeing your parents burnt to ash and just seeing the house in flames. A bit of imagination, especially of the childlike variety, and maybe tragedy can become supernatural ex machina.

And to think, all I have to do is give up some of my memories. Maybe I can even get someone to convince me I was a normal happy kid instead of a lab rat orphan abandoned by a junkie. That’d be nice, wouldn’t it?

I felt myself reaching out toward that disgusting floating alien appendage. Like an out of body experience, but I’m hardly a spiritual man. It was like some kind of physical response. Like my entire body was telling me ‘hey, you bitch and moan about the past all day and night, here’s the cure, let’s take it’. Everything felt so right.

But, then why the hell am I still thinking like this? Why do I feel disconnected if it’s all so right?

Come on, you’ve gotta be kidding me. This can be the end of it. For goddess’ sake, I could start saving my money for something better instead of blowing it all on... whatever the hell this little collection of mine should be called.

Who knows, maybe I could go join that revolution if they're still having a go of it down there. Maybe I could find a cause that won't take me down Gerard's path. Instead of living past the conclusion of this little collection game I could die in search of purpose. I wouldn't make the same mistake as him. No, I'd make sure I didn't live past the 'purpose'. I mean, that was his damn mistake, wasn't it? He found his reason to live, and the poor bastard actually went out and accomplished his quest of a lifetime. If he just died out there... if he just died...

The yellowed light of cheap bulbs reflected off that fancy armor of his. Felt like it was burning a hole in me. What? What do you want, huh? You think there's second chances in this damn void? You think he's gonna have a happy life? He sure didn't look content! He wasn't having a good time drinking watered down booze at this shack!

Come on, I haven't got arthritis yet. Just a bit further and I can put this tail on this weird little man child and be on my way. I won't spend my life chasing some stupid past like the pirate's aide. He may act like it's some grand pursuit, that it'll have some payoff at the end, but I know it won't. This worthless universe doesn't give out participation prizes. You don't get to feel good just because you chased... chased something... chased after your shitty little alien memories... and heart... and soul...

Something else was burning into me, not just that armor on the wall. Like a set of eyes. Watching. Always watching. What did they want? What are they expecting? Just curious? Something more? Invested?

Shut up. SHUT UP! Just let me think... let me think for a sec...

I do this, and I'm freed of these memories. I even help some tortured soul in the process.

But the universe is a bitch, I just said it myself didn't I? So what's she gonna take from me?

Ha.

Hahahaha.

No, I get it. Sure, sure. Haha.

It felt like I snapped backed into my body. Or maybe my body snapped back into me. I found myself staring at a puddle of amber; beer dripping off the tap onto the floor. An endless drunken stupor. That's what I'll get. False happiness. Is someone drowning in booze truly happy? Are they ever gonna find reason and purpose after that never ending 'last drink'? Well, Boozie makes for a fine example of that. This bar is all he has. And there sure as hell hasn't been a sign he'll ever have anything more.

I have to stay me. At least for as long as I can stand it.

Now, how to break it to the kid that I can't do something as simple as help him. Guess it helps that I was noncommittal about it.

Bah, guess I'll have to try and find something good to say, right? Some sort of encouraging words. 'You'll get 'em next time' might not be enough.

I just run a bar, I shouldn't have to deal with this kinda garbage.

I looked him straight in the eyes, the least I could do. But, well...

he was passed out.

Completely gone. Honestly, I can barely even tell if he's breathing.

That's the end of it then. I can't keep him here. I can't just wait until he wakes up and then continue this. No, this is just a bar.

"It's just a damn bar."

For some reason, some strange machinations of a drunken god, I found myself hauling Izz-Zelotes's barely breathing body through the winding maze-like streets, "Maybe the next galaxy

over will have a bar too. Maybe the bartender there will be a bit more helpful. I'm uh... I got some things to take care of. Well," the air was cold; being in Earth's shadow really drops the temperature, "I should probably do some thinking first."

Spit dribbled out of his mouth. Followed by... well, you get the picture. I didn't really want this coat anyway.

"Yeah, it's always thinking with me isn't it? No action. Like a teen with delusions of grandeur. Or a politician. Maybe more action would've kept us with a democracy. Maybe a democracy would've made things worse. Maybe I'm thinking too much again, huh?" I chuckled, completely forgetting the streak of beer-tinted bile running down my shoulder. "Tonight's gotta be the night. Maybe we can live forever, sure, but time's precious even for immortals. Not invincible. Shit happens. So, I need to confront her, don't I?"

I dragged him into the seat of a deep space cruiser and tucked the ticket into his pocket, "Well, this is goodbye then. Not very good at them. Usually I just roll people onto the street. Hm, well, uh..." the crackling sound of a loudspeaker that needed to be replaced at least a decade ago made for the perfect excuse to stop talking to a passed-out drunkard.

I watched the ship get released from the sling and thrown toward Mars's orbit. The ship disappeared into the night sky, keeping its boosters dormant. Good pilot. Captain. Whatever. "Oh, this is a good one: I hope the bar over there has a Xilson's for you. A real one." Who am I talking to?

I trudged back through the labyrinth of shacks disguising themselves as towers. Part of me was surprised when I reached my bar without being mugged. Part of me was surprised I just paid for the ticket for that little alien.

Now, I guess it's time to do some thinking.

No, no. It's time to make some decisions.

It's time.

“Well Old Man, I gotta say, you surprised me twice tonight.”

The lack of a slur was a bit more than disconcerting. Boozie looked far too lucid for a man who'd been drinking all night.

“First you decide to hold onto that nightmare of a childhood you were cursed with. Then you walk one of your drunks to the port? Who the hell are you these days?”

He hadn't turned to face me. He had a drink in his hand, but he wasn't just pouring it all down in one go. He was drinking like... well, a normal person. “I was about to ask you the same thing.” Far too lucid.

He nodded at the stool beside him, “I think I'd like to have a talk. I know you've already filled your quota of hearing out one hopeless drunk, but I'm hoping you'll make an exception tonight.”

Every word dripped with... well, there's no other way to explain it: every word dripped with smiles. Grins. Some strange happiness.

