

# Space Paws

ZR

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woof

*K*

*I wrote this for you  
but somewhere along the way  
it went off the rails*



# Contents

. . . . .	
Convenience Food . . . . .	3
Escape . . . . .	6
Goodnight . . . . .	14
Dog Chase . . . . .	20
First Degree Grape . . . . .	34
. . . . .	
In the Basement . . . . .	53
Heel . . . . .	63
Watch Your Tone . . . . .	74
Back Down . . . . .	84
. . . . .	
Set Free . . . . .	101
Out of Mind . . . . .	120
Pedigreed . . . . .	132
. . . . .	
Express Train . . . . .	143
Remote Work . . . . .	160
Admission . . . . .	176
Discharge [sic] . . . . .	186
. . . . .	
Take Off . . . . .	197
Orbiting Bodies . . . . .	203
Lost Dog . . . . .	224
Fetch . . . . .	233
Settle Down . . . . .	249





*Without a friend  
there's no denying  
you're incomplete*



# Chapter 1

## Convenience Food

‘Hey Dō, come down here. Haha — what I tell ya? Jackpot!’

Mās ran ahead down the alley, nose leading but eyes fixed on something. Bē followed, equally eager and apprehensive. His nose was catching a whiff, the smallest hint of something tasty, but it could just as well be his imagination, a hope led on by Mās’s confidence. The alley was dark and ominous, light bleeding in from each end diffused quickly into shadow. Up ahead, Mās’s black outline was barely distinguishable, an energetic trot dancing amidst a dangerous unknown. Bē lost sight of Mās. Did he go behind something? Did somebody grab him? Maybe he just disappeared. Bē cocked his head and froze. He was getting so scared.

‘What are you waiting for — an invitation? Get down here you meat-head. There’s a whole frickin’ meal here. And it’s still warm.’

Bē was still so scared. He couldn’t move or see anything. He tensed with fright and indecision. Mās’s voice was seemed as from a ghost. His mouth filled with a flood of saliva.

‘Or, if you want, I’ll eat it all myself and give you a report later.’

That did it. Bē broke out into a gallop down the alleyway, clicking his back paws together with a characteristic skip. He didn’t know how big a “whole” meal was but he was sure that Mās could somehow pack away the entire thing without sharing. Fast, too. He’d seen that spindly bastard eat a third of a pizza in less than ten seconds. Who knew where he put it? Perhaps he deserved a different name: Mās. Or Blāk Hōl. (Or Pērō Nēgrō.)

As he moved through the dark, eyes wide and tongue flopping, Bē’s sight adjusted and he could make out a large dumpster, and from behind that Mās’s backside wagging with enthusiasm. More clear was the smell,

good fresh human food along something sharper, a little spicy, leading his nose towards his mostly hidden pal. In his excitement, he overshot and barreled past, performing an inelegant 180° turn and slide, kicking up garbage as his still galloping feet were repurposed into out-of-control brakes. He slammed into something soft and solid, wafting up an intense blast of the pungent odor. He shook himself loudly and headed back towards Mās.

‘Sheesh, Dō. You tryin’ to wake this fella up? I don’t think he’ll be too happy if he sees us filling up on his chicken chimi.’

Bē looked back behind him. The smelly mass that he’d collided with was a young man laid out horizontally against the wall. He was wearing fashionable dark slacks, a loose, patterned silk shirt, and fancy sneakers, all of which had been coated in a marbled, yellow-green acid wash of puke. He unconsciously opened and closed his mouth like a fish gasping for water, a drip of vomit hanging between his lips and the ground. Normally, at least as of recently, that upchuck would have been an acceptable snack — or at least worth a taste — but Bē was pretty sure that neither his nose nor Mās were telling him that this was tonight’s promised feast.

Bē turned back to Mās, who was standing over an open styrofoam container that was filled with a brown slurry of beans, a pile of dry red rice, and a gigantic burrito thing, the whole heap swimming in a sea of melted cheese and wet chile. A delicate afterthought of raw lettuce and chopped tomato was getting crushed into the side of the container by the weighty glob. Wispy streaks of white and green laced across the top of the tortilla tube. Mās looked at Bē, following his eyes.

‘Sorry pal, you know how I am about sour cream and guac. The blood runs white and green along with the red. I held off on the rest waiting for you. Though I’m starting to regret it seeing how you’re trying your best to alert Señor Barfo back here that we’re gonna steal his supper.’

‘Sorry Mās,’ said Bē, ‘I just got so scared when I couldn’t see you and then I got so excited and I couldn’t help it.’

Even a hard ass like Mās softened looking at that pathetic face, sad and eager eyes of shame and sincerity. ‘Don’t worry about it. That stud’s out for the night anyway. I’m sure he left a lot of ladies back at the club wondering what lucky Juliet their puffy-shirted Romeo stole off with. Little did they know they got ditched for a stinky mess named Ralph.’ Mās cackled at himself and Bē joined in with his own laugh, a rapid-fire stream of under-the-breath snideness: ‘hehehehehehehehehehe.’

‘Alright, enough joking around,’ said Mās, ‘let’s eat this before some

bitch sniffs it out and tries to join in the fiesta.’

Without further hesitation, the pair plowed into the packaged-to-go meal. It was a surfeit of textures and flavors. Goopy cheese, fried tortilla, over-seasoned chicken, under-seasoned rice, salty beans, fire-roasted, spicy hot, wet, dry, soft, crunchy, delicious. They polished it off in a couple seconds, never wasting time with an unnecessary lick or chew lest the other get an unfair split of the spoils. Of course, Bē’s larger mouth meant that he got a bigger share, but since he was also four times Mās’s size, the resulting distribution was equitable. — or, at least, no one was complaining.

*Rule vii: a meal shared is not worth fighting over*

After the gorge, Mās sat on his haunches, his stomach sagging on the ground like an overstuffed pink beanbag. Bē lay on his belly, his head resting in the container, obsessively licking the grease-stained styrofoam, trying to savor one more taste of a meal which was now just a memory. ‘Brä, that was amazing,’ said Mās, ‘I’m stuffed.’ Bē kept licking, unable or unwilling to offer any acknowledgment or response. Then it was too much to even keep lapping and he stopped, letting out a giant sigh.

Mās’s nose twitched. He gave Bē a knowing glance, but his partner’s eyes were unresponsive, a lifeless glaze of satisfaction. With a wink, Mās lumbered around the surrounding trash and from a plastic bag dug open another container. Steam billowed out revealing three large pillows of fried dough, which Mās immediately (ignoring his distended belly) plowed into. He was just taking a second bite when Bē appeared, wolfing with abandon. In the final fleeting moments of their meal, the two enjoyed an extra bit of true happiness, safe with friend, ecstasy in a shared dessert of warm pastry and plastic packets, the latter expertly discarded by dexterous tongues but not before releasing their unexpected treasures of golden sweetness.

## Chapter 2

### Escape

Bē and Mās cruised the city, searching for a place to sleep. They had been on the streets for a week, and in that time had not spent more than one night in the same location. It wasn't too cold yet so staying outdoors was bearable but there was no safety — someone always coming around to touch you, catch you, befriend you, feed you, beat you, chase you. There was no privacy, it was like humans and their crappy noses could somehow sniff you out no matter how well hidden you tried to be. Mās was wary of everyone, unwilling to risk a friendship or the possibility of a home for fear that it could be a trick, a one-way trip to the *Shēltar*. Bē, of course, was not so suspicious, but Mās was wiser and tougher, he'd had experience with the world that Bē couldn't imagine. For all he knew, Mās might have been younger than Bē but the bigger dog trusted the little guy like an older brother and a mentor.

Back in the alley, Bē had suggested spending the night next to the drunk. The view from the streets was blocked by dumpsters and trash and shadows, and with full stomachs the thought of another long, indeterminate trek to find a bed was unappealing. Mostly, though, Bē just longed to sleep again with a person. Mās was a great companion, a great den pal, and if it was going to be just Bē and another dog, then Mās was surely the one he'd pick. But there was something different about sleeping next to a human, feeling their warmth and their love, their happiness with you. A human didn't need you, that was true. They could ignore you, or leave you, or be angry at you, or hurt you. But they would feed you, pet you, be your leader, accept you. They appreciated your loyalty, and in return offered companionship that ol' Mās just couldn't equal.

Bē was pretty sure that Mās, somewhere deep inside, felt the same way, but he sure wasn't admitting it on the outside. He wanted nothing

to do with the passed out man. First off, he was a mess, and second he didn't seem like the kind of person who would know how to take care of a pet. 'Even if he took us in, he'd probably get overwhelmed in a couple days, or go on a drug binge, or find something that was more interesting like a dirtbike or a hot slut. And off to the *Shēltar* we'd go.' Bē began to protest that you couldn't tell what kind of pet owner a person would be by their worst state, that most of the people he'd known had been good and even the best — Mr. Krüzēn — had moments of irresponsibility. But Mās cut him off, explaining to him that he didn't know what the world was like. It was full of assholes and mean motherfuckers, evil and indifference. Those who were caring and loving were rare indeed, and Bē had just been lucky that he hadn't seen that yet.

'Humans would say you've been sheltered. And you have. But I say it's because you haven't been *Shēltared*. That's where you really learn how horrible people can be. Stuck in a cage, waiting for someone to pick you. Hoping somehow your chihuahua ass looks better than the hundred others filling up the place. Hoping that something special didn't just come in to distract everyone from your averageness. Like a Jack Russell or a pug or a goddamn labradoodle. Hoping that you don't disappear into the crowd for too long, because after a while they take you away and put you out of your misery. Because they know how horrible that place is, and even they can't stand the thought of you sticking it out in there forever.

'But if you try to make yourself stand out, so you don't just get lost in the noise, you might just create more problems. They got labels for all of 'em, like they're diseases, sicknesses to avoid. Act excited and you're "high energy." Act chill and you're "lethargic." Bark to get their attention and they worry that you're "too loud." Try not to make a big scene and you're "too shy." Put on your cute eyes and they call you "sickly." Better not be grumpy because you'll get tagged as "aggressive" and at that point you might as well be dead. And if you're sick of it all and just act yourself they say you're "inadequately socialized."

'Then maybe you get lucky and someone takes you home. Think you've got it made, right? Gonna live out your life happy and well-fed and loved. Get to have people who pet you and maybe some other dog friends to play with. Wrong. WRONG. Your new "family" is probably fucked up in some way. Like your new home is actually a tipped over garbage can in the backyard that you get chained to. You're just forgotten and you never see anybody and if you're lucky some food gets tossed to you every few days. You're tiny and can't handle the cold or the heat

but nobody cares. And then someone rats on your “family,” and the next thing you know you’re heading back to the *Shēltar*. Or maybe they got you for little, lonely Alberto. But it turns out Alberto isn’t so lonely, and he gets tired of walking you and taking care of you. And his parents didn’t get a dog for them to look after. Or maybe the family already has a dog, a dog which hates you, which hates everything. A mean sonofabitch that is a menace to society. But the family’s had Big Blü for years and they sure aren’t getting rid of him. So guess who’s got to go?

‘It doesn’t help that for a little guy like myself, a lot of people don’t realize that what they really looking for is a cat. Something small and soft and cuddly. Something you can ignore for weeks and will somehow still be hanging around, rubbing up against your leg like nothing happened. They think they want personality but once they get me they realize they’d mistaken aloofness for personality. You can project whatever personality you want on a cat. With us dogs, that ain’t possible; like it or not, we assert ourselves. No sir, Dō, all they really want is a cat that won’t crap inside the house and tear up the furniture.

‘So what’s a guy like me supposed to do? I can’t change the fact that I’m a dog. I can’t help it if the *Shēltar*’s got too many of my breed. But the real problem is people. They’re just naturally bad inside. Even when they’re trying to do good most of ’em will do you wrong. It don’t hurt them none to just throw you aside. But they don’t see how it hurts us. I’m telling you the truth, Dō, we’re better off out here, hiding out and scragging for food, than we are fooling around with some party boy who’ll probably make our lives much, much worse.’

It pained Bē horribly, but he was sure that Mās was right. The *Shēltar* sounded like an awful place and he really had to be careful not to get sent there. Bē had to trust Mās — he’d kept them safe and alive this long. As usual, Bē was being too optimistic, seeing a loving human and avoiding the warning signs. So now he was following Mās, putting the thought of cuddling up with a person out of his head, trying to stay focused on surviving and sticking with his friend.

Mās was taking them away from the city center, out into a residential area. For the past week, they had stayed within the downtown, thinking that the tall buildings, endless alleys, busy people, and unseen detritus would give them cover. Plus, this was the place that they knew best. It was where Mr. Krüzēn had lived, where he had taken them out on walks and bathroom breaks. Sure, in their time with him they had only ventured out a couple of blocks at most, but the surroundings were comfortable and even in their little trips they noticed how much food

got left behind by people rushing, dieting, or uninterested in carrying around a half-eaten, unrefrigerated meal until they made it back home that evening. The soft economy meant there were bound to be a few dilapidated buildings, ignored eyesores perfect to hide out in. What they didn't count on was that the area was already full of other beings trying to get by: bums and addicts, dog packs and cat packs and rat packs, hoard dumps and clandestine businesses, people looking for sex, looking for drugs, waiting to die, or waiting to kill. Anyplace that appeared not to be occupied probably actually was and when its denizens found some strange mutts in there they weren't interested in keeping them around for pets. Other dogs were just as wary of strangers (human or canine) as Mās was, and the clashing of similar attitudes made any kind of amicable coexistence impossible. Since the place was already filled with the hungry and desperate, almost all of the discarded food was snatched up before they even had a chance. And if they did happen to come across any morsel in the garbage or gutter or forgotten on a bench, some starving beast — angrier and nastier than the boys (Bē's menacing growl useless without the size or bite to follow it up) — was likely to appear out of nowhere to steal it from them.

Another unexpected difficulty was being noticed. Despite what Mās expected, people in the area actually did remember the pair from the walks Mr. Krüzēn would take them on. All of those people who looked so busy and preoccupied, or who would look away awkwardly trying to avoid acknowledging an old man's disability, apparently a number of them were paying enough attention to be able to recognize the dogs when they were sneaking around on their own. Off-leash dogs certainly get attention, extra if they have tags, and if the person thinks they know the dog, then a full-on extended doghunt might ensue. Mās actually considered Bē to be the primary blame for this, as he was the one with the distinctive looks. Mās was just another chihuahua — for sure, the somewhat rare all-black, but otherwise just the same old bug-eyes, pointy beak, and eager annoyance that the city was inundated with. Bē on the other hand, he was one to remember. Thick tube body, achondroplasia shortened legs, AmStaff-esque square head and floppy ears, and those goddamned furnishings that made him look wiser and older than he deserved. Dark all over with a streak of white that shot a line down his snout, extended around his 'stache down to his belly and popped out for a bold appearance on each of his four paws. No matter what mood he was in — sad, angry, tired, or happy — he was a cute boy. And he had another amazing quality: the ability to wear any type of outfit or gear or

accoutrement and look cool as hell. Even now, wearing an earth-toned, dirt-stained, striped mock-turtleneck that would have made anyone else look like a pretentious bum, he came off like a struggling beat poet heading off to open-mic night at some cafe, about to blow the minds of the coffee swilling intelligentsia with erudite and dazzling spoken word. Fucking. Cool. As. Hell. Those looks were becoming something of a detriment, but Mās wouldn't ever consider them a reason to split with Bē. They were not only stronger as a pair, but they were friends. And friends stick together.