It was nauseating. I don't think I've ever heard someone so happy. And that sorta thing coming out of Boozie's mouth? Boozie shouldn't be a happy man. I reached over the counter and grabbed one of my good bottles. I set it down and took the seat beside Boozie, “You're lucky that kid didn't look horrifying enough to get me to drink myself catatonic. I've got plenty of room.”

He nudged his glass against the bottle, “That makes two of us then. Let's make a night of it.”

Seventh Draught:

What, No 'The Next Day'?

OR

An Alcoholic Doesn't Just Carry Bottles

I pulled the cork out of the bottle, somehow managing to avoid breaking it into pieces and having to pick out the bits. Seriously, you'd think they'd have a new futuristic design for this kinda stuff. Or at least a screw on cap with a better seal. Hardly the future I was hoping for.

The cork bounced, in a real satisfying way too, on to the rotted floorboards. I filled Boozie's glass, then my own.

Boozie raised an eyebrow, "Seriously, you sure you're not some sorta shapeshifter? Maybe got possessed?"

"Shapeshifter's don't exist. Closest thing might be those chameleon looking things from, what'd she call her galaxy..."

"Gorbaflorpaschlorp?"

"That's gotta be racist. Damn, can never remember the details. Wait, where were we? Oh yeah, no she couldn't pass for human anyway, few too many scales. And tails, come to think of it."

"So, down to possessed then?"

"You know they banned possessions. Put those towers all over the federation's territory. Or were they an empire? The one's in charge of the local galaxies."

He shrugged, "Conglomerate?"

"A business lexicon merger with the political world, huh?"

“Puns. You really know how to start a drinking party Old Man.” He looked at me with the kinda side long grin you give to people you’ve known for far too long, “But hey, maybe you got possessed on those trips down to Earth? I heard the towers don’t even really work.”

I took a long drink, maybe to get my thoughts straight, maybe to cloud ‘em up a bit, “Hm, ‘Earth’ huh? Are you really that old? Or just stubborn?”

“No other option?”

“The only people who still use ‘Earth’ fall in those categories. Full stop.” I wonder if she even calls it ‘Earth’ anymore. Things would have to be pretty bad for the hero of the planet to stop caring about it, I suppose.

“Heh, you always got things figured out, right Old Man? But, well, I like to think there’s other choices, y’know? Maybe we just don’t know about them yet. Wouldn’t that be nice?” He raised his glass. The mix of the yellowed light and ever-present dust turned his golden drink into some kinda toxic snow globe. I wonder if it’s weird to call a toxic snow globe beautiful. “Wouldn’t it be nice to live in a world of *truly* endless possibilities? And all we have to do is wait for a new answer to show itself.”

He’s just another customer trying to find something in an inanimate object. Seeing something I can’t see, “So? What’s your answer then?”

Boozie set his glass down. He sat up and started to speak. It was strange. Boozie was a drunk. That was it. His whole character could be summed up with a beverage. I mean, it’s his namesake for Ad Astra’s sake. But... he was like a completely different person. The drunken wreck, or waste, of a human was speaking with the voice of an orator. His stance alone made him look like a man of legend. He was somehow glowing in a dimly lit, run down shack of a bar. “Habit, Old Man. Those of us that still love our mother Earth, those of us that beg to serve her! Yes, don’t

you see it? Of course you do! It is a habit of service, a service to the great people of Earth! It is my habit, my habit to serve you, my friends.”

“Nauseating stuff.”

“Heh, well that sorta ‘for you’ garbage wins elections pretty well. It was what got me to be one of Earth’s top politicians.” He sunk back down, and the façade fell apart. Or maybe he put the façade back up, “Well, back when Earth had politicians instead of CEOs.”

Something in my stomach started to search for a way out. I downed the rest of my drink hoping to kill whatever was down there, but the feeling stayed. The sickening feeling of being a bit too close to something you’d been keeping your distance from for years.

This has gotta be a sign, right?

No, just calm down. We’ll figure this all out tonight. I’ll face my past, I’ll face her. I know, I know I said that already, and I’ll go through with it, but I just want to do it on my own terms, that’s all. I just need... I just need a bit more-

“So, I’ll admit that I’m not in the best shape after all these years, but I like to think the important bits are still working.” He patted his liver, or where the augmented mess of coiled wires and circuitry were pretending to be his liver, “And maybe my head’s not all gone yet either. Even though I’ve been trying my best to change that. At any rate, no point in walking around it. You’re the kid, right? *Her* kid?”

I couldn’t manage to get a response out. Something was frozen inside me. All I could do was pour another drink, bottle to mouth directly this time. The slight burning of the liquor gave me some false hope that it would turn my insides into ash.

It didn’t.

“Yeah, I had a feeling. I mean, well, it’s not like I knew her personally or anything. No, I never even met the girl. But, after becoming a hero of the people like she did, we were all keeping track of her. Never know when a good photo-op could save your career, y’know?” He swirled his drink. Through some incredible force of will he didn’t take a gulp, just watched it spin in the glass, “Sorry, I know you’ve got some sort of situation with her. I heard about the... the *issues* she ran into after the war.”

I opened my mouth, deciding to ignore the feeling of my insides rushing to escape through this new exit, “So what? You’ve got advice for me?” I spit, not at him. It helped my stomach a bit too, “How about you piss off. I’m not looking for advice from people like you. Worthless people. Or what? You think saying you’re some government lackey makes you into an acceptable human being? Look around, you alcoholic stain, walking garbage like yourself got us here.”

“Hm, ‘walking garbage’. I like that. Really sums it all up.”

“Great. Then we’re done here. So, get out. We’re closed.” This again? Am I really so pathetic I can’t even stand to hear about my own mother? I’m falling apart.

“Well, I don’t know about that. Summaries are nice and all, but the details might change how you see it. And, to be honest, I think you need to hear this as badly as I need to say it. You’re not quite brain-dead Old Man, you see what’s happening to yourself.”

I took a deep breath. It was awful. Nothing but rancid smells. Stale booze, human fluids, *alien* fluids. Didn’t help my stomach... but my heart slowed down a bit. Wins and losses. God dammit, I’m getting tired of this. I poured the rest of my drink onto the floor and tipped the bottle, the oh so expensive bottle, over the counter and let it crash on the floor, “Hope you got your fill, you’re back to the cheap stuff.”

“Haha, that sounds a bit more familiar. No hard feelings, the cheap stuff works just the same.” He dumped his own glass and grabbed a bottle off the bottom shelf. His glass was filled to the top with cheap, watery booze and he sucked it straight down, “Back to it then. Like I said, I don’t know your mother, but I know you’ve got some stuff to work out. I’m hoping to show you what can happen. Give you a little taste of what might be coming your way. My story’s not over... but, well, as much as I keep hoping for another answer, maybe I’m losing the faith a little. Sorry, ha, can’t start falling apart yet. Gotta get through, what, half my story? Is that when your average patron starts bawling?”

“Ballpark, yeah.”

He started pouring himself another drink. His hands were shaking. Not in the usual ‘alcoholic shake’ sorta way either, “So, I oughta just get on with it. I uh, well, I’ve got a daughter.”

“Yeah, sure. Next you’ll tell me you have a wife.”

“Heh, well, I think that was a necessary step to the whole ‘having a daughter’ thing. Tended to have more luck with relationships when my name wasn’t Boozie. But that’s the name I’ve got now. The name I’ll keep.”

“That’s good. I’m not fond of trying to remember new names, so I wouldn’t. Wife, daughter, pretty good start Boozie. Really setting the stage.”

“Sorry Old Man, I guess I’m getting lost in the past a bit too easily. Better times... well, not better times. Better in some ways, I guess. Maybe you feel the same about your past? Ah, forget that, I’m overstepping. At any rate, you know what politicians were like in those final years: lot of corruption. I wasn’t any different. It’s the same story you’d hear anywhere: had dealings with some baddies, decided I could cheat the baddies, figure out that the baddies don’t like to get cheated. Old as time.”

Ah, I get it. Bit of regret about not saving his wife or kid or both. Can't make amends for being a shitty father or husband when you're family's dead. Yeah, that makes sense. Just cause medicine and technology can keep you alive forever doesn't make you immune to getting shot by some gang lord. You'd think they woulda made a shot for that by now...

ha

"So, where should I start?" Boozie's eyes glazed over, lost in thought probably, "You mind if I just talk about them for a bit? Sorry, guess I'm just... well, just getting drunk I guess. I'll get to the important bits, I promise."

"As long as you keep ordering drinks, I guess I'll stick around."

"Always looking for another dollar."

"Nothing else worth looking for." I wonder if I mean that?

I don't think I do.

I think maybe...

Wait, he said he *has* a wife and daughter. Not *had*.

"Ah, sweetie, looks like I'll be able to make it to your competition after all!"

My little girl, well, not as little these days. Cliché of clichés but they *do* grow up too fast. I love her more than the world. Actually, that's not as good of a saying these days considering just how many worlds there are. Well, I love her quite a bit, so I'll do everything I can to keep her comfortable. That's harder said than done when you've got an intergalactic empire trying to absorb you, but... Jesus, I really need to get away from my job, don't I?

"It was yesterday."

I was hanging up my suit and getting a bit too excited at the idea of being able to take off these far-too-tight shoes, “Really? I’m so sorry sweetie, I lost track of time. You know that office is just like a casino-”

“No windows and everyone wants your money. Yeah, I remember.”

“Haha, ah, well, guess I’ve said that one a few too many times, huh? Don’t worry Lizzy, I’ll be there for the Olympic qualifiers next week. Archery against aliens? I’m sure this year’s going to be quite the show.”

She was already out the door, but turned a bit so I could hear, “It *was* the qualifiers. Also, strangers usually call me ‘Elizabeth’, maybe you should think about using that instead.”

The heavy oak door slammed shut. The intricate glass work splintered, adding another web of cracks. I could’ve sworn I ordered a replacement for that last time.

I finally managed to pry my shoes off. I decided to catch my breath and stayed on the bench for a few more minutes. Not exactly old, but, well... looking down at my gut made me think I should really consider picking up running again. Damn. Wonder if Sue has any cake left over from her birthday party last week. Does Sue like cake? Whatever, I’m sure they’ll be something sweet. The groan that came out of my mouth as I pushed myself up was too familiar. Wonder if dad’s still making groans like that over at the retirement home. What I wouldn’t give to be in a retirement home. Especially one *that* nice. I mean, it had a pool! *There’s* a good way to stay fit.

“Lizzy already left?”

“Honey! Happy birthday, sorry it’s a week late. Did the flowers get here alright? Oh, and did you and your guests eat up all the sweets? Or is there something left over. It might sound crazy, but I think I need something to get the taste of cigars and whisky out of my mouth, haha!”

“Would it kill you to try and actually connect with our daughter?”

“Come on dear, she’s just at that age.”

“Do you even know how old she is?”

I wasn’t joking, the stale and sour taste of cigars and whisky melding in the back of my throat was about to make me puke. I hate drinking like that, but these intergalactic monsters have taken quite the liking to the stuff. Agh, can’t say that. Probably offend them. I’m sure they’ve got their own booze and smoke equivalents. “She’s uh... hmm... oh come on Sue, it doesn’t really matter. Hell, at the rate this augmentation stuff is coming on the market no one’s going to bother remembering ages. Think about it love, after a couple centuries, remembering ages will be a horrible pain for people.”

“She’s our daughter! I just- no. I’m going out. Don’t follow me. I’ll be back when I feel like it. Goodbye.”

“Oh come on honey, I just got back, can’t we spend some time together? You know, I was thinking of getting back into running, maybe we could go together sometime?”

She stopped at the door, turning herself sideways in almost the same exact way Lizzie did, “You give us everything, but sometimes I wonder if you even know who we are.” She scraped out a sigh and rubbed her eyes. It was the only giveaway that she was far too tired. I got her some ‘youth restoring’ augments while they were still in trials. She wanted them so badly. “No. I do not want to go running with you. Just like last time, and the time before that. No. Goodbye.”

The door slammed shut... again. Pieces of glass fell onto the floor this time. The morning sunlight glinting off of them as if they were diamonds. I wonder if they’d like diamond windows. That would hurt the pocket, but if this deal goes through, well, a private diamond mine in space wouldn’t be too far-fetched. If we keep those little green men stuck in political limbo a bit longer, I’m sure they’ll start to try to ‘grease the wheels’ a bit.