Over the past week, the only times that the two were seriously concerned with being caught were when they were being chased by people who seemed to know them from before, even if they didn't always get the names right. 'Crushing!' 'Wheelchair!' 'Short guys!' 'Brady!' 'Maize!' 'Mullet!' One guy — a bobble-headed beard hippy with cutoffs, no shirt, and a pot-leaf flag as a cape — actually knew their human names, but despite his trim look ran out of steam after half a block of trying to simultaneously sprint and call out 'B \_\_\_\_\_' and 'M \_\_\_\_'. Even when they were seemingly far away from Mr. Krüzén's place (which was locked up tight — they had checked regularly the first couple days) they would get spotted, the distance from their supposed home exacerbating the humans' concern for them and increasing the intensity of the chase. After a week of limited food and all of that forced exercise, the pair were exhausted and ready to try something new.

So Mās and Bē headed off through neighborhoods, away from the busy roads and businesses, into areas full of residential homes and apartment buildings. Mās led the way, weaving through the streets, staying in the shadows. He let his eyes guide him, preferring the more poorly lit blocks with infrequent or burned-out streetlights and unlit houses. There would be a higher likelihood of empty residences here, and though it also meant a greater chance of running into an unsavory element, he was less concerned with that than having to deal with some nosy, do-gooder household. The kind of household that would trick them with good food and a nice-looking family, make cursory efforts to find their owner (which they would of course not find), and then ship them off to the *Shēltar* as if they were doing them a favor. No, Mās and Bē would take their chances in the rougher parts of town, the places where the economy was always bad, places of sadness and isolation, where people who might get the notion to "help out" some scrappy street dogs would never venture into.

After some roundabout navigation (at one point Mās accidentally

took them to one of the richest streets in the city, full of mansions and finely manicured yards, fooled by a false dimness caused by the ridiculous width of the street including a giant greenbelt divider, the density of trees blocking the streetlamps, and the residents' pointless attempt to promote dark skies on their virtuous strip) Mās and Bē finally found an ideal spot to look for a place to stay. It was a dark neighborhood, so dark you might think the power had gone out (with dark skies to boot!). Even under moonlight it was hard to make anything out, but as they passed through they could see treeless yards of dirt and weeds and concrete, yards surrounded with chainlink, yards filled with children's toys and TVs and trash and vehicles. So many vehicles. Old beaters, old beaters with flat tires, old beaters on blocks, old beaters half-disassembled, giant trucks, rickety custom vans, and the occasional pimped-up ride, lifted and polished, paint gleaming and rims sparkling, somehow finding light to call attention to itself in the darkness. Mās looked for empty yards, places that appeared un-lived-in. Finding one, they'd quietly go up and inspect, looking for signs of life, means of entry. More than once they were prompted to sprint away by the barking of a backyard dog, and finally, after one of these incidences, they turned a corner to find a street that appeared to be completely abandoned.

The street had no cars parked along it. More than half of the lots were empty or piles of rubble from a burnt-down or torn-down home. Far down at the other end of the street things disappeared into blackness, a nothingness even greater than they'd experienced all night. Bē, who'd been quiet for almost the entire journey, trusting his partner's wayfinding, finally had the urge to speak up.

'Mās, I'm getting kind of scared. Maybe we should go back.'

'Sssh, Dō. This is perfect. There's nothing to be scared of, because there's nothing out here.'

'But I'm getting so scared.'

'Listen, you wanna go back? Be my guest. I'm going to find someplace to sleep.'

And with that Mās took off down the street, heading towards a tiny bungalow sitting between two bare lots. He was not as confident as he sounded, but he *was* tired and knew that bullying Bē was usually effective at getting him to join in, even reluctantly. He was a follower, not a leader. As expected, Bē dispiritedly followed after Mās, though keeping a careful distance. Mās headed up the yard to the house, not looking back, eyes focused on the large window in the front. It appeared to be glassless, and as he came up to it, his suspicions were confirmed.

He stood up on his back legs under the window, his front paws leaning against the dried and peeling clapboard. Putting his nose high up so that it cleared the windowsill, he sniffed the air. It smelled old and musty, perhaps a hint of rot. But no humans. No food, no fire, no man-stink. He couldn't really see in from here, just the dark hint of a ceiling. He got down and turned around, looking for Bē. The bigger dog was down at the edge of the yard, his barely discernible silhouette looking like it was poised to run away at a moment's notice.

Mās hissed at his partner. 'Come on! Get up here Brä. This place is empty.' Bē didn't appear to be making any movement towards the house. Mās took a step towards him and said with finality, 'Stay there if you want. I'm going in. I'm tired and I don't want to spend all night waiting on you.' The little dog turned around and after a slight pause to gather his courage, leapt up and onto the sill, then hopped down into the house.

Seeing his friend disappear into the window, Bē was left no choice. If he was so scared before he was terrified now, and he tore off towards the house, his backside bobbing while his hind legs beat an uneven gait. When he got to the window he took a small adjusting skip-step and, energized by adrenaline and fear, leapt up towards the window, completely clearing the sill and landing with a short slide inside the dark house. It was too dark to see and he began to panic, turning his head and sniffing and calling out to his friend.

'I'm over here,' said Mās. It was somewhere off to the right. He pointed his snout and caught a whiff of his friend but mostly an unfamiliar odor that smelled old and dusty. 'There's a couch over here, Dō. Come on up and we'll go to sleep. We can look around tomorrow when it's light.'

Bē let his ears and nose lead him, carefully padding over to Mās. 'Are you sure it's okay? Maybe we should check around some more?'

'Trust me — it's fine. My nose is better than yours, remember? There ain't nothin' here. Just come up here and cuddle up so we can go to sleep.'

Bē found the edge of the couch and hopped up. He curled around Mās and buried his snout in the other dog's belly, quickly drifting away. Mās was finding it hard to sleep. Bē's breathing was nice and warm, but also annoying against his lightly furred belly. The big guy seemed to be asleep, but he was probably just tubing. Mās felt the urge to move someplace where he wasn't being steamed all over. He thought of the *Den Rules*:

*Rule ii: the first to fall asleep sleeps on the bottom*

*Rule iv: comfort matters only for those not yet asleep*

Mās let out a little sigh and just slightly adjusted himself, burrowing his own nose into Bē's fur. It didn't matter. He was just happy they had made it through the night safe and together. He was so tired he didn't care where Bē was breathing, just as long as the big lug didn't start licking...

## Chapter 3

### Goodnight

Bē and Mās are in the land of dreams. As they have for the past week, they both dream about the same thing: Mr. Krüzēn. It may sound like some psychic connection, or an indication of their deep, brotherly bond, or perhaps a statistical anomaly pointing to the strange coincidences of the universe. Rather, perhaps not so surprisingly, it is the result not of something mystical but rather a practical attempt by their traumatized minds to make sense of their lives' recent upheavals. Even for Mās, the events of the past few days have been a particularly and continually frightening nightmare, and in an attempt to understand how they ended up here, to compensate for their anguish, and to create an alternative, preferred existence, the two return to their happy and peaceful lives with the old man.

Bē was reliving his favorite time with Mr. Krüzēn: their daily walks. The routine leading up to them was well established, and process took almost exactly ten minutes before they were able to get out of the door, but nonetheless the minute it started Bē would lose his shit and start running around the apartment as if he were chasing an erratic ghost. It did not matter what he was doing right before that moment — eating, gnawing on a bone, or (most likely) catatonic tubing — his entire being would be consumed with the idea of going on a walk, and with energy filling his body and mind but unable to be properly utilized while Mr. Krüzēn prepared things, Bē's only outlet was to excitedly run to the door, excitedly run to his owner, sit expectantly, a millisecond later excitedly run to Mās (who was patiently waiting, coolly ignoring Bē's antics), bark, excitedly wag his tail, excitedly run around at nothing, bark some more, lose his breath, shake his tongue, hop around shaking and prancing, and unable to stop do it all over again and again and again.

All of this was precipitated by Mr. Krüzēn pulling back his sleeve and looking at his trusty Timex and saying, ‘Well, it’s three o’clock. Guess it’s time to take you fellas out for a walk.’ While Bē stirred up a whirlwind, Mr. Krüzēn would put down his crossword puzzle or paperback, delicately pick up the remote and turn off the 24-hour news station running on the TV, make sure that his green-tinted glass (same glass every day) was centered on its coaster, and with an unstable hand move his chair’s joystick so that he would turn and begin the journey from the living room to the kitchen. Upon reaching the counter (Bē has completed seven cycles during all of this), Mr. Krüzēn would open the drawer and pull out two leashes, two harnesses, and a container of poop bags, carefully placing them on the countertop (four cycles). He would easily place one harness on Mās (two cycles) who, in almost direct antithesis to Bē, would proceed to lay down and wait out the rest of the process. Next was Bē’s turn to get into his harness, always the longest step in the entire routine because of his inability to sit still and Mr. Krüzēn’s limited mobility. It would involve many truncated maneuvers, usually including a moment where Bē would run around with the harness half-attached and the old man firmly saying (but not yelling, he never yelled) something like, ‘Goshdarnit B\_\_\_\_\_, git over here and let me finish.’ Sheepishly understanding the tone of voice, Bē would come over and let Mr. Krüzēn finish strapping him in (twenty-five cycle equivalents). After this, the poop bags would be put in the cupholder (one cycle), the leashes securely attached to the chair (four cycles), a trip made to the back door to confirm it was locked (two cycles), up to the front door to get a coat and a hat (six cycles), the poop scooper tested and hung on the chair (two cycles), the front door opened (one cycle). Finally, Mr. Krüzēn would call over the dogs and hook them to the leashes, at which point, like a switch was flipped, Bē’s mind would clear and he would be obedient and controlled, ready with Mās to follow his master for a walk around the neighborhood.

While dreaming this memory, Bē has been twitching and making quiet barks that sound breathless and satisfied. These physical manifestations of the dream are jostling Mās, but he doesn’t waken. Mās himself is unmoving, lost in his own favorite memory of Mr. Krüzēn. He is sitting on the man’s lap, one hand scratching his back while the other holds a meaty rib bone that Mās is gnawing on. On the first Thursday of every month, Mr. Krüzēn would get a rib plate from Lil’ Smokies, spreading the meal across four dinners and collecting the ribs in a plastic bag, treating the dogs to a long-awaited delicacy after polishing things off

Sunday afternoon. Bē would get possessive about his bones and would be left alone to chew his couple or three alone on the couch. But Mās liked Mr. Krüzēn to hold his, to remind him of the rare type of person his owner was. One to be trusted, who would not just give a bone but would never take it away, who would wait patiently while Mās slowly worked his way through it. Bē would polish off all of his in less than ten minutes and then tube out in exhaustion, while Mās would take an hour or two, enjoying special time with that wonderful man. While Mās worked, Mr. Krüzēn would watch TV and complain about the world, occasionally moving his rubbing hand down to Mās' hind paws, massaging the fur and pads gently, longingly. Mās hated having his paws touched (his freakouts about getting his nails clipped were legendary) but this he tolerated because he was distracted by the deliciousness that filled his mouth, because he did not want to risk ending this enjoyable moment, but mostly because he knew Mr. Krüzēn was reminiscing about his missing legs. Mās did not know how he lost them (or if he ever had them to begin with) but he did notice how the man would rub his stumps and let his hands follow down to trace out nonexistent shins and calves, or how he would mindlessly rub his finger along the bare legs or pants in the glossy pictures of his gossip magazines. For Mās, the sacrifice only enhanced his joy.

*Rule vi: in the den, the love is shared, as is the pain*

And when he was finished with the bone, Mr. Krüzēn would allow Mās to lick his fingers, which by now were sticky and greasy after holding the meaty, saucy rib bone. Bē would lick anything, and hands were a favorite target, his tongue sneaking a swipe at all times, even at a clean hand, happy to get just a hint of some flavor, new or old, good or gross. He would do it to the point of annoyance, with Mr. Krüzēn having to hold his head away to prevent the dog from lapping open an ulcer in his thin skin. Mās generally did not find licking particularly enjoyable — especially a human's skin — but the time spent cleaning up the residue of the rib feast was a rare exception. It was not unusual to find him acting like Bē, tonguing at spots already cleaned and flavorless, enjoying the repetition, as if hoping to delay its halt eternally. And Mr. Krüzēn would similarly accept that which from Bē would be so vexing, allowing the private little experience to extend just a bit longer.

Bē has gone on dozens of walks, walks with Mās, walks alone, walks in the cold, in the heat, full of smells and new friends and familiar sights.

But now Bē has shifted into a similarly wonderful world of treats. But, unlike Mās, for Bē the pleasure is not in forming a trusting bond (for he has known nothing else) but in the variety and tastiness of the morsels that would get passed his way. Mr. Krüzēn gets a small bowl of mixed nuts, Bē gets a single salty almond (crunch crunch). Mr. Krüzēn eats a microwave dinner, Bē gets a single overcooked pea (squish mish). Mr. Krüzēn pulls out a few Doritos — still crisp thanks to a tightly rolled bag and Chip-Savr clip — for his cheese-and-mayo half-sandwich lunch, Bē gets a single corner crumb (orange crunch snunch). Mr. Krüzēn gets a glass of ice and Bē gets a single cold crunch (crach crach). Mr. Krüzēn eats a handful of his neighbor Ginny’s homemade cereal glop, Bē gets a single crescent of overseasoned, hard-as-a-rock rye chip (crunch crunch crunch crunch...crunch crunch crunch). So many flavors and textures, all throughout the day. Always the tiniest morsels but Bē didn’t mind, because there was always more to come. A bit of potted meat, or a drop of sweet tea, or a lick of flavor crystals. Or, if he was real lucky, his favorite: stringy cheese. Upon hearing that distinctive screech of the single-serve package being opened, Bē and Mās would line up patiently at Mr. Krüzēn’s chair, watching eagerly as he separated a small string for himself, then pulled off the thinnest wisp of cheese — so thin it floated upwards with the air currents, defying gravity like a delicate feather — and passed it to whoever’s turn it was, the dog chawing repeatedly at the tendril with great gusto as if it did not disappear into insubstantiality the moment it touched the mouth. With his engineer’s precision and Bē’s mutable dream logic, Mr. Krüzēn was making the single stick of cheese last for eternity, endlessly tearing off strips for the three to share.