Welp, time to accept reality: I'll need to check for myself whether or not we have cake. God I hope we do. Not often I pray, but I swear I'd do anything to get this cowboy era smell off my breath.

Alas, no cake.

Screw you too God.

Just kidding, I'll make it up to you this Sunday... probably. Then again, I *did* just get back. I deserve some rest. I went to church last Christmas anyway.

I sat down on the leather couch that looked far better than it felt and threw my nasty feet on top of the relatively illegal ivory coffee table.

My TV didn't switch on automatically when it saw me. Cost a fortune, but when you actually *see* what the International Pacification Task Force gets up to, you realize paying a few small fortunes is more than worth the feeling of not being spied on. Maybe a few small fortunes and one large fortune actually.

Instead, I picked up the universal remote next to me and had to click a few buttons. A bother, but I'll live with it.

The TV switched on to some mindless comedy special. Something topical about a barista with thirty eyes and spider legs or something.

Not a great sign when the immigration process hasn't even started. Ah well, probably shouldn't base political decisions on half-baked comedy routines.

Another click on my little remote control and metallic blinds began to reveal our three story windows in all their glory. I stared out at the forests and lakes and rivers. It was beautiful. Only three other places like it left on this planet. It's too bad, but progress takes sacrifice I suppose. Always has.

Always will.

I started to flip through channels. It was all garbage. State sanctioned TV tends to be. But censorship is needed during times of change. The people can only handle so much. I just wish they let us officials have some of those channels back. 'Too dangerous' they say. 'Easily hacked' and all that.

I can buy illegal, unregulated augments for my family, but getting a channel that plays some war flicks is completely beyond me.

Maybe I should start to advocate against corruption...

ha.

Not everything can be suppressed though. People have pretty good imaginations. Hearing about alien diplomacy seems to bring everyone to the same conclusion: war. The party running against my own, some rich kids playing with far too much money, have been capitalizing on this. Basically just some CEOs trying to get ahead by jumping into the political realm. Who'd vote for a CEO though? That'd be a tough sell... haha get it? Tough sell? CEO? I'll have to write that one down. Anyway, their commercials just barely skirt regulations. Advocating accelerated concept-to-market laws so people could 'be on equal footing with the horrors of space' as they put it.

Augments, personal space craft, and metric ass tons of robots.

They say the robots are for security, but a company plus robots usually just means automated labor.

I opened the drawer embedded in the coffee table and pulled out a bottle of water. Rare stuff. Expensive stuff. Part of me wanted to ask those space mutants about providing water. The rest of me realized a population just barely getting by is easier to manipulate. Those corporate children aren't too popular yet, but better safe than sorry when it comes to securing votes.

Incredible, I sit down after days of nonstop work and all I think about is work. I need to relax.

I leaned my head back for a moment, and before I knew it, I was drifting off.

I started dreaming. Such a wonderful dream.

Everything was great. My family loved me, the planet was healthy, I was a hero of the people. Clean cities and cleaner skies. Natural disasters neutralized before they could even start. Everything was working out. Everyone was so happy. It was the kind of utopia you could only dream of.

“Aggh, dammit.” Yeah, ‘only dream of’. That checks out. God, I hate sleeping in the afternoon like this. Neck feels like it might break if I start trying to move around. Wish there was an augment for this. Maybe a steel spine or something. Wonder if that’d do anything actually.

“Apologies. You were sleeping?”

What the? How’d they sneak past the... everything? I lurched for the remote, screaming in pain as I moved my far too stiff neck. Just press the button. Those bastards will get some free surveillance on me if I activate it but-

“No threat detected. If this assessment of the situation is not correct, please contact our corporate office to report the issue. Have a pleasant day and remember Argos’s eyes are here for your protection.”

Piece of shit.

“Interesting. You humans certainly have a talent for... how would one say, corporate messaging?”

“More like an advertisement I guess.” I don’t want to die. Oh God above please, I know we aren’t exactly on speaking terms but please, you have to save me. You have to! I don’t want to die! My family! You can’t rip me away from them, they need me!

“Maybe human advertisements are different than ours. We normally target advertisements toward those that would be interested in them. I don’t think thieves are in the market for security systems.”

“You don’t?” Just keep him talking. If I can just keep him talking someone’s bound to come. Aggggh, I should’ve just let the security personnel patrol the house too. “I would think thieves have a bit of an interest in keeping the stuff they steal.”

“Hmm, an interesting idea.” A splotch of darkness right in front of me started to part before my very eyes, revealing the chief diplomat of the alien-mutant freaks we’d been dealing with. Behind that mottled black and gray cloak was a ball of muscle ten feet tall. The two overly long and overly thin limbs that protruded from the ball worked as both hands and legs. There were no eyes and he had no mouth. No facial features at all. Although I’m starting to think certain bunches of stringy gray muscle are actually looking at me. “This, *this* is why we think humanity would make a wonderful addition to our intergalactic alliance. The way you flesh bags *think*. Such stupid ideas that hold occasional wisdom. So, *so* very intriguing.”

He- honestly I don’t even know if a ball of meat can be given a gender. It got like this sometimes. Losing itself in tangents, normally it was just focused around getting the job done as quickly as possible. I tried to move my neck.

That’s not happening. Instead, I stayed on my side. I pulled a blanket down to cover my pants. I still don’t know how this thing sees but covering the piss stain gives me some peace of

mind, “I swear to God Jara, if you ever break into my house again I’ll throw every nuke we have at that ship up there. I can do it you know.”

The muscles contracted. They started to pulse in a strange pattern. “You’re welcome to try little human, but I didn’t break into your house. Although your door did have a strange set of doorknobs on it. It’s a wonder how humans interact at all with such strange barriers.”

I kept rubbing my neck, pushing two fingers into the fleshy bits hoping to hit a magic button that would make me feel better, “They’re locks. They... this isn’t worth my time. What do you want? We already decided to hash out the details next week.”

“Yes, but we were also hashing out details last week. And the week before. Etcetera.”

The pain in my neck miraculously disappeared. Looks like this one finally wants to grease the wheels. Now to name a price. Some *real* political negotiations, “Well, these things take time. Manpower’s probably our biggest bottleneck, but we can’t exactly afford an army you know?”

“Ah, is that the only problem? It is easy enough.”