Mās had made a bad turn, following an anti-narrative down a path of inevitability, and now found himself staring at Mr. Krüzēn, that final memory, slumped and unmoving, staring at the master with fear and apprehension. His chair has taken a final quick twitchy turn before stopping, and Mās is staring at him, waiting for him to move, waiting for him to pull his chin up and smile. Staring at his eyes, open and grey, waiting for one more snide wink, one more caring glance. Mās barks at him, and again. Bē is barking too. Mr. Krüzēn is still, eyes fixed downwards on his stumps, like he can finally see the rest of his legs. Mās hops into his lap and sniffs — it is his smell but something is missing, something warm, that minty bitter odor of his breath. Bē is licking Mr. Krüzēn’s hand, whimpering. Mās nuzzles his head and he slumps further and, frightened by the sudden movement, the little dog hops down and runs

a few feet away, turning around defensive and tense. Bē is still licking the hand, faster and more desperate. Mr. Krüzēn does not move, his chair pointed in an odd direction. A cold draft passes by. The back door is open. Just a few seconds ago (or was it minutes? or hours? Mās is not sure how long he has been waiting for him to move) Mr. Krüzēn had unlocked the door and opened it. He never used that door. It was always locked, always closed. He had opened it and Bē thought maybe they were going out, but there were no leashes, no harnesses. He was confused. Mās too. He had opened the door and turned around and looked at them, barely able to talk. 'I'm sorry guys, this is it. You better get out of here.' Bē is looking out the door, he's never seen out that way before. Mās is staring at the master. He doesn't understand. 'You can't stay here.' Mr. Krüzēn sounds like he's choking. 'If they get you they'll take you away.' Another labored breath. He reaches back towards Bē, tries to form a word: 'kkkkkaa.' Then his hand collapses on the joystick and the chair jerks away to its final resting place.

Mās is whining, small squeaks emanating in small bursts from his nostrils. He sounds like panic and fear. Bē does not wake, but the sound of his crying friend fills his dream, and he retreats to a point of safety and comfort. He is in the apartment and there is Mr. Krüzēn, but his hair is fuller and he seems bigger, straighter. He is smiling at Bē, looking pleased. Bē is sitting on the couch which seems giant and he feels so small. He lays his head down sideways onto a furry warmth and then something pulls at his face, wet and course. He looks up and sees her, tall and regal and looking down at him with love. She is beautiful. Brown and black and strong. She licks him again and he lays back down and rests his eyes. He feels so small, so safe. Bē is resting and then there is a noise and he looks up and Mr. Krüzēn talking with someone at the door. He seems angry. Bē has waited too long. He didn't get out in time and now there is no escape. The door is wide open and Mr. Krüzēn is yelling after two men who are rushing in, towards Bē. They are a blur. Bē winces and then he feels an emptiness, a lack, cold. He opens his eyes and the men are dragging her away, muzzled and noosed. She is fighting, twisting her head, dragging her nails. But they are stronger. They are out the door and Bē runs after her, slipping on the wood floor. He is almost out after them when he lifts up in the air, flying and writhing. Mr. Krüzēn is holding him up, hugging him. He is crying. 'I'm sorry, B\_\_\_\_, I'm so sorry.' Bē struggles in Mr. Krüzēn's arms, straining to look out the door, desperate to get free. He tries to bark but Mr. Krüzēn has him so tight he can barely breathe. He watches with desperation and

fear as she is dragged into the van, white and red, blurring as it pulls away. Bē is pulling, angling to see, to catch one last glimpse of her as a steady patter of hot tears fill his eyes.

## Chapter 4

### Dog Chase

It was bright and cool when Mās woke, the sun streaming onto his face through the glassless window. He yawned and squinted at the light, then, turning to look at Bē, nearly jumped out of his fur. The big guy was laying perfectly still, breathing slow, like he was asleep, but his eyes were wide open, staring at Mās like a freakish gargoyle standing watch.

‘Sheesh, Dō, what have I told you about looking at me like that? It’s freaky as hell.’

Bē raised his eyebrows and looked down but said nothing.

‘Well, you should have got me up when you woke. It’s already light out and we need to make sure nobody can find us in here.’

‘I’m not awake,’ said Bē, ‘I’m just tubing.’

‘You and your tubing. You act as though you were asleep but you’re obviously not.’ Mās stood up and stretched his little back. ‘You need to quit being so lazy and remember that we ain’t got time to be resting. Until we’re sure it’s safe we got keep alert. Otherwise someone’s gonna catch us. Someone bad.’

Unmoving, Bē stared blankly at Mās and let out a gigantic sigh.

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘I had a bad dream,’ Bē said morosely.

‘Are you serious? What do you want, a pat pat? I’ll let you in on a secret. You ain’t the only one having a hard time with the dreams. But do you see me moping around? Asking for sympathy? No sir. You sit around and feel sorry for yourself and pretty soon you’ll be sitting around in the *Shēltar*. And then you’ll really know what it means to feel sorry for yourself.’ Mās hopped down and turned to Bē. ‘Come on, time to get up. Let’s look around and then find something to eat. That’ll get your mind off of slumberland.’

Bē sighed again and stood up. With a few mighty twists, he shook himself, making a racket with his collar and tags. The old couch wobbled and creaked unsteadily. He gingerly stepped off onto the hard ground. He took a big stretch, first pushing his front paws out and arching his back, and then straightening out and letting hind legs drag stiffly behind. He looked around. The floor was hard concrete, cold and streaked with old glue and bits of multicolored carpet pad. Around the perimeter there were tack strips, and Bē noted they were lucky they didn't step on them when they were creeping in the dark the night before. The walls were dry and yellowed, removed picture frames memorialized with shadowed rectangles. None of the doorframes actually had doors, and Bē could see through to the back of the house. It looked bare all the way through. The couch they had slept on was the only piece of furniture in the room, probably the only one in the entire place, but he wasn't surprised that nobody had taken it. The upholstery was half gone and what was left was shredded so badly it was hard to tell what its color or pattern was. He and Mās had slept on the only cushion that was left, and that appeared to be mostly stained foam and zipper. Looking at it now it sure didn't look comfortable, but it certainly seemed fine the previous night.

Behind the couch, some letters had been spraypainted on the fireplace brick in bright green. Two lines that began with "N" and "B." Bē asked Mās what it said. The chihuahua, who was digging through some trash in the corner, looked up at them for a second. 'Black dog,' he said, then turned back to the pile.

'Hmmp,' Bē said to himself, and then started walking towards one of the doorways.

'Where you goin?', asked Mās.

'I was just going to check the place out. See that it was safe around here, like you said.'

'We should stick together, in case something happens,' said Mās. He kicked at the trash he was digging through. 'There ain't nothing in here anyway, not even bugs. That means we probably ain't gonna find food.' He ran over in front of Bē, taking the lead through the doorway. 'All right, let's see what this place looks like.'

It didn't take them long to explore the rest of the house. Every existing room including the kitchen had been completely stripped, but the most distinctive thing about the place was that its entire back half was missing. There was a concrete pad but the framing and roof just ended, bits of insulation and shingle and wire hanging off as if the rear section

had been ripped off. When Bē had originally looked through the doorway and seen empty rooms, he didn't realize that many of those rooms literally were not there. Mās noted that when it got colder this place was going to be no good, so they would still need to keep their eye out for better shelter. But for now it was actually pretty nice, seeing how it was unlikely that anyone else would want to compete for something barely better than living outdoors.

After checking out the half-house, Bē had his doubts about its suitability, but he trusted his wiser friend and thought he could give it a few more nights. Mās said they should see what kind of food they could find around the area, and the pair headed out the back opening around the house and to the street. The mention of grub combined with the bit of walking gave Bē the urge and he started sniffing around the front yard, looking for someplace to squat.

'Whadda you think yer doin'?', Mās said like a curmudgeon who had caught the neighbor's dog shitting on his grass.

'I just gotta go,' said Bē.

'Come on, not here! This is our yard! And anyway, if someone finds fresh crap they may start snooping around or send out the dogcatchers. Just hold it a bit while we go down the street.'

'Ooooooh.' Bē let out a pained whimper. It had started moving and now it hurt to hold it in. He tried to walk but his hind legs went all bowed and he found himself hopping more than stepping, awkwardly bouncing out of the yard and into the street. 'Uuuuuuhhhhh.' His butt was quivering, fighting against his efforts to keep it closed up. Mās began to crack up and Bē just tried to ignore him and focus on getting down the road. To move and not to move. Bē's little dog brain had a hard enough time doing two things at once, and when they were opposites it was almost impossible. He tried to run but just lifting his back leg set his ass loose and he barely caught it in time before making a mess. He could still hear Mās behind him, laughing like a midget hyena. Bē was hurting and mad, forcing himself forward through sheer force of will. His teeth were bared, his tongue flapping, his legs squishy and useless like rubber. He was panting uncontrollably. He couldn't make it any further. 'Screw this,' he grumbled to himself. He didn't care how far away he was from their "house." That place sucked anyway. He took a sharp tack onto the curb and didn't even bother trying to make it onto the dirt before squatting and dropping a huge, satisfying load.

Upon finishing, Bē's mood immediately improved. He was still panting but he felt like running, running forever. He took off and ran donuts

in the middle of the street, releasing his pent up energy like his ass was on fire. Eventually he collapsed onto his side, exhausted, his head resting on the asphalt in full side-tube mode. Mās sauntered up, chuckling.

‘Oh boy, you should’ve seen yourself! You were moving like you had a pineapple up your ass and from the looks of that pile over there, I think you might have.’ The little dog starting giggling uncontrollably again.

‘It’s not funny. My belly hurts and I did it too close to the house.’ Bē sounded overcome with emotion. His eyes and his whiskers bent to from a sad face, but lying on his side with his head almost upside down, he looked pathetic. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Mās stopped laughing and walked up to Bē. ‘Don’t worry about it, Dō. Shit happens, right?’ He gave a little half giggle and then stopped himself. ‘Seriously, it’s not a big deal. You made it almost down to the end of the block. And besides the way that thing stinks, it may actually keep people away. Beans and cheese: a killer combo.’

‘You ate that stuff, too.’ Bē was starting to sound a little more upbeat.

‘I know. And I’m not lookin’ forward to my turn at the New Mexican cleanse.’

Bē started giggling breathily and got up on his feet, rested and cheery. Pleased with himself for bringing his friend’s mood back up, Mās gave Bē a little side tap and pranced into the lead. The two headed down to the end of the block, where the road came to a dead end. What at night seemed like a giant emptiness was actually a broad culvert with steep sides, snaking an angled path from the mountains down towards the river. Access was blocked by a tall cyclone fence but even in their immediate view there were numerous breaches through which the little fellas could easily pass through. In front of the fence, paralleling it in both directions, was a paved recreational trail. Looking down its length, the dogs could see the dark line of asphalt disappear into the distance, a utilitarian strip surrounded by weeds and dirt, chainlink and concrete, offering bland scenery in browns and greys that was meant to be passed through, ignored, forgotten.

Up towards the mountains, a sparkle appeared, flashing and bearing down the path with great speed. Curious but apprehensive, Mās and Bē hid behind a bush and watched as the speck grew larger, its indistinct flashes resolving into clashing blocks of colors, piss yellow and neon green and turquoise, two dark eyes floating within them. Pumping, pumping, it flew towards them, a tail of dust and debris rising behind it. Then it passed, silent and fleeting, and in that brief moment the boys got a glimpse of the beast’s true form: a cyclist, situated such that half its

body extended beyond the front wheel, legs spinning in a blur. Bē and Mās were forced to turn and shut their eyes from the windblown wake of dirt and trash. When it was safe to open them again, the racer was again but a speck, soon to vanish beyond the horizon.

‘That was so scary,’ said Bē.

‘Oh, gimme a break, Dō. This is perfect.’ Mās was standing out on the path, looking of in the direction of the disappearing cyclist. ‘People who go on these trails don’t want anything to do with dogs. They’ll try to avoid or ignore us. They’ve got other things to concern themselves with, like exercise, or not gettin’ bit. It’ll be safer along here than in the streets. We just gotta keep an eye out so we’s don’t get run over. And it’ll be easier to find our way back.’ Mās walked over to a pole and lifted his leg, marking the spot for future reference.

Once again, Bē had to put aside his own misgivings. What Mās said seemed to make sense, even if Bē’s instincts told him otherwise. The pair started off down towards the river, putting the city’s big buildings and known problems to their backs. Over the next few hours, they slowly made their way down the trail. They had to keep a watch out for riders and runners, finding shrubs or side trails to hide in while they passed. Despite their attempts to be remain unseen, the recreationalists would often stare at them while passing, but only one person actually made the effort to try to make contact with them. An old whitehead who was power-walking in a pastel track suit and huge, square sunglasses turned down the same entrance path that the two had secreted themselves along. At first it looked like this was just her normal path home, but she stopped her bent arm strut and started creeping around looking for them, calling out aimlessly with a kindly voice. Mās knew that old ladies don’t take dogs off the street unless they are pet hoarders or nutcases, and told Bē to prepare scare her off (he could put on quite a ferocious performance). It turned out to be unnecessary as she gave up after not much effort and went back to the trail to continue her hustle with serious concentration.

As they continued along, the boys were able to find a few scraps of food to munch on: crumbs left at the bottom of a discarded chip bag, dried glaze on the lid of an empty donut box, the insides of a fast-food taco inside a wrapper inside of a bag — probably the result of some pot-head snacking while high and not realizing that the shell he was munching on had emptied itself during consumption. (Mās was not sure that eating that on top of last night’s selection was the best idea — at that point he had finally taken his deuce and it was as hot and awful as ex-

pected — but beggars can't be choosers.) Other than searching for these rare morsels, the path was rather monotonous. Out in front of them, the green haze of the river trees that marked the trail's end never seemed to get any closer, and the only thing that indicated that they were making any forward progress was the storm culvert, which had merged with a few tributaries along the way and was now big enough to hold a river: deep, wide, and completely dry. When the sun had pulled across mid-day Mās considered turning them back, worried about possible interruptions on their return to their new home. There was bound to be an afternoon wave of exercisers that they would have to deal with if they waited too long. They were passing a fork in the trail when Bē called out to Mās. The little dog turned around to see his partner still as a statue, head cocked, looking down the intersecting path.

'Do you hear that?,' said Bē, 'I think I hear other dogs.'

Mās came up beside and aimed his large ears in the same direction. He could hear the faint sounds of barking. It wasn't fighting barks, or scared, or lonely, or hungry. They were happy barks. Playful barks. It sounded like a lot of dogs.

'They're having fun, Mās. Can we go look?'

'I don't think that's a good idea. It'll probably only mean trouble for us.' Mās tried to sound convincing, but there was a tinge of doubt. His mind filled with thoughts of having a good time, playing around — it was incredibly enticing after the hellish week they'd been through.

Bē tried his best to make a hard sell, but he wasn't quick or smart like Mās. The best he could come up with was, 'Maybe there's some food we can get. All those dogs got to eat.' Mās gave him a funny look, and Bē felt the urge to explain some more. 'That isn't the sound of hungry dogs. Those dogs have plenty of food. There's bound to be extra for us.'

Mās thought about it. Bē was onto something with the food, even if his argument was as persuasive as a rabid mutt dowsing for water. There might be something down there, and though it was doubtful they could sneak anything away, it was probably worth at least a look. 'Alright,' he said, 'I guess we can go take a peek. We need to be careful, though, okay Dō?'

'Alright!,' said Bē, and without waiting for Mās he took off in a trot down the path. Mās quickly ran up to keep pace, warily looking out ahead for any sign of the sources of the noise. The wind shifted slightly and Mās could smell them too, a faint but unmistakable odor of well-groomed dogs. These were no street curs, they were family pets and companions, dogs with human owners, masters. Mās felt a tinge of con-

nection, and envy.