Ball of mutated muscle, robot loving business freaks, even the pathetic humans I have to call ‘coworkers’, they’ll all throw money at their problems. I’m thinking maybe... hm... ten percent. Ten percent of what this twisted mass of gore gives me will go toward moving things forward. The rest? Well, bribing officials to get my baby girl back on her Olympic stage won’t be cheap, not to mention Sue’s been wanting that new weight adjustment augment. You gotta get money somehow on this planet.

One arm of the ball of meat started to extend and lever itself up until it functioned as a stand while the other arm was free. That free arm found its way around my neck, lifting me off the couch and, even though I started pissing myself a bit again, I found some small comfort in the fact

that my neck was stretched back into position. The following sensation of not being able to breathe managed to dull that comfort a bit. Oh God. Oh please.

“You see little man, I will make things simple so your tiny, smooth brain can understand: you will hire this army or I will bring my own army to... ‘help’ the process.”

Those fingers. Those slimy, boney, far too long fingers were wrapped around my neck. The fingers and arms were thin, tiny. But, somehow, they were still powerful. It felt like a single spasm from this creature and my insides would pop out the top end. Maybe the bottom too. As my consciousness began to fade all I could do was scream silently at God. I don’t want to die...

asshole...

I felt the blood piling up beneath my neck, unable to travel any further due to the iron clasp of this mutant. Maybe now’s not the best time to be making enemies with God.

Dear lord, sorry, amen.

Yeah, that’ll do.

Those snake-like fingers uncoiled, and I fell to the ground, collapsing in a kinda lifeless way as my body tried to get things back on track. That splotchy cloak began to rise again, obscuring the horrifying being.

“You have... hm... let’s say a day. Have a deal ready by this time tomorrow.”

I struggled to bring my hand to my neck. I rubbed at the bruised skin, mainly because it felt like the expected thing to do. Hard to care about nursing your wounds when you’re being threatened, “Or else?”

The cloak nearly covered the thing, but a sliver of the top remained. This was one of those times where the pulsing, grotesque muscles seemed to *see* me, “No, those words are used by lesser species. Pathetic beings that talk more than they should. My people have no need of ‘or else’.”

And with that, it was gone.

My pants were still wet. My face was blotchy from the tears and saliva. “I need to clean myself up... wouldn’t want to scare the family...”

I collapsed.

I curled up.

...

I cried a bit.

Thunder struck nearby.

“You want thanks? Because I’m alive? You realize all the work I need to get done now? No. Piss off God. Maybe we can have a chat next Sunday.” I looked at the rosary I left lying on the table. I reached up and thought about throwing it away.

I didn’t.

Boozie took his hands off his drink and started to rummage through the pockets sewn, stapled, and taped onto the rag he pretended was clothing. He pulled out a piece of metal that was sort of cross shaped, “Heh, sold most the jewels but I still got it. Dunno why though. It’s a-” Ah, yes, now things are on the right track. Boozie’s belch may not have been the best one he’s ever had, but it made me remember him as the alcoholic he is rather than whatever the hell he’s trying to convince me he was, “Ugh, mystery. It’s a mystery.”

“So, I’m guessing this is where the ‘baddies’ come in?”

“Not a whole lotta ways to get a last-minute army, see?”

“Ah, so now we’re really at the corrupt politician bit as well?”

He laughed a bit, “No, no. I was corrupt the whole way through, but I suppose this was a bit more of a low point than usual. You see, even though I was at the head of the organization that

ran Earth as a whole, individual nations still had some power. It made things complicated, which made corruption easy. The downside, of course, was when you actually wanted to move things along. For the treaty we were supposed to sign, we needed the majority of nations to agree. Of course, none of them would, they didn't understand. So, I sent out some folks to... *convince* them to agree."

"Beat them senseless?"

"Well not *senseless*, they wouldn't be able to sign the treaty that way."

I was reading the back of the bottle we were drinking from. Hard to believe they allow this to be consumed at all, "That's a lotta foresight from you."

He wobbled his near-empty glass back and forth on the counter, "This empty glass is kinda a mystery too. You going senile Old Man? You got my card, don't you?"

I stared at him for a while.

The damn lighting in this shack never gets any better. Practically pitch black with the occasional yellowed circle of light from lightbulbs bleeding their lives away. Well, I mean lightbulbs don't bleed, but you get the idea. No, lightbulbs do bleed don't they? Bleed light? People say that, right?

Ah, whatever, hardly matters. What matters is that the man in front of me, the man who I liked to think of as a bottomless wallet in search of my booze, was telling a story in which he had a *family*.

Boozie was taking a hard look at the quarter inch or so of liquid left in his cup, "You know, even if it's backwash, there's still something left in there. Just toss it back."

He leaned back, laughing and nearly falling out of his stool, "I'd be sucking this swill down in an instant on any day of the week, but for some reason... huh, I dunno Old Man, maybe talking

about the past makes me remember the days when I could feel shame. Maybe... maybe I don't want the swill this time. And if you really want, you could always recycle what's left in this guy." he shook his glass.

"Oh I plan to. Always do."

"Christ and a half Old Man, you're lucky I'm me and you don't have anyone else in here. Can't imagine people willing to drink recycled swill."

"And yet my bar always has customers."

His eyes went dead for a moment. Hard to explain, but I'm sure you get it. That kinda look where you know they just drifted off to a whole different world to have a proper think. Mouth nearly agape, he responded, "Alcoholics are a hell of a breed, aren't they?"

...

"I'm a hell of a breed, aren't I?"

...

"Give me something here, Old Man."

"You're Boozie. A Boozie that apparently has a family and some bit of political power once upon a time." he was still staring at me. Goddamn it. People shouldn't be allowed to seek purpose in someone else's interpretation, "I don't have any salvation for you Boozie. I serve drinks." I rubbed the back of my neck, head tilted slightly down. Am I... unholy hell and more, am I *apologetic*?

My God, I really am, aren't I? I genuinely feel... bad... bad that I can't help...

"Shit. I know... it's just... agggghhhhh. Dammit. I just... gawh... I... I need something."

"I'm a bartender, not a therapist. I haven't gotten any wisdom from servin' watered down drinks. I can't... I can't help."

“Don’t bartenders listen?”