The path they were following was lined on both sides with high wooden planks, and the barking was getting louder, reflecting all around them. As they rounded a curve the barricade on one side ended suddenly and before they had a chance to pull back and hide they got a view of a giant park, green and lush, shaded with giant trees that rose high into the sky. And at the edge, closest to them, there was a large fenced-off area, filled with dogs and humans. Dogs of all sizes and colors were running around, playing with each other, playing with their owners, leashed and unleashed, barking, panting, enjoying themselves. There were frisbees and balls and chew toys, chased and fought over and shared. There was jumping and sprinting, shaking and scratching, laying down in exhaustion. The two outsiders were captivated, but Mās quickly snapped out of it and ran back behind the barrier, crouching to keep out of sight.

‘Hey Dō, get back here. Someone will see you.’

Bē was transfixed, immobile. He was staring at the scene in front of him full of anticipation and desire. Mās called to him again, but he was not hearing. Suddenly, a big, puffy golden retriever standing by the tall chainlink fence turned towards Bē and made eye contact, staring for a second before throwing its head back with a bark of acknowledgment. With this recognition, Bē was released from his frozen state and took off at a full run towards his caller, unable to control himself from chasing after the happiness and excitement and camaraderie that lay before him. Mās panicked and started after Bē, but pulled up after a few steps, unsure of what he could do or where things were headed. He watched as Bē reached the fence, he and the retriever hopping against it with their front paws and making a giant ruckus. They both stepped back to the ground and began sniffing one another, Bē whimpering like crazy because he couldn’t get inside, in *there* where the fun was, where his new friend was. He was pacing back and forth, digging at the ground with his front paws trying to find a way under the chainlink. He was so focused on breaking through that he didn’t notice the two humans approaching him from his side of the fence.

‘Look, Jo, he’s got tags,’ said the burly one. The voice was husky and fearless. Broad shoulders and a thick body covered in red plaid under denim. High cheekbones and intense eyes sat below a dense helmet of curls that extended just far enough to cover the neck.

‘Here, boy,’ said Jo, who was petite and tense, sporting a leather jacket and spiked hair that was dyed and shaved around the sides.

‘Where’s your owner?’ Jo looked around, trying to see if Bē was with anyone, and spotted Mās. ‘Hey Mick, over there. It’s another one. Looking right at us. I’ll bet they’re together.’

Mās had seen the two humans creeping up to Bē, and was slowly moving forward, preparing a sneak attack to help Bē escape. When the tinier one with the green hair looked at him and pointed, he saw that his element of surprise was gone, and he started barking like mad, running back and forth, trying to get Bē’s attention, but Bē was oblivious. He pawed at a single spot at the intersection of the ground and the fence, tearing a bare spot in the grass, full of desperation and adrenaline. The retriever ran back and forth in front of him, and then retreated. Bē looked up to see a tall man pulling the dog away, eyeing Bē with misgiving. ‘Come on Rūf,’ he said, ‘we don’t know him.’ The man looked up at something behind Bē, but Bē didn’t notice, the only thing he saw was his new pal being dragged away and with a surge of panic started to scratch and the ground with even greater fury. Bē looked up again and now he couldn’t find Rūf or his owner, they had disappeared into the crowd. He looked back and forth with confusion, whimpering and barking in the direction he had last seen them. His mind was a scramble, he had to get through this fence. He started digging again, angry at the ground. He got his paw under one of the links and was tapping around when his head pulled back and his neck went stiff.

‘Got him!’ said Mick triumphantly. Bē was pulled away from the fence, writhing, trying to get free and back to his digging. Mick’s grip was strong though, and Bē was just flopping uselessly, like a fish held up at the end of the line. ‘Jo! Go round up the crew and get the wagon. We need to get this guy away from all this commotion.’ Mick stood between Bē and the fence, petting his face and reading his tags while trying to calm him with tongue clicks and soft words. Bē’s eyes were wide and wild, something Mick interpreted as him being frightened and continued to try to calm him, but Bē really just wanted to see behind the human, to catch another glimpse of the golden retriever that he’d been next to just moments ago. Mick rubbed his tube body, running a hand over his worn and stained shirt. ‘B\_\_\_\_\_, what a mess. We need to get you cleaned up. Though I have to admit: something about this dirty outfit makes you look cool as hell.’

Mās watched all of this unfolding from afar, barking and pacing, frustrated that he hadn’t done something and now his friend was caught. Bē’s back was to Mās but the little dog could see him twisting and shaking, and he knew he must be so scared. Behind, coming out of the fenced-

off area, the green-haired human appeared holding a half dozen leashes, each stretched tight and attached to a different big dog. One of them caught sight of Bē and big-plaid and lunged, starting a trend which the other dogs quickly followed, green-hair struggling to restrain their collective obsession. Bē noticed the pack and tried to run towards them himself. Mās saw the two humans leaning away from each other, pulling on their respective dogs, yelling at each other. Green-hair said something and the group pulled back and followed into the parking lot.

They're dog hoarders, Mās realized. This was getting worse by the second. big-plaid looked strong and intimidating — what could tiny Mās do against that? But he was even more scared for Bē, getting picked up so that these humans could have one more for their menagerie. Mās started to get mad, and realized this might be his last chance, while the humans were separated and their dogs removed from the immediate vicinity. He stopped pacing and, with one final large (for him) breath of resolution, broke into a run towards big-plaid and Bē. Knowing that his small size was anything but intimidating, he tried to screw his face into something friendly, masking his true intentions behind a facade of wide eyes and wagging tongue.

Mick watched the chihuahua running towards them with great excitement. He was eager and happy, a big dog smile spread across his face. Apparently the little guy's worry had eased up and now he was looking to join his friend and get his own share of loving from the Big Mick. Good for him. These were clearly a bonded pair, it was better if they could keep them together. Mick reached a free hand out to greet the dog and, at the last second, the visage of friendliness turned to spite and the tiny jaws clamped down on Mick's hand. Growling like some hell devil, the dog stayed clamped on as the hand jerked back in pain, and Mick unconsciously released the other to grab at the beast and pull it off.

Seeing that Bē was free and had run back away from big-plaid, Mās relaxed his grip and was flung aside by the human's other hand that was pulling at his snout. Still angry and with the taste of his enemy's blood in his mouth, Mās' instinct was to return to attacking the human, but seeing it scramble after Bē reminded him of his true mission. Bē was running back towards the dog park fence, oblivious to what was following him.

'Dō! What are you doing! We gotta get out of here!'

At the sound of Mās' frantic voice, Bē stopped and turned around just in time to see his hunter lunge into the air, reaching out for him like a hovering lumberjack. Bē made a quick cut and ran around the horizon-

tal human, meeting up with Mās just as it crashed into the ground and slid away from them. Bē looked at Mās with a shocked and hopeless expression. ‘What now?’ he said. ‘C’mon,’ Mās grumbled, taking off at full speed back the way they came, Bē following close behind. As they turned up the bike path, Mās stopped to look back and saw big-plaid, covered in a grass stain that ran from shoulders to heels, leaping into the open passenger window of a Subaru that had stopped in the field. Multiple dog heads were sticking out of both sides of the vehicle, a writhe of fur swirled in the back seat. Green-hair was behind the wheel, head leaning forward, grip tight. big-plaid got turned upright and showed a snarling face. An arm stuck out of the window, lowering to point straight at Mās. The station wagon’s four tires spun, kicking up grass and dirt for just a second before traction took hold and the car began to accelerate.

Mās turned and sprinted up the access trail at full speed. He flew past Bē and yelled at him to keep up as he turned onto the main path. ‘They’ve got a car. We’ve gotta get moving!’ Bē pushed to keep up with Mās, the two of them racing together in a panic. Behind them, there was a loud squeal of tires and a dark cloud of smoke lifted from the direction of the dog park, then the Subaru burst through an insubstantial metal gate and out onto the path, fishtailing and skidding, knocking down bushes as green-hair tried to maintain control. The asphalt was too narrow for the car, so it drove slanted, two tires on the paved section and two down in the dirt. The wheels in the dirt were kicking up dust and slipping, causing the vehicle to veer and bounce wildly. Green-hair was banging on the horn and flashing the high beams. All of the dogs in the car had their heads sticking out of the windows, barking like crazy, their ears and tongues flapping in the wind. big-plaid was leaning out of the window as well, shaking a fist and yelling like a banshee.

Bē and Mās did not stop to look behind them. They could hear the chasers and, despite the difficult driving conditions, they were gaining on them, the cacophony get closer and louder. Bē was slowing, his tube starting to drag. Mās was keeping up his speed, his legs a blur of motion, but a little dog can only go so fast, and he could tell it was not fast enough. This was certainly the end, he was sure of it.

The chasing car suddenly hit a patch of hard dirt and swerved into the cyclone fence, knocking off the sideview mirror and ejecting a giant spray of sparks. The dogs on that side had barely pulled their heads inside in time, and, wanting to avoid a repeat, joined the others in the opposite window. With all of the dogs and Mick leaning out of the same side, the car’s balance was thrown off and Jo fought to keep it going straight,

slamming back into the fence. Sparks poured through the open rear window and a fur-covered fleece blanket that had been laid down in the back burst into flames. Thick, acrid smoke filled the cabin and poured out of the windows. Jo was the only one whose head wasn't already outside of the vehicle, but to do so would risk severe bodily damage if the car hit the fence again, so instead tried to just deal with it by cranking the ventilation and leaning close to the windshield.

All of this was slowing down the vehicle considerably, and even though Mās and Bē were flagging, the distance between them and the chasers was being held constant, perhaps even increasing. Up ahead, however, they were rapidly approaching an exerciser who, despite making movements like he was running, was moving so slow that he almost appeared to be jogging in place. He was wearing giant over-the-ear headphones and unaware of the din behind him, and when the two dogs running past him came into his peripheral vision, he turned away in surprise and tripped over himself, landing flat on the ground.

Meanwhile, the fire in the back of the wagon grew more intense and the heat from the flames forced the dogs to retreat from it into the front seat. Jo was already struggling to see, the windshield obscured with soot and eyes irritated from the smoke. Now there was dog tail and paws and heads and bodies all over the place, and Jo was driving with only the briefest glimpses of the road. Mick, head still out the window and fist shaking, was yelling navigation instructions but with ears filled with dog fur and dogs barking Jo couldn't understand. Suddenly, Mick pulled back into the car and, yelling 'Didn't you hear me?!', shoved a bloody hand through the swarm of canines, yanking hard on the steering wheel. The car pulled sharply off of the path, barely missed the fallen runner (who was taking the opportunity of lying flat on the ground to do an impromptu plank), barreling across at an angle through bushes and into the wooden fences of homes that were built along the path. Jo was able to fight back the wheel and straighten out before they hit any houses, but in such a way that the fences were aligned with the car's centerline. Jo tried to slam on brake pedal but hit the accelerator instead, and wood planks flew in all directions as the vehicle tore through section after section, all the while everyone inside yelling or barking or coughing uncontrollably.

Mās was out of breath. Bē's body was ready to shut down. Hearing the crashing behind them, they were sure they were goners. Surprisingly, Mās was the first to stop, barely having the energy to turn around, fully expecting their chasers to be right upon them, either to crush them

underwheel or to snatch them up as captives. Instead, the car was much further back, off to the side, and wrecking property, its back windows glowing and a thick plume of black smoke pouring from it and extending into a hazy line like a crude reflection of the asphalt path. When Bē saw Mās stop his tube shut down and he immediately rolled onto his side, head sideways such that he could see the destruction proceed, albeit canted towards the vertical. The car powered through a last bit of fence and into an opening connecting the neighborhood to the path. High concrete curbs had been constructed to prevent vehicles from entering and when the tires hit these they lifted up, first the front then the rear, and the wagon sailed through the air before impaling itself a yard off the ground on thick wooden post with a “Dead End” sign.

Bē and Mās were dog tired, but after seeing the spectacular crash, Mās realized this was their chance to escape, perhaps without being noticed. Humans and dogs piled out of the burning vehicle, black-stained and stunned and struggling to breathe. Bē didn’t want to move, he had switched completely into tube mode and, having already expected to get caught, wasn’t even entertaining the possibility of getting away. Back behind them, the jogger was standing up again, scratching his head and staring slack-jawed and the burning wreck.

Mās snapped at Bē, ‘Get up! We need to get out of here.’

‘I can’t move.’ Bē was completely still.

‘Listen Brä, it’s your fault we’re in this mess. And I didn’t nearly get myself killed just so I could leave you here to give up when we’re almost free. *Get up.*’

Bē didn’t move. He didn’t even blink his eyes. Down below, big-plaid was trying to round up the dogs, who were in a tumult of anxiety and confusion. They were barking and running around and acting altogether annoying. Bē stared at them wantingly. He let out a giant sigh.

Green-hair was sitting off to the side, head in hands, staring at the ground. People from the neighborhood were walking out through their destroyed fences. Mās could tell their risk of getting caught was gone now, but he still didn’t want to hang around. He walked over to Bē, leaned down, and bit his paw. Bē sat up quickly and snapped at him. ‘See, you still have the energy to move,’ said Mās. Bē growled in response, his upper lip quivering. Mās continued: ‘We’re most of the way to the house. Let’s just get back there and then you can tube all you want.’ Bē growled some more but stood up and, giving Mās a nasty look, licked his paw a few times before starting to jog up the trail. Mās was still upset and Bē’s crap attitude was not helping. He took off running, moving in

front of Bē so that he wouldn't have to look at him, keeping his nose open for the marked pole that signaled their home street.

It was getting dark when they finally arrived at their half-house. Bē walked directly through the back hole to the couch, hopping up on the lone cushion and laying down. His eyelids immediately went heavy as he settled into a tube state. Mās, who had been stewing since they left the accident, wasn't about to let Bē just fall asleep. He got up in his face, livid. Bē's eyes opened back up, but he was staring off at nothing, seemingly trying to ignore the little dog.

'Dō, what you did today was very dangerous. I understand that you're lonely, but you can't just run after any old dog that you come across. We almost got picked up today because you can't control yourself. If I have to go back to the *Shēltar*, I don't know that I'll make it. And I'll tell you what — your pansy tubing ass wouldn't last a day in there. You need to think about that the next time you get the urge to chase some dumb mutt that you don't even know. Don't forget that I'm your friend. I'm the one who'll stick by you. Those other dogs don't give a lick about you.'

Bē turned his eyes to Mās and sighed. His upper lip was unmoving. He stood up, hopped off the couch, and slunk past Mās out towards the back.

'Where are you going?,' Mās said, 'I'm trying to have a serious conversation here.' Bē kept walking, continuing through the end of the building, out under the night sky, beyond the bare concrete slab, into the dusty yard. He lay down, facing away, his big dark head resting on his white paws. Mās looked at him with disgust. Bē just wanted to tube out rather than face reality. One of these days he was going to mess up real bad and Mās wouldn't be able to get them out of it and then he'd really be sorry. The chihuahua jumped onto the couch and curled up, trying to relax himself so that he could go to sleep. He couldn't stop his mind from running, though, and he just sat there, exhausted but wide eyed, staring into the darkness of the room.

Bē was also unable to sleep. Sad and tired, confused and frustrated, he lay under the moonlight, cold and alone. Somewhere in the depths of the neighborhood, a dog began to howl. The sound reverberated deep inside Bē, causing his chest to tighten, his soul to ache. The howling continued, and Bē found himself making soft guttural noises that he was unable to control. The baying stopped and Bē relaxed with a whimpering sigh. Head still on the ground, he looked up at the bright moon, mysterious and untouchable. The howling started again, plaintive and distant.

Suddenly, without meaning to, Bē sat up, put his head back, and joined in. He let out deep and passionate howls, sustained lamentations echoing his isolation and despondency. The other dog stopped but Bē continued unaware, singing raw and unrestrained songs of despair. Then another joined in, full of melancholy and sorrow. The other harmonized with Bē, weaving a sonic tapestry of longing and penitence, separation and connection. When they finally stopped, drained and weary, Bē and Mās turned to each other, nuzzled, and walked back to the couch where they could finally sleep in peace.

*Rule x: like bared claws and fangs, you can't sleep on anger*

## Chapter 5

### First Degree Grape

Two full days passed before Mās and Bē left the house again. They were tired, emotionally exhausted, and happy to stay in one place for more than a few hours. Mās was actually recovered after one night of good sleep, but Bē required multiple days and nights to recharge himself. Mās wanted to explore and look for food, but he knew that they needed to stick together and he worried about Bē doing something brainless if he left him alone. So he hung out in the half-house, bored, hungry, antsy, but also happy to see his friend get the rest he needed. When they lived with Mr. Krüzēn, Bē would spend at least twenty hours of the day in some sort of tube state, time spent doing one of the few things that can be done without moving the body: sleeping, resting, lazing, staring. While Mās would spend a large part of his day doing stuff or at least thinking, Bē lived primarily in shutdown mode. Of course, it was possible for him to switch into action at a moment's notice. This was seen when he had to potty, or Mr. Krüzēn was going to take them on a walk, if he detected the merest hint of food, or, occasionally, when he got the urge to take a few chews on a toy. But once these were over — and they didn't last long (even the walks were usually just a quick lap around the block) — it was back to tubing, as if the energy required to do anything was always threatening to run out. The one thing that didn't ever run out of energy was Bē's eyes. It was rare that you would catch him actually sleeping, instead it seemed that every time you looked at him his eyes were wide open, staring back at you. Mās found this resting Bē face creepy as hell, a dog body stiller than death but two eyes following you around, like one of those paintings in a haunted house (not that Mās would know about these, but if he did he would have found them equally unsettling). For a time Mās considered that he might just be an insomniac dog, except

that he hardly ever saw him yawn or act restless — or maybe that his lethargy was a manifestation of feeble-mindedness, though entertaining such a notion seemed pointless and cruel. In the end he just accepted as a fact of nature that Bē's default energy level hovered right at the edge of a coma.

Over the past week, Bē had been deprived of his daily tube quota, and Mās recognized that it would take time to replenish the deficit that had accumulated. Bē for sure slept the first night, as Mās was woken a couple times by his loud snoring (which recalled a *Den Rule* usually referring to the struggles caused by being at the bottom of a dog pile:

*Rule xiii: an unheard breath might mean death*

). Since then, Mās never saw him with his eyes closed. It didn't matter the situation, if Mās woke up in the middle of the night, or was hanging around next to the couch, or snuck a peak from behind a wall to catch the bigger dog unawares, Bē would not only have his eyes open, but would be looking directly at the chihuahua. However, besides this freakish behavior, Bē didn't acknowledge Mās at all. Mās talked to him, telling jokes or rambling out long monologues, and there would be no response (other than the ubiquitous stare). Even the loud, big-breathed sigh — his catchphrase — seemed to have disappeared, the few that were almost heard just normal exhalations misinterpreted by the oversensitive Mās.

A couple times a day Bē would get down to go to the bathroom, but he would just walk outside and return to the couch without any interaction at all. On the second day, after one potty trip, Bē misfired when hopping on the couch and failed to reach sufficient elevation, bouncing off the cushion onto his back. Not only was this the first interesting thing the dog had done in a day and a half, but it was downright hilarious, causing Mās to have a convulsion of laughing that lasted for a quarter of an hour. Bē didn't seem affected by any of this — after he fell he just got back up and made a successful jump and settled into tubing, disinterestedly watching Mās roll around on the floor. Other than the annoyance of those ever-watching eyes, Mās wasn't bothered by the inactive behavior. Bored perhaps, but he knew Bē wasn't (or didn't appear to be) acting out of rudeness or leftover anger, and that in time he'd regain the ability to turn on his energetic self.

The time came after the third night. Mās woke up at dawn alone on the couch and, in a panic, hopped up and ran out looking for Bē. His worries were put to rest when he saw Bē sniffing around the yard, chewing

on some of the wild weeds that were growing in the dirt. Turned out he was hungry and looking for something to eat. ‘So, when are we going to go get some food?’ he asked. He spoke as if the past few days hadn’t happened, as if they were living a normal domestic life and this day was just like any of the others. Mās tried to play it cool, to match Bē’s easygoing mood, but he was starving himself and with great eagerness suggested that they go out right away. Bē unhurriedly stretched and assented, and two left to search for a long-delayed meal. It was still early and the sky glowed a deep pink, though soon the sun would breach the mountains and wash out the strange, distinctive lighting into an unremarkable and ubiquitous blue.

It turned out there was a steady supply of food to be found in the immediate area around their home. There were some scraps along the recreational trail (as they’d discovered the first day), however the real treasures were to be found in the dead end streets that abutted the trail. When it was dark, these spurs — whether residential or industrial — were unwatched and forgotten, any residents that lived along them either uninterested or afraid of coming out. As a result, they attracted certain types who preferred privacy from society’s prying eyes: junkies and thieves, drunks and delinquents, prostitutes with johns, teenagers hanging about, creepers trolling the night, transients and bums venturing out from their encampments in the nearby drainage canals. During the day, when “normal” people needed to go about their business and when visibility a concern, the police would run patrols to keep the areas clear of riff-raff, picking up any stragglers and taking them in for a brief (if often undeserved) detention. But at night they left them alone, preferring to create an informal DMZ for the miscreants and unsociables that would allow them to handle their shit (which, no matter what, was going to be handled somewhere) away from most of the civilized people of the city (or, at least the ones who paid the most taxes and had the loudest voices). This created a diurnal cycle, in which the unsociables would wait until the sun set to come out to the cul-de-sacs, and then remove themselves before the light of the following day. The lack of an almanac or an alarm clock, combined with a tendency to fall into a blackout from alcohol or drugs or lack of rest, meant that the nighttime crowd usually left well before dawn to prevent the possibility of accidentally sleeping in and being caught out in the dangerous rays of daylight.

The upshot of this was that come dawn, these dead ends would be littered with the trash of their transient residents. Much of it was useless to the dogs — condoms, hypodermics, oily clothes, broken shopping

carts, broken glass, broken televisions (why a TV would be brought there in the first place was an unsolved mystery, but the fact was that they would show up with great regularity as e-litter), and other crap that humans would ascribe enough value to haul in but not enough to haul out. However, among that flotsam would inevitably be discarded bits of foodstuffs, everything from crumbs to unopened packaged snacks. It was rare that a spot used the night before didn't have some scrap to consume — a dried glob of cheese in a greasy pizza box, a little mound of spilled breakfast cereal, an unfinished can of beer — so as long as the boys could scope out which locations were being used, they were sure to never starve.

The problem was that there was a little competition for this food, not from other dogs or humans but from wild animals. Birds, raccoons, ants, the occasional alley cat — they would eventually find and pick away at the spoils such that nothing lasted more than a day. As a result, in the days that followed, Mās and Bē settled into a routine. A few times every night, the pair would sneak up and down the path, identifying which streets were being used, and then in the morning, when the dark was just beginning to ease beyond the eastern horizon, they would go out to those locations and pick through whatever was left behind. They would be home well before the sun crossed the horizon, so they would not have to worry themselves about being spotted in the daytime. There were, of course, a few before-the-crack-of-dawn exercisers who would be out on the trail, but they wore lights and thus were easy to spot and hide from, and even if their headlamps did spot four eyes peeking from the bushes, they were more interested in a quick escape so that they could complete their morning workout without getting mauled by whatever monsters lay in the darkness.

For the next few weeks, this was the life that Bē and Mās lived. Avoiding the light, staying in the house during the day, finding food, keeping each other's company. It was not a particularly exciting life, but it was relatively easy compared to what they'd been through immediately after leaving Mr. Krüzēn, and it was comfortable to settle into. Without a human owner to provide a safe space for interesting activity, the dogs quickly became content with a relaxed and undemanding companionship. Bē had plenty of time to tube and no real reason to get into trouble, and Mās was able to keep his mind preoccupied with each evening's food run. The only time there was any sense of danger was when their own street would be used by the night crowd. However, since the half-house was a ways away from the end of the road, they could easily sneak out

in the opposite direction and go through the neighborhood to look for the next street that connected with the trail. On one of these occasions it was some teenagers who had settled in at the dead end, drinking and smoking weed, talking and joking rowdily. Experience had shown that youngsters invariably left huge amounts of food behind, and Mās decided that instead of going out to see what other locations had prospects, they would just mind their own when the morning came. However, come morning, the kids had not left. Even when the sky became bright with a new day, they still sat down there, drinking and smoking and carrying on. Mās and Bē had once again become accustomed to regular morning meals, and the thought of going without for another twenty-four hours was distressing. (Even worse, it seemed a reasonable assumption at the time that the youths — who might have been doing uppers as well — would stick around for days.) So the two dogs headed out into the neighborhood for the first time while it was light, which is how they met Tōrō and ended the short-lived peace they had found for themselves.

From their previous trips, the two dogs knew that the third road up intersected with the path, so they snuck out — traveling through unfenced lots and backyards to avoid being spotted by the teenagers — and headed that direction. Although they had gone along this route a couple times, this was the first time they were seeing it fully visible and not just after midnight under the spotty illumination of the occasional working streetlamp or odd houselight. It was a completely different experience. Whereas before everything seemed ominous and abandoned, under daylight it actually gave the appearance of something more domestic. Rough and run-down, to be sure, but still a place individuals and families struggled to make the best of, a neighborhood people perhaps didn't care to live in but where they did care about their lives. Amidst the weeds and dirt and peeling stucco were signs of responsibility: a freshly painted door, a cozy porch behind metal bars with two rocking chairs waiting to be used, a well-tended raised garden bed, a huge, immaculately detailed truck pulling out of a garage with inches to spare on each side. All of this had a strange effect on Mās, making him feel less isolated and more a member of a community, even if it was one he could only be an unknown participant in. For Bē, walking around in the light and seeing hints of ordinary people reminded him of Mr. Krüzēn's walks, putting him in a sad, nostalgic mood. They had only been out a few minutes and already he wanted to give up looking for food and just go back home to tube and forget he ever saw any of this.

They had one more street to go before turning back to the trail when

from across the way they heard a deep, snappy voice call out to them.

‘Hey girls, what you doin?’

The two dogs turned and found the source to be a large, burly pitbull standing broad and challengingly in a yard behind a tall chainlink fence. Mās immediately worried about Bē taking off towards it but when he looked at his partner he was just sitting on his haunches staring, his head turned oddly. Mās was about to tell Bē that they should just keep moving when the big dog hollered at them again. ‘What’s a matter, ladies? Seeing this fine specimen of a man got you speechless?’

Bē spoke up first. ‘We aren’t girls!’

‘Coulda fooled me.’

Mās hopped in. He knew they should just move along but this lunkhead was pissing him off. ‘What about this, huh?’ Mās lifted his leg and started to piss onto the sidewalk. ‘Yeah!’ Bē added, and lifted his own leg to let loose his own hot stream.

The pitbull laughed. ‘Whatever, bitches. I’m not impressed. From what I can see you’re missing some key equipment,’ and with that the dog turned around and shook his backside, bouncing a sack with two huge testicles between his meaty thighs. He turned back around with a superior looking grin on his face. ‘How ’bout them puppies, huh? After seeing those big boys you still want to claim you’re men?’ The pitbull hopped up with his two front paws high on the fence and began urinating, a gigantic jet that splattered across the chainlinks and still managed to shoot out well into the street.

Mās and Bē slowly put down their legs, shocked at the audacity and impressive masculinity on display before them. Mās knew he had no good retort for this, and didn’t think escalating this pissing match was a good idea anyway. But he was again cut off before he could tell Bē they needed to leave, this time by Bē himself. ‘But we’ve got dicks! Last time I checked only dudes have dicks!’

‘All I see is a pair of overgrown pussies.’

Mās cringed. This was embarrassing and pointless. ‘Come on Dō,’ he said, ‘let’s just go.’

Bē was staring at the pitbull, his lips curling, a low growl rumbling in his throat. Out of the side of his mouth he snarled at Mās, ‘This guy is a real asshole. I’ll bet the two of us could take him. Heck, I think I could take him. I’ll gnaw those balls right off and spit ’em in his ugly face.’

Mās started to get worried, this was escalating quickly and he needed to tamp things down. He spoke to Bē: ‘Are you kidding, Brä? That guy would destroy us. Bite his balls off my ass. That guy would have you

licking 'em like they were your water bowl. Plus, what are we going to do with that big fence between us? We just need to get out of here and forget him.' Mās turned to the pitbull and called out, 'Look mister, you're right. You're much more of a man than we'll ever be. We admit defeat. Have a nice life, I'm sure it'll be full of more testosterone and nut scratching than we could ever dream of.' Bē was staring at Mās, a pained and disappointed look on his face. Calmly, Mās said to him, 'Let it go, Dō. We have to pick our battles, and this one ain't worth it.' Mās turned and started walking back up the street. Bē let out a giant sigh, took one last glaring look at the pitbull, and reluctantly followed the chihuahua.

'Hey, where are you going?' The pitbull had hopped off the fence and was now running beside it. His voice had moved up an octave. 'I was only joking around, having a little fun. Don't leave yet. I still want to know what you're doing out here.'

Mās kept walking. He called back towards Bē, 'Just ignore him. He probably only wants us to turn around so he can insult us some more.'

The pitbull continued, sounding more desperate. 'Listen, guys, nobody comes around here. When my owner's gone for the day he just leaves me out here all by myself and I don't get to see nobody. I just want to talk a little bit.' Bē and Mās didn't turn back. Only a half block more before they turned towards the trail and could forget this dick. The other dog continued, louder now that they were farther away. 'Oh please, I'm sorry. I really am. Won't you stay for just a little bit? I, uh—I'll tell you the truth, alright. These balls, they're, uh, well, they aren't my real balls. I'm like you. I-I got snipped.' Mās didn't notice, but Bē had stopped and was looking back at the pleading dog with fascination. 'My owner had these-these fake nuts put in to give me confidence. And I guess they work pretty good, right? But really I'm just like you. You guys are just as much of a man as I am. Hey buddy, why don't you come back over here and talk with me for a bit, huh?'

Mās looked back, prepared to give that faker a smug look of satisfaction when he noticed that Bē was well behind him, that Bē was who the pitbull was talking to. He swore to himself and ran back towards him. 'Don't even think about going over there, Dō. He just means trouble.' Bē looked back at Mās and waited for the little dog to get next to him, and then said, 'Do you think its true? That you can get fake balls?'

The pitbull called out, 'You don't believe me? Look at my tattoo!' The dog lay down and lifted a leg, its false nuts stretching down to the ground, and right next to the sack a thick, straight turquoise line, proof of his unintactness.

Mās couldn't believe that it had caught Bē's interest. 'Give it a rest, Dō, what does it matter? It's not like you've got anyone to get *you* a pair.'