Listen? Listen. I mean... agh sonofabitch. God or gods or goddess or whatever the hell is up there. Whatever is up looking down or lackthereof. Is that how you use that word? Ah.

Ah.

Ah.

Ah.

Ah, I’m getting so damn tired these days.

Of course I listen. I can’t really fight against that, right? It’d be asinine.

Day after day of some random bastard telling me their life story. I wish I could just sit here and let it all bounce off and collect my paycheck but... dammit... something always sticks... huh, doesn’t that mean I’m taking purpose outta their interpretations? If I haven’t gotten wisdom, then what the hell *am* I getting outta serving watered down booze, huh? Hasn’t this all been pushing me to solve my own problems? Isn’t that wisdom, or some form of it at least?

What the hell is a bartender?

No.

What the hell is a human?

“Haha, you don’t have to say a thing Old Man. Maybe that suits you though: kind of like a shredder. People just feed whatever into you and it all... disappears.”

It doesn’t disappear. It’s still here. It’s all still here. I poured Boozie a new glass, a clean glass, a glass so clean I could barely believe it was in my bar, “So... don’t keep me waiting. Who knows, maybe your story’ll stick.”

“No... yes... of course I understand your position... as I said, you have to think about the long term when you consider this alliance... really? You little- listen you don’t have a single brain

cell in your empty head that could fathom what these *things* will do to us if they don't get their way. Now you either sign that document, or you'll be some space meatball's new favorite skin suit. DO YOU UNDERSTA-"

Of course he hung up on me. The door to my office squeaked open and a very frightened intern was probably making sure I didn't have any heavy objects at hand to throw at him. Bit of an office rumor... or maybe a legend. Which one can be true again?

I set down the phone as calmly as possible, truth be told I'm getting too tired to even be the proper asshole any bigwig ought to be. I pinched the bridge of my nose, more so because of theatrics since I don't wear glasses, "Please tell me the next one on the line is just calling to tell me how they've already signed everything." The look on the intern's face said 'not a chance', I melted into my chair a bit more and wondered if anyone had some ice cream in the office fridge I could steal, "Of course not... go ahead and put them on, I'll see what I can do."

"Sorry sir, the High Authority of the North African Consolidated States said to tell you... well, to tell you they think they've given enough money to the United Earth Initiative and believe that you'll either handle it, or they'll begin their own negotiations."

And that's it. Without their support, and all the others who have turned this deal down, I can't do a single thing. There's no way things are working out this badly, right God? Haven't I done things right? Sure, I got a bit greedy, but that's just part of the position. You can't blame me for following along... for using my power... for, no! For trying to help my family! You can't blame me for trying to give them a better life!

My knuckles had gone stark white, sitting clenched on my desk as I stared bullets into the intern, though not on purpose, he was just in the line of fire. He bolted out of the room, sure to

start some more horrific office rumors. Rumors that will only last the day, because after the sun goes down, we'll be at war, a war I'm fairly certain we won't be winning. Much less living through.

I wanted to contact those underworld cretins I hired to 'convince' everyone, namely so I could tell them they'll be serving on the front line.

Dammit. I don't normally try to tap the underworld like this, but with the time frame that ball of horrors gave me I had to do something that would work fast, and these street scum were supposed to work fast. Yet not a single country on this worthless rock agreed. What the hell happened? Maybe I should've agreed to their demands and paid them up front?

The phones here are all tapped, courtesy of those rich children too. If their companies get word of this, our whole government will come crashing down.

But, I guess it's hardly worth worrying about, what with the impending doom and all. I reached my hand back toward the phone, hoping that my underworld contact hasn't ditched their disposable phone quite yet.

Before I could start to dial however, my door shot open with quite a bit of force. Half of me thought about reaching down for my handy dandy pistol, while the other half thought about what a stupid idea it was to have a painting that expensive hanging there instead of, you know, a door stop.

The protesting intern behind this destroyer of fine art disappeared like a shadow. Probably fair. If I caught them, I'd have their salary paying off my painting for the next ten yea- oh, wait, war. Well I could still take everything he owns currently. Oh well.

With that thought taken care of, the half of my mind that was focusing on the artistry- wait no I can do better... ha, 'artistic atrocity'.

God, I really want to be distracted from all this, don't I?

At any rate, the woman who just smashed my painting was my oh-so-precious daughter. Funny, I suppose doors destroying things is a harbinger of my family, “Hullo Lizzy! Wonderful to see you and all, but I’m actually a bit, well, tied up at the moment. Important work you know. After all, important work means-”

“Important people. I know.”

I laughed. It was a practiced laugh, very bass-y and light-hearted. I liked to use the word ‘uproarious’ to describe this laugh, but my sweet family never seemed to share in the laughter with me. Maybe it’s the curse of fatherhood to tell jokes only to receive blank looks, or maybe it’s just a personal trait. Needless to say, this time was no different and my little Lizzy kept her face blank, not even showing remorse at destroying my painting... no, that hardly matters.

“We need to talk.”

“Oh sweetie, you know how I love our conversations, but-”

“We’ve never had a ‘conversation’. You just talk and I find an excuse to leave. I want an actual conversation, ok? Where I talk and you listen.”

“Sounds a bit one-sided for a conversation, doesn’t it Lizzy? Ahaha, no, you’re right.” I was starting to sweat... profusely. I grabbed a few tissues and dabbed at the beads of sweat forming in the creases of my forehead. Whose bright idea was it to make handkerchiefs go out of style again? All this damn stress, and a bit of fear; I’m sure my bin’s going to look like it belongs to some teenager with too much time on their hands... bad phrasing. “How about this my dearest little daughter, I’ll finish up my work and then you can talk to me back at home all you want, I won’t even turn on the TV! Promise!” If we even have a house to go back to at the end of the day. I plucked out a few more tissues, wishing my door was closed so I could stuff them under my

armpits for a while. Damn space monsters will probably try to kill me first. I need to start thinking about a place to hide us all.

“Oh my God! You have to be kidding me! Argghhh!” Lizzy started to breathe a bit heavily and her eyes looked a bit watered down.

Well, this has turned into quite the time soak. Bad time for it, “Oh Lizzy, don’t cry. I’ll work as fast as I can.”