'Yeah, but those look really real. I mean, maybe someday—'

'Real my ass. Those things would look overgrown if they were hanging from a bull. That's just a sign of someone who's overcompensating. I was pretty sure those were fake from the first time I saw them. You don't want to look like that, trust me. Everyone will just laugh at you. And if they made you act like that big pisser over there then I don't know if I could be your friend anymore.'

Bē turned back to the pitbull who was laying on its side, exhibitioning himself, staring at them patiently. Wistfully, Bē said, 'Sure, maybe it's not such a good idea — and like you said, how could I get them anyway.' Bē trailed off and scratched at himself mindlessly. 'Can we at least go and talk to him a little? He seems lonely. What can it hurt?'

Mās didn't want to, but he could tell that Bē might go anyway if he refused. To Bē he said, clearly articulating reluctance, 'Okay, but just for a few minutes. We still haven't eaten and it's light out. Staying out here we're just risking getting caught.' With that, Bē broke into a big dog smile and headed off in a quick trot, skipping his back legs every few steps and not even looking back to see if Mās was following.

Bē got up to the pitbull and, eyes firmly affixed on the taut nutsack, lifted his leg and said, 'I've got a tattoo, too!. Same one. So does Mās.'

The fenced dog sat up and put his head low, looking at Bē's package. 'Nice!' He glanced down at the approaching chihuahua. 'So he's Mās? My name's Tôrō, what's yours?' Bē started to answer but Mās, who had just caught up, cut him off. 'You can call him Bē. But listen pal, we don't have much time. It's not safe out here when it's light. Did you just want us to come back so that we could share our ink?'

'You're right,' said Tôrō, 'it's not safe. People don't like strays running around. I see you got tags, though. What you do, escape or something?'

Mās could tell Bē wanted to talk but he stepped in again. 'That's none of your business. We're out here and that's just how it is.'

'Just passing through?'

Mās thought about this for a second, making sure that he didn't say too much. His hesitation gave Bē an opportunity to jump in, and the eager mutt said excitedly, 'Uh-uh, we're staying just down the ways. We found a—' Mās nudged Bē hard with his head and he stopped talking, the little dog picking up for him: 'We're just resting here. A couple days and we'll be moving along.'

'Hmmm, that's too bad. I thinking that if you were going to be around

for a while you might be able to stop by regular. Like I said, I get pretty lonely out here.’

Hearing such an offer, Bē started panting and shifting around with excitement. Annoyed, Mās tried to give him a look that said ‘Control yourself!’ but Bē didn’t even notice, he was just staring at Tōrō. The pitbull looked directly at Bē and said, ‘So if you’ve got a place to stay what are you doing roaming around? You yourself said it isn’t safe in the daytime.’

Mās started to answer but this time Bē cut him off. He explained that they were hungry and were going down to the trail to find some food. He started to tell about the kids on their street but he realized Mās had been kicking at his paw and stopped suddenly, abashed.

‘I guess there’s scraps down there, huh? I only been over there a couple times but I can’t imagine the eating’s very good. You guys are probably shitting mostly dirt and grease. You know my owner gives me a big bowl of kibble every day, I could share it with you.’

‘Sounds pretty good,’ said Bē, but Mās interjected.

‘That’s just dumb. Enough food for one dog spread among three? That just means we’ll all starve. Listen Tōrō, I understand that you want us to come by and hang out but that just ain’t gonna happen. It was nice to meet you but we really need to get going. Come on, Bē.’

‘Wait wait. I get it. You don’t want to hang out. It’s cool. But seriously, if you really need some food, like, good food and lots of it, I know a place that’ll hook you up.’ Mās shook his head and nudged Bē to go. The pitbull continued, talking quickly. ‘Up the ways here there is a market, and the owner lets dogs eat for free. You just go in and eat whatever you want. They have all kinds of stuff — plants, bread, lots of meat.’

Mās was incredulous. ‘You think this is funny? Trying to get in one last joke at our expense? I’m smart enough to see through your crap, but this guy here, he *wants* to believe. All you’re doing is screwing with his head. What do you think is going to happen when he finds out you’re full of shit? Certainly not come back and hang out with a liar.’

‘No, you’ve got it all wrong. I’m not pulling your tails. Chək — he’s my owner — he took me a couple times when I was younger. There were a whole bunch of dogs just chowing down. This is a real thing. Just go and check it out, you’ll see.’

Mās was a little intrigued, but couldn’t shake his skepticism. ‘And why are you telling us this? So you can feel good for helping out your fellow dog?’

Tōrō looked down and lightly dug at the ground. Meekly, he said,

‘I thought that maybe if you saw what a good thing it is, you’ll want to stay. And if you stay, maybe you’ll come and see me once in a while.’ He looked back and forth between Bē and Mās with sad, sincere eyes. ‘It really is good eating. Plus, you don’t even have to go out during the day. Both times I went were in the evening after dark. You can probably get over there without anyone noticing.’

For Bē, this sounded too good not to try. He didn’t want to wait for Mās to turn him down and just directly asked Tôrō how to get there. Little did Bē know that Mās was also interested — tentative, but hopeful. They listened as the pitbull gave them directions. The turnoff was actually back towards the half-house, and from there only about a twenty minute walk with a couple easy turns. It was in the middle of a little business district that served the working folks from the factories nearby. ‘It’s called “Bēnjəməns,” or at least that’s what Chək called it.’

Before they left, Tôrō pleaded one more time for them to come back and see him. ‘I doubt it,’ said Mās, ‘but we’ll see.’ The little dog headed back in the direction of the house, hoping to get some safe rest instead of risking a daylight search for trail food. Bē followed for a couple steps and then stopped, letting the other dog get a little ways down the road. Bē furtively turned back to Tôrō and asked if he might, one last time, get a look at his, um, balls. The pitbull smiled and turned around, shaking his nads in long, loping swings. Impressed and envious all over again, Bē moved his head back and forth, matching their pendular motion. Tôrō asked if he liked them and mindlessly Bē responded, ‘Oh yes.’ Then, reluctantly, he broke his gaze away and ran off after his partner.

On the way back, Bē kept prattling on about Tôrō and what a nice dude he was and his packed scrot and how he couldn’t wait to see him again. It was really driving Mās, killing any good vibes he had about the forthcoming feast. When Bē started talking about how he had an affinity with Tôrō because of his pitbull blood Mās snapped, telling him to cool it talking about that big lughead. ‘Besides, amstaff isn’t even pitbull. You’re probably more poodle, anyway.’ Bē fell silent, chastened. Mās immediately felt regretful, but at least he didn’t have to hear about dragnuts anymore.

When they got back to their street, the kids had left. Bē and Mās were able to scare off some pigeons and get a little snack (a couple Corn Nuts, some melted blue-flavored Slurpee, a squashed Ding Dong) to tide them over until the evening. After a day of resting — during which Bē tubed hard but as far as Mās could tell never closed his eyes — the two set out after sunset, following Tôrō’s directions under an ever-darkening twi-

light. They saw no pedestrians and few cars. Sure enough, in less than half an hour they came up to a little business area with shops lining both sides of a wide street. Most of the stores were dark, apparently closed for the day, but the overall impression was of a bustling little economy within this seemingly destitute area. Mās was surprised how close this was to where they had been staying, and that they would probably never have found it had it not been for Tôrō. He was reminded of how much more of the downtown area they had seen in the week they were out on their own compared to the years they had been with Mr. Krüzĕn. Just living in a neighborhood, even for a very long time, doesn't guarantee you'll be an expert in all its nuances and secrets, or even its well-known gems.

Bĕ started to whimper and Mās looked back to see him cowering back away from the street. Not sure what was going on, Mās slunk back as well, looking around for danger. He didn't see anything. 'What's wrong, Bĕ?,' he said.

Bĕ pointed his nose and stuttered out, 'L-look.' Mās looked and saw a van sitting at the end of an alley running behind the stores. It was white and had big red letters across the side *PhRI*. 'Did you see something happen?,' asked Mās.

'That was wha-what they took her away in.'

'I don't understand what you're talking about, Dō. Who's *her*?'

Bĕ started to say something but stopped when two men inside the van came out from the back to the front seats. Its lights turned on and it pulled out and drove away from them, down the street. Mās looked at Bĕ closely. He seemed to be calming down, but was staring after the receding van with a worried look. 'It's gone now,' said Mās, 'you want to tell me what that was about?' The van stopped and turned a corner, disappearing from their sight.

'Just a bad memory.' Bĕ sounded relaxed, if a bit uncharacteristically thoughtful. 'That van takes dogs away, to where they don't come back.'

Mās didn't understand. He didn't think Bĕ knew anything about dog-catchers or Shĕltĕrs. 'I wonder what they were doing here?,' he asked.

Bĕ looked in the direction where the van had departed, exhaling a dreamy sigh.

Mās nuzzled Bĕ, trying to interrupt his pensiveness. 'Let's not get distracted now, okay? Remember why we're out here. Let's go get something to eat.' At the mention of food Bĕ snapped out of his contemplation, immediately turning restless and craving. Hunger had evaporated whatever memories he had been lost in.

Mās and Bē moved up to the corner and, hiding behind a pickup, peeked down the street. Far down at the other end, a delivery truck was being unloaded of crates by indistinct men, leaning back in chiropractic nightmare postures. Only two other storefronts were lit up. One was across the street from the truck, and another about halfway up the block. Other than the unloaders, the sidewalks were empty. Mās told Bē to follow him closely and be ready to run at the sign of any danger. They stepped out on the opposite side from the nearest lighted store, creeping along in the shadows next to the unbroken line of buildings. Partways down, their angle was such that the sign on the awning could be made out: *Rudolpho's*

'What does that say, Mās?,' Bē asked quietly. Mās looked at the sign counting out the letters and noting the apostrophe. 'This is it, Dō. *Bēnjāmən's*. Just like Tōrō said.'

It was still dark and empty around them. They crept across the street to the other side. Below the store's awning, the door was propped open with a brick. A hose with a spray nozzle was running out of the door and laying on the wet and glistening sidewalk. The dogs made their way up to the open entrance and looked inside. It looked like a run-down convenience store. On one side of the door was a checkout counter in front of a wall of cigarettes, cigars, and vape pens. Opposite that was a few rows of shelves running parallel to the storefront holding — at least from what Bē and Mās could see from their low, limited vantage point — a random assortment of snacks, cheap plastic trinkets, and auto supplies. Straight back there was a soda fountain and a couple of steaming carafes. The fluorescent lighting was bright and harsh, and above the shelves one bulb was flickering a slow, irregular pattern: white-grey-white-greywhitegrey—white. The green painted concrete floor was cracked and chipping, stained dark with rubber and grime from the soles of workboots and old sneakers. There was a wide streak of moisture extending from the open door around behind the farthest shelves. The whole place was emitting a loud, indistinct hum — the hum of lights, of compressors, of fans. Coming from someplace unseen was a faint dragging sound accompanied by an occasional grunt.

For Mās, this was all rather disappointing. It certainly didn't seem like a feast — there didn't appear to be any fresh food at all. He stuck his nose up and sniffed. It smelled like cleaning supplies and nicotine. But, somewhere, behind that foreground odor, was a scent of rawness, of plants and uncooked meat. There didn't seem to be anybody around, but he was nervous about going inside. However, the two of them stand-

ing out there, exposed on the empty sidewalk along an empty street in the light of the doorway, was probably the most conspicuous place they could be right now. Mās spoke quietly to Bē. ‘Let’s go inside — but stay close to me. We need to be careful.’ Bē was panting in anticipation, seemingly lacking any of Mās’ reservations or dashed expectations. They slipped through the door and turned up the second aisle so they couldn’t be seen from outside through the window. They snuck down to the other end of the aisle, the shelves on one side packed with tightly inflated bags of chips and on the other varieties of crackers and soups (canned, ramen, dried five-bean bags). Sticking his head around the corner, Mās saw that beyond the shelves the store continued in a long and narrow extension within which makeshift lanes had been created out of pallets and crates and barrels. Inside the containers were piles of vegetables and fruits — red, orange, yellow, green, (not blue), purple, white; rough and hard; leafy and bare; shiny and dull.

‘Dōō, check this out. I think this is what Tōrō was talking about.’

Bē, who had been waiting with difficult patience, tail wagging eagerly, stepped around and looked at the bounty. A giant dog smile spread across his face as he began to salivate furiously. He noticed a floppy canvas sign strung up above the entrance to the section. It had a picture of a produce-filled cornucopia on one side and stacked cuts of meat on the other. In the middle, in large green letters it said *FRESH*. ‘Mās, what does that say?’, asked Bē. Mās, who had not noticed the sign, looked up at it and then looked at Bē, his eyes wide and exhilarated.

‘It says “free,” Bē. It says *free*. Tōrō was telling the truth. Let’s go see what they’ve got.’

Mās and Bē pattered side by side into the back of the store. It smelled of wood and nature, an organic earthiness with a hint of funk that roused an instinctual appetite in the dogs. Along the right wall was a line of bins with scoops holding bulk staples: grains, flour, beans, trail mix, duros. Beyond them was a large double door opening from which the dragging noises could be heard more clearly above the persistent hum. At the back was a line of horizontal refrigeration units. The smell of raw meat was strong in that direction, and Mās suggested they head back there to see what delicious treasures it held. Mās was speeding through the aisle of produce, caught up with the idea of eating good food — a real meal — not the discarded scraps from some oblivious human.

‘Fthht!’

Mās halted. That was a signature Bē sound. He used to make it when

Mr. Krüzēn was eating some food that he wanted a taste of. If he barked or whimpered or stared with expectant eyes, Mr. Krüzēn was likely to get annoyed with his begging and give him nothing. But if he didn't look at the old man and just made that sound, the little reminder of his presence sometimes warranted a treat. Or at least that was what Bē thought. In all likelihood it was a throwaway sound that Mr. Krüzēn didn't even register, and the random bits that he would give Bē just allowed the dog to create a false causality to match his intention. As subtle as Bē might have thought he was with Mr. Krüzēn, Mās had been able to decode his strategy almost immediately. And so when Mās heard it in the store — for the first time in more than a month — it forced him to stop and see what Bē was sniffing at. When he turned around he saw Bē sitting next to, but clearly not looking at, a large barrel which was overflowing with bunches of large, plump grapes. Mās walked back to him and gave the other dog a sympathetic look.

Mās looked up at the vines that were hanging down above Bē's head. You want some of those?

Bē, who had made the original noise subconsciously, was reminded of just how incredibly perceptive Mās was, the kind of friend that has an extrasensory ability to know what you are thinking. 'They smell really good,' he said, attempting to be coy.

The whole situation made Mās feel quite happy. He was looking forward to his own meal, but it was incredibly pleasing to have Bē express a desire that Mās could actually satisfy. 'Go ahead, Dō, have one. Have as many as you like.'

Bē was panting, licking his lips. He looked at the grapes, then back at Mās, then back again.

'Go on — you saw the sign!' Mās was enjoying this. 'Get one and tell me how it tastes. Do it, Brä! Do it!'