She closed her eyes and started to steady her breathing, but for some reason the tears were just getting worse. She didn’t seem to notice though. Actually, she seemed quite unaware of the stream of water flowing down her face, “I... I told myself I wouldn’t lose control.” She breathed deeply once more and looked me straight in the eyes, something in my stomach started to turn, creating more knots in my gut, “Mom said she wouldn’t come. She said you didn’t deserve it, but...”

My hand was still hovering over the phone. It was strange, really. It was that movie kind of moment. The sort of moment where time seemed to stop. My hand hovering, the world crashing down around me but not actually starting to crash just yet, somebody in front of me gearing up to say something I’m sure I don’t want to hear. The only signs that time hadn’t truly stopped were the beads of sweat racing down my body and the clock counting down on my monitor. It would be nice if time did stop. I wouldn’t mind having a bit of a break...

“but I want to give you one last chance. You need to change dad. You need to. Mom’s going to leave you and I’m going to go with her. But... but if you could just change! Don’t you remember when I was a kid and you took me and mom out to see those colony ships launch? We stayed out there all day and night, just watching them disappear into the stars. You didn’t talk about work or try to get out of it or leave us by ourselves, you just... you just held us and, and well

it was nice dad. I miss that. I didn't want to grow up without a dad and... I still don't, all you have to do is chan-

"I *did* change honey," my voice sounded strange, not the usual jovial, oblivious voice that I put on. Strange, it's not even the fake rage or authoritative voice. This one's different... older, maybe a bit more honest and certainly a bit more emotional, "I *did* change. I changed from a man that could only provide the bare essentials to a man that could give you and your mother the world! I'm not the sort of sad sack of a man that can spend an entire day staring at the sky anymore, I'm *worth something* now Lizzy!"

"To who?" her voice was tiny, though still steady.

"To... well... but don't you both have, well, everything?"

"I'd rather have nothing and stare at the sky." She carelessly threw her phone behind her.

"We'd be hungry again..."

"Well, you *could* use a diet." Now her jewelry came off. Each priceless piece falling to her feet.

"You... you won't go the Olympics, I won't be able to pay the bribes..."

She shrugged, "I wasn't good enough anyway." she reached her left arm under her right and a mechanical click could be heard. Her arm crashed onto the ground, the sound softened by the skin substitute that coated it.

I leaned back in my chair, feeling oddly relaxed. A grin, can you believe it? A grin started to fight its way onto my face through all the stress and impending doom, "We might just die in the streets tomorrow, you know?"

She opened her mouth in the biggest smile I'd seen in years. A couple of her top teeth on the left side were missing, I'd always told her to just have them replaced, but it painted the picture

perfectly: a few missing teeth, the only arm she was born with, the ragged gray sweats with colorful patchwork, the smile that never made any damn sense to me. My family, oh God I loved them so much didn't I? When did I change? I thought...

She leaned forward, lightly slapping my cheek, "I'm pretty sure mom's augments won't be going anywhere, but she said she'd give up everything she could in a heartbeat if you stopped killing yourself here."

Her brown eyes reminded me of her mother's. There wasn't anything special about them. I've never 'drowned' in them, I've never thought they were piercing, and there wasn't any sort of divine sign that showed wisdom. No, they were normal, and I think that's what got me all those years ago. Ah, normal eyes, sure, but who else would've given a scruffy drifter like myself a free meal and a careless smile. Oh God, it's been so long Sue, so long since I've really looked at those eyes of yours.

Lizzy stopped slapping me and grabbed onto my hand. I must've been lost in my memories, because she talked to me as if she was trying to wake up a child, "Well then? Are we... can we go? Dad." Being called 'dad' again sure is nice. I chuckled a bit, really, wasn't this my goal? I never wanted to do this political garbage. No, I just wanted to be happy. I rose up from my chair in a daze as my daughter, *my daughter*, started to lead me to the door, away from all of this.

"A happy ending? I was expecting... well, a bit more." I turned to look at Boozie,

Now, you'll have to hear me out on this one, alright?

When I start listening to these stories, I like to tune out a bit. Now that doesn't mean I don't hear and absorb what's going on though. You gotta see by now that I like to polish a glass or clean a table or etc to keep myself in a tactically good position. From those positions, see, I can easily make my way out of a conversation. I got something going on, get it? The downside to this

incredibly useful strategy is that I can only guess my customers' mental state through how they talk, since I'm avoiding eye contact and all. The thing is, Boozie seems to only have two tones to his voice: drunk and not drunk.

'Why bother saying all this?' is something I'm sure you folks'll be asking. This is why.

Boozie, whose voice was starting to slur and sounded perfectly drunk and perfectly normal the whole way through, was curled up, head on the counter, holding his glass at his throat. I'm figuring he was hoping it was a broken, jagged glass. This one wasn't. I grabbed the cup from him and let him cry for a while as he gripped onto my counter as if it was his final chance at life.

His knuckles had gone white and the veins on his temples looked close to popping when I finally decided I needed to do something, "Maybe not quite a... a happy story, huh?"

"Everything, everything was gonna go so right. I was jus' gonna leave with hers, go to a, to the, the life where I was happy before, y'know? But," Boozie looked up and his mouth moved a bit, the words he was mouthing at the sky didn't seem terribly kind, "*they* decided to start collectins right away. *Needed somethin'* they were sayins."

And then... well, he started screaming.

Howling, screeching, wailing, shrieking. A banshee, an enraged animal, a soldier on their death charge, an Auris Fractionis (aptly, though pretentiously, named) whenever they step foot off their colony ships. I'm sure there's a thousand and more ways to describe it, a good chunk of those being better than anything I could come up with, so I'll put it like this for now: he started screaming.

Boozie's no singer, rarely even raises his voice, so he didn't last long. There were strange fluctuations in his pitch as pieces of his insides ripped and tore and got spat out, making a nice little spattering of blood on my countertop.

I ignored it, instead focusing on the man in front of me.

I don't... I don't know what he was feeling.

Ah, who knows, maybe I've some idea locked away, but it felt like I couldn't relate at that moment.

I don't deal with these kinds of situations; it's always been easier to just turn away or throw a few artificial condolences at them. But maybe it was just the empty bar, but for some reason I couldn't find the right words that would make this situation disappear.

Come on, just think. There's gotta be something I can do to make this end. Push him out? Just leave him down here? Should I give him another drink?

No... no I don't think so.

For whatever reason, whatever goddess's will, I found myself standing in front of Boozie. He was still screaming, though silently now. A pool of blood was growing in his mouth, dripping out the sides. Like some beautiful macabre work: a frozen upturned face trapped in pain, white knuckles and an oxygen deprived blue face, all framed with those two little streams of crimson dripping out of his mouth. I started to raise my hand; he didn't seem to notice. Then, as you do, I brought my hand down and laid it on his shoulder.

I could only imagine what this might look like from the perspective of another drunkard in the corner who just hadn't left yet, who decided to listen in. A side view from their little eavesdropping corner of a bartender who seems like a grade A asshole begrudgingly putting a reassuring hand on a regular who he treats like human garbage. They'd see the bartender looking down at his patron and his patron looking into space, but maybe the patron's eyes abandoned that 'thousand-yard stare' a little bit. The macabre image closes its mouth and the blood stops dripping out. A bartender in shabby clothes who looks far too old and far too tired for his age, and an alcoholic dressed in rags, carrying equal parts booze and suffering inside him. The light between

the observer and the scene winks out but the bulb behind the scene stays lit, casting a strange kind of shadow.

It'd probably make for a nice painting.

**No Draught:
Get Out, We're Closed**

Shards of broken glass.

Rotted floorboards.

Patches of dirt.

Holes in the tin walls.

Broken stools.

Scratched up tables.

Dead lightbulbs.

Dying lightbulbs.

Vomit stains.

Piss stains.

Blood stains.

Puddles.

Piles.

Me.

Right in the center of it all. A sad, pathetic, worthless man:

Me.

Boozie left a long time ago. I don't think he's gonna be coming back. At least not for a while. An alcoholic like him? Staying away from a bar? I hope he's gonna be alright... wow, I mean that don't I?

Ha.

What the hell's happened to me?

I was laying on my back, watching that rickety ceiling fan turn above me, “Still haven’t decided to kill anyone good buddy? Tonight may be your last chance y’know?” But it just kept on turning.

Just kept on turning.

The booze was wearing off, but I was still a bit lightheaded. Maybe I wasn’t thinking straight, but, quite frankly, I don’t think I’ve ever been thinking right. My mind’s always been clouded by one thing or another.

I’m not gonna sit here and say some garbage line like, ‘Oh! Suddenly it’s all so clear!’ cause it’s not. I’m just as lost as ever. But that doesn’t matter.

In fact, it’s probably a pretty good deal. If I’m stuck in a pitch-black room, I shouldn’t waste time trying to think about which pitch-black direction is right. Wouldn’t make any sense. No, no I’ll just start walking.

I’ll get the hell outta this truck stop. I don’t need to hitchhike, I don’t need road signs, I don’t need any of that. I’ll just start walking. Maybe backwards, maybe forwards, but I’m gonna start walking.

Collecting information? Sitting around thinking about it? Never making any decisions and just waiting for the perfect opportunity?

I wasn’t moving at all. Just a lie. Nothing more, nothing less.

But I *am* gonna start walking.

...

Literally.

Yeah, literally. I like that.

I got up, legs still a bit wobbly, and walked upstairs.

What if I get hurt? Make some horrid mistake trying to do right? I don't care Mustaqbal, I'd rather move and deal with the consequences. It's gotta be a better fate than wasting away. You can at least say you fought. I'd like to say the same.

I started stuffing a few bags full of whatever I thought I'd need.

What if this adventure ends up being the peak? What if after this it's all downhill? Wouldn't it be better to just let myself imagine that peak for the rest of my life instead of having one flash in the pan taste of it? Well Gerry ol' boy, I think I'd rather have a single slice of cake than spend my life eating stale bread with a few grains of sugar.

I headed back downstairs, lifting Gerard's chest piece off the wall. Oh yeah, I think this might just manage to be fun.

But relationships are just contracts, and she's done with me right? Trying to connect with someone is just gonna cause pain? Isn't that right Zell, Cap'n? Well, if I can be honest with you both, I'd rather chop up my own innards than listen to a couple of hopeless pirates.

The stick looking mushroom-mancer sent me a jeweled gun that must've belonged to Cap'n. I went ahead and slipped it under my belt. Never know when you'll have to vaporize something, right?

With all these augments, with this kind of future, why even bother? Can't I just put this off for eternity? No, no I can't. You were right Yorm. Every moment is important. The pain we feel today isn't less or more because of how long we live. Pain is pain. The experience may have stained us, but I can at least confront it.

I walked under that rickety ceiling fan on my way toward the door, "Last chance friend." It didn't fall. I think I grinned a little.

Isn't it better to just hold onto what few good memories I have? Wouldn't it be nice to just live in a past that never went wrong? Isn't growing up just inviting more pain? Well Izmennik, no, *Zelotes*, maybe growing up, moving on, maybe it does all just invite more pain. But it doesn't just invite pain, no, it invites opportunity doesn't it? The opportunity for pain or pleasure, bad *or* good. Maybe my life will end up with more suffering, but I'm willing to take the chance if it means I'll get even a bit more enjoyment outta this miserable little life of mine. You might be able to live forever with your current ratio, but I think I wanna shake things up a bit.

With the slivers of sunlight at my back, I looked into my bar. Run down and ragged, "Just how I found ya, eh?" I laughed, actually laughed.

What if you make my mistakes? Don't think I forgot about you Boozie. That's why... that's why I'm leaving this place. I could never look down on you as the worthless alcoholic you are if I made the same mistakes as you. So when we meet again, which I'm sure we're cursed to, let's get a drink. Not as two worthless, sad sacks of human waste, but as two people who gave it their best shot.

I hopped into the pilot seat and started to get everything prepped. Heading back to the Blue Dot already, almost makes me weep to go back to that place. But this time, this time I'm gonna do something. For the first time in a long time, I'm gonna actually do something. I'm gonna take a goddamn step.

Forget the expensive hotel, forget the beautiful oak stump, forget the city lit up by a million and more lights. Forget that idyllic bar.

If I had any say in the matter,

which I damn well do,

I'd be telling you about *my* adventure!