Without any more hesitation, Bē hopped up against the barrel and pulled off a low hanging fruit. It popped in his mouth and a shot of juice spat out on the floor. A couple of big chomps and the grape was gone. Bē sat down on his haunches, licking his furnishings, exuding pleasure. He didn't even turn to acknowledge Mās before stretching up to get some more. Mās was savoring this moment along with his friend, so wrapped up that he didn't notice that the dragging sounds had stopped, or the pungent odor of sweaty human. Only when he saw the slightest shadow cross the corner of his eye did he break out of his beguilement and turn just in time to see the large man bearing down on him and Bē. Yipping loudly he ran back towards the front, his short body slipping right under

the giant, sweeping hand. Chewing loudly on the fruit, Bē never even heard Mās and was so consumed with his treats that he did not even notice he'd been pulled away from the barrel until he realized he could neither swallow nor breathe.

Mās was all the way at the front of the store when he turned around, expecting to see Bē close behind him. Instead, he saw a huge, hairy man holding up Bē by his collar, the dog's head thrashing, eyes bugged out and mouth agape. The man was shaking him, screaming, 'You sonofabeech! You steal from me! I show you, you fucking sonofabeech!' Mās was in a full panic. That man was killing Bē. But he was so *big*. The little dog was frozen, unsure what to do. Then the man turned and looked right at Mās, a face ugly with hatred.

'You little bastard. I get you too!'

The man reached back with his free hand and then was coming at Mās, holding up Bē with one arm and a large cleaver with the other. Mās was petrified and angry all at once, and also standing his ground. Brave and frightened, he barked and bared his teeth, trying to brace himself for a fight. The man swung the knife but he was still far away and Mās didn't move, barking and raging until it was almost too late and he sidestepped, the back of the thrown blade clipping him before clanging across the ground. Pain shot through his side and Mās backed away, down the aisle at the front of the store. He was terrified, any confidence or courage completely lost. The man rounded the corner and Mās saw Bē, head leaning to the side, tongue lolling. He thought about the men down the street and had a quick change of plan. Perhaps he could get their attention. They wouldn't let this beast kill a dog. Mās hobbled to the door and stopped at the entrance, barking at the man, drawing him out.

When the man was almost upon him, Mās charged out into the street, stumbling off the curb and yelping like mad. He pointed himself down the street so that the unloaders would hear him but they were gone. The street was dark and so too were all of the storefronts. Mās turned back just in time to see the man pulling the hose back into the store with a snap. The little dog stumbled back towards the entrance but before he even got halfway there the door had closed and there was the loud clack of a lock being thrown.

When Bē had stopped thrashing, he realized that he could just barely breathe through the pressure on his neck. He was not sure what was happening; he was being tossed around, the store sliding and circling around him. He was focused on pulling air in and pushing it out, settling

into a quasi-tube state with his eyes wide open but not processing any of the sensory inputs. Then he had the impression of a familiar shape, a small black shadow, and he pulled into awareness. It was just a glimpse, but something unmistakable. Mās was sitting awkwardly at the glass door, moving his mouth but not making any sound. Huge eyes locked their gaze with Bē and it was a look that he had never seen before. Mās was horrified, anguished — he was so scared. Then store turned and Mās disappeared from Bē's view.

Bē settled back to focusing on breathing. The world was twirling around him. He had the impression of being carried down stairs, through a door, heavy breathing (not his own), clanking, a musty smell, echos, a male voice grumbling all the while. And then he caught his breath and before he could react his body was pulled down against a metal table, then his neck. His head was pressed against the cold surface, his eyes darting around, trying to make sense of where he was. He was facing a bare cinderblock wall with buckets and cleaning supplies piled up into a corner. The space was stuffy and smelled of chemicals. He couldn't see a source of light but it was harsh and concentrated. Bē squirmed and kicked but couldn't pull himself free, his paws slipping on the smooth table. For the first time since he was grabbed, he had time to think about what was happening. He started freaking out, whimpering, pulling at whatever was on his neck.

'Shaddup thief.'

Bē froze at the sound of the voice. A huge shadow appeared on the wall then something lay across his backside, rubbing ominously. Bē snarled quietly at the touch.

'Think you steal from me and I do nothing? Bad dog! Second time today. I show you what do to theefs.'

A hand grabbed his front left paw and pulled it out straight. Bē growled louder, baring his teeth in the direction of the hand.

'You no angry with me. You learn. I show you.'

The shadow moved and Bē looked back to see a gleaming rectangle of silver metal raised high above his head, the distorted image of a monstrous face reflected in it. He was unable to close his eyes to the blade as it came down, feeling so scared, the last thought running through his mind something that Mās had told him just the night before.

*Rule xi: the best dens live on in our memories, even when we have to go*





*From the door comes Satan's daughter  
And it only goes to show*



## Chapter 6

### In the Basement

Fugue rode away from the institute, not ready to go home but happy to be out of there. It had been a busy day. First school then coding up some ideas that Keith had for some new tests, and after all that Gordolph had caught another dog so they had to set things up for her. Usually a new arrival was exciting but this one apparently had been tough to deal with and came in a drugged-up lump. She was extremely skinny and dirty, and washing the limp, unresponsive animal just made Fugue dejected. She suspected her uncle had probably been an asshole to the dog (over the phone he said he caught her trying to steal food), working the poor thing up to the point of needing to be tranquilized, but he would never admit to it and speculating about it would just make Fugue upset. At least the dog would have an easy life now, easy and interesting enough that she could just forget about anything bad that Gordolph might have done to her. Lucky dog.

Without thinking about it, Fugue aimed herself away from the store and towards the *Basement*. She wanted to get her mind off of things and home was not going to help with that. Gordolph would want to know what happened with the dog and then she would have to talk to him and about work and those were the last two things she wanted to do right now. It wasn't too late and surely Post was still working and even if not, it felt good to ride around the streets and just think. Fall was her favorite time of the year - it wasn't so cold as to make riding insufferable, but it was cool enough that you could enjoy the crisp, fresh air tickling at your face and in your lungs. It was a refreshing experience, almost as if the chilling wind and her overheated brain had found a perfect equilibrium for supporting contemplation. Her bike light illuminated the ground in front of her, and she swerved slightly to avoid a lone shoe

sitting in the street. She wondered how pairs of shoes got split up. It was not like one was terribly useful without another. Unless you only had one foot, in which case you wouldn't even need shoes because you'd be in a wheelchair, unless you used crutches or had a prosthetic foot. But if you had a prosthetic foot you might as well wear both shoes, unless you had one of those blade feet and then you definitely wouldn't want to cover that with a shoe (not that it would fit anyway) because it looked so awesome. She felt like she had seen single shoes in the streets far more than she had single-legged persons or pairs of shoes, so perhaps there was a bigger story going on. That shoe had been well-used, and Fugue wondered if its missing partner was similarly shabby, if they had been worn out together and then reluctantly separated to follow different paths for their lonely, useless retirements. Or was the other pristine and unused, sitting in a shoebox, forgotten in the back of a closet or the bottom of a landfill, just as useless. Useless indeed. Especially compared to other types of clothes, discarded shoes seemed terribly useless — nobody (except maybe a desperate bum) wants to wear someone else's old shoes, and it wasn't like they could be repurposed or recycled into something functional or interesting. They were just smelly trash. And if a pair of old shoes was worthless, what did that make one all by itself?

And so it went as Fugue navigated the streets, taking her time, letting her mind wander based on whatever stimuli came her way. She was almost at her destination when her phone buzzed in her pocket. When she pulled up to it, the store's lights were still on and its "OPEN" sign (which looked like melting neon) glowing. She locked her bike to the rack made up of intertwined Cthulhu tentacles (the beast's body forming the supporting pedestal on one side) and pulled out her phone. It was a message from her uncle:

Gordolph: You come home?

She replied that she was still working but would be home soon. He wouldn't check up on her any further as long as she didn't stay out too late, and possibly would be too drunk to bother if she did. He had a strange paranoia about her running away even though, given her situation, he had a fair bit of control over her life. She put away her phone, took off her helmet, and walked to the entrance.

*The Forgotten Basement* was a strange hybrid of art gallery, music store, and geek trinket shop. Its artwork was eclectic but generally revolved around the themes of oddity and freakishness. The place was filled with surreal paintings showing misproportioned body parts and

cartoony bizarreness, fantastical taxidermia, antique medical devices displayed as terrifying curiosities, and pieces that hinted at (or sometimes explicitly referred to) deviances of a sexual and/or violent nature. Post, the owner (who regularly reminded people that he had been using the name since before that scribble-faced singer was born), had a personal fondness for horror, and a whole corner of the store was devoted to books, paintings, movies, and other *et cetera* that fit into his vague concept of that genre. Anyone who knew him knew that this was his favorite section of the shop, even though it was easily the least profitable, primarily because he priced everything well above market value so that he wouldn't have to part with it. During the day — when the customers tended to be average Joes or Josies looking for a weird fix — Post would play mostly moody, atmospheric music that might be described as nightmare Muzak, innocuous yet unsettling. In the evenings, though, when the normals were at home discussing their cool shopping finds around the dinner table, Post would play things rougher and more intense, often so loud it seemed as if he were challenging his customers' tolerance for noise and hearing damage.

Fugue loved going to the *Basement*. Everything was so offbeat and creative, so different in a way that really connected with her. It was a place where she could find things that expressed feelings that were deep inside her, inarticulable truths of her being. She could spend hours in there, looking, listening, reading, and thinking. And talking to Post. The other employees and some of the customers (especially the evening ones) could be interesting, but they usually treated Fugue with a dismissive attitude that ranged from outright disinterest to reluctant tolerance. Post, on the other hand, never talked down to her or made her feel excluded. They would have fascinating conversations where they would discuss the artwork, their lives, silly stuff in the news, movies, music, anything. Post didn't care that she was awkward or dorky, that she wasn't good looking, or that she didn't know very much about anything. He was that closest school buddy that everyone was supposed to have but that she did not. He was her confidant and mentor and best friend, even though she knew she was not his.

When Fugue entered the store, Post was sitting on a stool behind the sales counter, waving a pair of drumsticks and nodding his head to a ridiculously fast beat of death metal that was playing on the sound system. Something was grunting indecipherable words, fighting to be heard over a cacophony of guitars and drums whose melody was equally cryptic. The impression that Fugue got was that it was the musical equiv-

alent of when she would bash out nonsense on the keyboard as fast as she could out of frustration. Post looked up at her, still banging his head and swinging the sticks.

‘What’s up, Fugue?’

‘Not much. Who is this?’

‘Severed Soul.’ Post closed his eyes and shook his hands with even greater fury, as if the music was coming to some crescendo (it all sounded the same to her). Suddenly, he struck the sticks out straight out on either side like he was crashing some giant cymbals and, just as the song stopped in unison, flung his head back, pausing like some rock crucifix. He dropped his hands down and let his head loll on his neck. ‘You like?’

‘Hmm, not really. Kind of sounds like, I don’t know...trash. Like it’s trying to be disgusting.’

Post laughed, walking over to the stereo to turn down the volume. ‘I don’t necessarily agree with the aesthetic criticism that underlies your assessment, but I would say that you might be on the right track to understanding their artistic intent.’ Another song came on that sounded exactly like the one that just finished, except that now it was quiet enough to be ignored, turning into bland background static. ‘By the way, I like your hair. Sort of a two-face thing.’

‘Thanks. I was actually going to do the other side in pink, but after I got the blue done I thought it looked kind of cool. Check this out.’ She turned in profile, standing still for a second, then switched to the other direction. ‘Depending on which way I’m pointed, I can be “business” or “rebel.”’

‘That’s pretty sweet. Which reminds me, I’ve got something to show you.’ Post walked around the counter, making small talk as he went. ‘You just get back from the institute? Anything interesting happen?’

Fugue shrugged. ‘We got a new dog. But it was all drugged up and floppy like it was dead. She actually came from Gordolph.’

Post stopped and looked back at her. ‘Geez. Did he do something to it?’

‘I don’t know.’ Fugue was staring at her fingers, picking at her cuticles. ‘I don’t really want to talk about it.’

‘Sure, sure.’ Post leaned back on the counter. ‘But I still say that you should start taking pictures or video in there. Collecting footage. You could make a cool art project out of that. The stuff you tell me about, it’s pretty wild.’

Fugue look at him skeptically. As far as she was concerned, she had

no artistic ability. She liked what other people made; when she tried anything, it just turned out dull or awful. 'Ivor and Dee would never let me film in there. Anyway, it's not nearly as interesting as it sounds.'

'You're just around it all the time so it seems commonplace. One of the secrets to art is finding the bits of color in the greyness of life. And it doesn't have to be photography. You could write some poetry, or draw a cartoon. Or — how about this? You could film a reenactment. We could get some artist to make up models of the dogs, and I could play Ivor — like a mad scientist — and we could get, uh, Jesse to play Dee, and you could play yourself. It could be all creepy and dark, screwing with animal's minds—'

'We aren't "screwing" with the dogs' minds. And you know it's not a horror movie in there. It's research, real science. If you want to know what's really messed up, it's the dogs that we don't get that go to the pound and are put to sleep because nobody wants them. Now *that's* fucked up.'

Post stood back up, slightly chastened, and headed off into the store. 'Well, even if it's not "the truth" it still would make a good movie.' He was always trying to get her to do something inventive, said that it made life a lot more fun. He'd warn her that if she didn't start now when she had the chance, she would grow old and afraid and die full of regrets. That was easy for him to say — he was always coming up with crazy and cool ideas. He just couldn't imagine what it was like to not be creative at all.

He *had* gotten her to change her name, though. He said names usually don't fit the person because they get chosen when you're a baby, before you turn into the person that you end up being. 'We think a name fits somebody just because we're used to it, but if you really think about it, usually it's all wrong. Take your name. "Vanessa." No offense, but it is just about the last name that I would ever pick for you. A complete mismatch.' He bugged her to pick something different, something that spoke to her. After a week, she still hadn't found anything. She'd been scouring the internet, reading books, thinking about things she liked. Nothing seemed right. Post told her she was being too precious. 'This isn't a tattoo. If you end up not feeling it you can always change it again. I went through three other names before I settled on Post, and who knows, maybe I'll switch it up again in the future. I'll tell you what, though, I'm sick and tired of calling you Vanessa, so just choose something!'

Post's pushing her had pissed her off. He didn't understand how hard it was for her, how unimaginative and dumb she was. She decided to just pick something that would show how crappy she felt about herself,

and see what he said to that. She thought through some ideas (Dumbo, Grody, Ick) before remembering a phrase that some assholes from her old school use to call her. She looked up words that started with f-u-g and came across fugue, whose definition was a bit mysterious and even though didn't really apply to her it had a cool sound. Also, there was that hidden meaning sitting in plain sight, to remind her how she felt about herself. 'Perfect!', said Post when he heard it. 'You are totally Fugue.' Of course, she hadn't told him the whole backstory, just that she liked the way it sounded.

But that was the only time she had come up with anything creative like that. It was a fluke, and despite Post's encouragement, she was never going to live up to his expectations. She had gotten used to brushing off his prodding and just moving on. It was almost like a game.

'Fugue, come over here and check these out. We just got them yesterday.' Post was standing by a spinning display with a bunch of postcard-sized pictures. 'Some girl in Arkansas, of all places, made these. They're lenticular. You move them and the picture changes.'

Fugue picked up one of the cards. It shifted between a picture of a monkey typing on a typewriter and Shakespeare on the same typewriter. She gave Post an unimpressed look. 'I mean, I get it. Ha ha. But Shakespeare wouldn't even have had a typewriter.'

'Okay, okay. The anachronism is part of the joke, but I agree, that one's trying a bit too hard. Here, look at this one.' He turned the display and handed her a different card. It showed a beautiful princess leaning down to kiss a frog with a crown, and then on the switch the princess had turned dark and fierce, standing up with blood pouring from her mouth and gripping two torn off frog legs in her hand. Fugue agreed that it was pretty awesome. Post handed her another. There were red circles embedded in color-shifting strips, and when it was tilted the circles changed color even though they had no lenticulation. The effect was trippy. After a few more times switching back and forth it started to bug her eyes, and she handed it back to Post. 'These are crazy. How much?' He told her — they were kind of pricey, she could probably only afford to buy one. She started systematically looking through them all, not wanting to make a mistake with her budget.

While she was looking through the cards, Post sat behind the counter telling Fugue about the artist who made the cards. 'She doesn't have a website - she only sells through handpicked stores, and we're not allowed to put her stuff online. We can only sell it in person. Her hope is to create exclusivity and drive interest without become a sellout. Really

she's just trying too hard to go against the grain, it doesn't make good business sense. Coming from a guy who actually runs a physical store, I understand the importance of the tangible, but to ignore the virtual experience is folly. It's an essential part of modern life.'

'Says the businessman who wastes valuable real estate for a personal collection he could easily store at his house.' Fugue was turning cards that were potential keepers 90°.

'That's different,' said Post, a little defensively, 'the Blood Alcove provides ambiance, and it is a point of attraction for some customers.' Fugue gave him a side-eye. Other than her and him and a few of his horror buddies, she had never seen anyone spend much time back there, especially once they saw the prices on everything. 'Nonetheless,' he continued, 'even if I think her ideas are crazy, at least she has some conception of marketing. Every week artists come in here wanting me to carry their work but act like its sellable qualities are self-evident. Just the other day — you'll like this, Fugue — some wacko came in trying to get me to sell his VR experience. Not really what I deal in but I was willing to at least take a look. But he doesn't have anything to show me, just some sketches and some description that I couldn't follow. He says all the equipment to experience it is at his house and he won't show it to me unless I sign an NDA, and that if I decide to sell it it'll take up a third of the store to install all the equipment. And on top of that, I ask him what exactly I'll be selling and he tells me: "the experience." Then he gets mad at me when I pass, complaining that I had wasted *his* time.' Post shook his head. 'Talk about a reality distortion field.'

Fugue had picked out a card and came up to the counter. Handing it to Post, she said, 'Well, it's not like VR is all that special nowadays anyway. I mean, look at me.'

'You need to stop selling yourself short,' said Post, 'but you see what I mean. Most people don't have anything worth buying.'

'See, I already realize that about myself. That's why I don't bother creating anything.' Fugue was only slightly joking.

Post sighed. 'The problem isn't that people are creating something — even if it's crap, the effort's commendable. The problem is that they expect someone to pay for it. That,' he waved the card in Fugue's face, 'requires salesmanship.' He looked at the card, tilting it side to side. It showed a woman in a power suit giving a presentation to a room full of business men, then the woman and her presentation easel transformed into a giant, fluffy, white dog with beady eyes sitting with its paws tucked in, looking equal parts superior and idiotic in front of the suits.

'I don't know what it is supposed to mean, but I'm pretty sure that puffball is my spirit animal,' said Fugue. Post smiled and put the card in a little paper bag. He rang Fugue up on a tablet, which she tapped with her phone and then voiceprint authorized by saying her name. 'I guess I better get going. My uncle'll be expecting me.'

'One of these days we'll get you out of that asshole shop and the brain shop, and you can come work at the cool shop.' Post winked and Fugue gave him a half smile.

'I wish,' she said, 'All you need to do is become my guardian and get set up as an HS. Should be easy, right?' Post watched her with a rueful grin as she turned and left.

Fugue pulled up to the back of the store, unlocking the door and parking her bike just inside. She was about the check in with her uncle when she saw the light for the stairs was on. When she turned it off she noticed light shining down below, under one the doors in the basement. She went down to see if Gordolph was down there but when she opened the door she nearly cried out in fright. There was a tube of dog fur tied to the table and smears of blood on the floor. Fugue stepped inside and touched its backside, expecting it to be dead. Instead it twitched, letting out a horrifying growl. She pulled her hand back and as she moved around the table she saw that the poor animal was secured down not just around its body but also its neck. Upon seeing her it bared its teeth but only whimpered. One of its front paws was bandaged up with white gauze, bright white against its dark fur. The leg was shaking. It looked at her with big eyes, whining desperately. It was the most awful and saddest thing Fugue had ever seen. She began to cry.

She carefully reached out again to the dog, giving it a gentle pat on its head. It started to growl again but at her easy touch relaxed and went back to whimpering, only this time a little softer. 'Poor guy — what happened to you?,' she said. 'If I take these ropes off will you promise not to hurt me?' She reached down to untie the knot under its neck but was stopped short by her uncle's voice.

'No touch. Bad dog.'

Fugue looked up. Gordolph was standing in the doorway, swaying. He was wearing only a tank top and tight underwear, both white and both stained. His big belly was poking out between the two.

'What the hell happened? Is it dangerous?'

Her uncle stepped into the room, reeking of sweat and liquor. 'He not dangerous now. Caught him stealing. It get hurt'

Fugue stepped forward, trying to block him from coming near the

dog. 'What the fuck did you do to it — to him?,' she said, angry. 'And why is he tied down if he's not dangerous? He needs to be taken to a vet.'

'No! No doctor. I fix him up. The paw came off, and I burn.' He pointed to the corner, where there was a soldering torch. 'Tomorrow, I give to Ivor.'

'His paw come off? What does that even mean? And he needs a doctor, he's hurting!' She was almost yelling now.

'No doctor! Ivor take care tomorrow.'

'But what happened?'

Gordolph shook his head indeterminately, 'Accident happens.'

'Accident? Did you do this? What did you do?'

'I fix him.'

'Well he needs to be untied. You can't just leave him here like this.' Fugue turned back to the dog.

'You don't!' He moved towards her, reaching out and grabbing her shoulder. She shook him off.

'Don't fucking touch me. I've told you before.' Her uncle stepped back, focusing on her more than his balance, staggering into the wall. 'You're sick. I ought to call the police on you.'

He leaned against the wall with a superior look on his face. 'You call police, you go to home, *Vanessa*.'

Fugue was mad, but she knew he was right. She didn't want to go back. She wasn't going to let him get away with needling her with that name, though. 'Listen, Gordolph,' at the word, his face fell into a scowl, 'you're going to go to your room and go to sleep. I'm going to untie this dog, take him up to my room, and I'll call Ivor in the morning.' She really wanted to call him tonight, but she was afraid her uncle would do something rash.

'No one tonight?'

'I'll get Ivor in the morning.'

Gordolph looked at her for a few seconds, as if testing her resolve, and then stumbled out the door and up the steps. Fugue closed it behind him, then went back to the dog. It had been deathly quiet the whole time her uncle was talking, but now he started whimpering again. She untied the rope around its neck and once released he flinched his head back in fright. She put her fingers out for him to smell, but he just twisted away. 'It's okay, guy,' she said to him softly, 'let's just get this last one off.' She undid the restraint around its waist, half expecting the dog to jump off the table, but it instead flopped onto its side, as if exhausted from being

stuck in that cramped position for who knows how long. Fugue carefully petted his flank, letting him know that he was safe now. He was staring at her with those huge eyes, looking fearful and in shock. She noticed he had a collar with tags. The dog showed his teeth as she reached for them but didn't stop her. One was a silver disc that said 'B\_\_\_\_\_'; the other was a red dog bone embossed with 'Kreuzen.'

'So which one of these is your name, huh fella?' Fugue tried them both, but the dog responded to neither. 'Well, they're both kind of silly names. Maybe I'll just call you "B" — or "K."' When she paused between the two letters, the dog looked at her. 'You like B?' He lifted his head towards her hand and opened his mouth slightly, as if he was about to grin. She brought her hand up to it and he began to lick her. 'B it is, then.' She brought her head down and laid it on his, hurting for him but also feeling love. She was going to have to carry him up to her room, but she waited just a little longer, enjoying the feel of his rough tongue lapping at her tears.

## Chapter 7

### Heel

Bē lay on the bed, tubing, Fyüg spooning and petting him. He liked her, she was always rubbing him, giving him food, and she let him lick her as much as he wanted. She was almost as good as Mr. Krüzēn, except she smelled better and was softer. The only thing she didn't do was take him on walks — though he couldn't walk anyway. Bē looked down at his missing paw and started chewing at the bandages. They were stiff and irritating, bothering him like a tag. Fyüg gently pulled his head away.

'No, no, no, Bē. You need to leave those alone.' She pulled over a stuffed platypus for him but he just sighed. Even with the use of only one paw he'd pulled the tag off that thing in the first couple minutes and de-stuffed it soon after. It was just a shell now, uninteresting. Bē settled back into the tube, listening to Fyüg talk to him, understanding her tone of voice but not a single word she said. She was worried.

'What are we going to do, Bē? Īvôr doesn't want you. Says you are damaged goods. What does he know anyway? He acts like all those strays he takes don't have problems. Sure, they might have all their limbs, but mentally they're probably more messed up than you. Īvôr says you have PTSD but I think you just like to chill. If he was really so worried about mental problems he'd have to get rid of two-thirds of his dogs. I mean, look at Tād, he's essentially a dog wastoid. But *no*, he can't take *you*, so he leaves you here with that monster.' Bē took a deep breath and sighed. 'See, you know what I'm talking about. I gotta see if there's a way to get you out of here.'

Fyüg kept talking. Bē's ears were hearing but he wasn't listening to anything. His eyes were open but he wasn't looking at anything. He was breathing but wasn't smelling anything. His missing paw hurt but he wasn't feeling any pain. It had hurt so bad that first night with Fyüg, but

after that she had started giving him special treats and they made him feel much better. That first night, that was when his paw had gone, but he didn't remember how it happened. He remembered the bad man — Fyüg called him Górdólf — dragging him around and then he couldn't move. The next thing he knew he was in the bed with Fyüg. He must have fallen asleep or tubed out. That first night was like a nightmare — his paw wasn't there but it felt like it was, like it was getting crushed, ripped apart. Just thinking about it was horrible. He pulled himself back and listened to Fyüg some more, feeling at ease.

'Oh Bē, I love you. Maybe it's good you didn't go because we're friends now. I'll keep you safe from Górdólf. I used to be so glad I didn't have to share my room with all those other girls, but now I'm glad I don't have to be in my room alone anymore. I wish we could just stay like this forever.'

Bē thought about the last time he remembered having his paw. He was up on that barrel, eating grapes with Mās. They tasted so good. Then Mās was outside and couldn't get in. Was that real? Bē wasn't sure. Maybe it was a dream. Mās was scared and they were being pulled apart and now he wasn't here. Maybe this was a dream. Bē thought of the grapes again. That last time he and Mās were together. Both paws on the barrel. They tasted so good.

He pulled back and listened to Fyüg again. She sounded tired.

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Mās was despondent. He had been sitting on the worn out couch in the half-house for days, unable to move, unable to accept what had happened. He had been waiting for Bē to return, certain that whatever had transpired in that store must have been a dream, or, even if it did happen, that his friend would find a way to escape and return home. It was impossible to imagine that he would never see Bē again, that him being dragged away by that monster was to be Mās' last memory of him. Mās had lived a complicated life, often hard and unfair, but this was the first time he had found himself in a situation that he refused to believe. He refused to believe that Bē was gone, refused to give up hope, to the point that he was willing to wither away, to sacrifice his own life to prove his devotion.

Mās would perform all manner of mental contortions to convince himself why he could not leave his vigil. If he left to look for Bē, or, even worse, to look for food, then surely that would be the time that Bē

would return to the house. If Bē found it empty he would know that Mās had abandoned him and would leave forever. Mās couldn't leave him a sign, Bē's sense of smell wasn't good enough to determine how old a scent was and his simple little mind (oh how Mās missed that doof's mind) would probably misinterpret or not even recognize any kind of message. If he returned to the store to see if Bē was there, then that was a sign of weakness, a willingness to give into the idea that Bē was captured, or hurt, or dead. Even entertaining that notion would spell his lost friend's demise by confirming it. Like many of his kind, Mās believed in a connectedness that bordered on spiritualism, and he knew that Bē's existence, his very life, was supported by Mās' fidelity to the surety of his friend's return. If Mās went to the store he would likely discover Bē dead or gravely wounded, but it would not be some inevitable truth that he was bearing witness to — rather, the horrific path of that reality would have been established solely by his going to the store, by allowing it to be.

The heart of the matter, though, was that Mās really didn't want to deal with his own culpability in the disaster. He had led Bē into the store, had encouraged him to eat the grapes, and had run away instead of immediately coming to his friend's aid. He'd allowed his own excitement get in the way of caution, a mistake that may have been the ultimate cause of Bē's capture and possible death. By staying away, by not fighting to free his friend — not only right away, but in the hours and days that followed — that was truly how he was letting Bē down. Worst of all, Mās had violated that most sacred rule, the one which he always harped on Bē for not following, the one defining the very existence of the den:

*Rule i: a den is made together and must stay together*

As a dog, Mās could not understand the concept of suicide, but if he could, he surely would have killed himself. Somewhere deep inside he felt inescapable sadness and hopelessness and guilt. His current non-action was the closest approximation to self-harm that he could create, where his mind's justifications, suppressions, and mysticisms created the means by which he could fight his deeply ingrained survival instinct. Eventually, however, that survival instinct would win, and Mās would understand that Bē is not returning, or would admit that Bē is as good as dead, or would decide that instead of waiting he must fight for Bē, or would create a fantastical new story for Bē to live on in, forever separate from Mās, but certainly alive. At that point Mās would leave the house,

to eat and shit and make new friends and find things to do and go on with his life. But until then, Mās lay alone, as cold and lost as any one dog possibly could be.

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‘Come here, boy — you can do it!’

Fugue was on the ground on one side of her room, holding a cheezy cracker up by its corners, calling to B. The dog was sitting by the opposite wall, his eyes fixed on the cracker. Overactive salivation was forcing him to swallow over and over again, giving him the appearance of being extremely nervous. Fugue found it incredibly cute, as if he was overcome with performance anxiety, frozen not with lack of ability but stage fright.

‘Come on! Got an orange treat for you!’

Fugue had discovered that of all the food she had shared with B, by far the kinds that he went most wild for were those that shared that distinctive color: nacho flavored chips, cheese puffs, fruit cereal balls, cheddar sticks. She wondered if he might have had some sort of sight deficiency where that color stood out more boldly, though the fact that they were also addictive snack food couldn’t be discounted. He wasn’t uninterested in carrots or orange slices but she did notice that he rarely finished them. Nonetheless, no matter what the object was the color sure seemed to catch his eye — he would even try to eat the peanut butter cup wrappers that she left on the bed (a habit she quickly fixed, for as bad as it was giving him human food as treats, chocolate — even smeared residue on the inside of packaging — was strictly verboten).

So now she was trying to entice the dog with his most favored goodie. She knew that inside he was going crazy, imagining that perfectly sized tab of deliciousness crunching in his mouth, filling it with the flavor he savored. But he just sat there, unmoving. She knew he could do it. When she carried him out to potty (he used a small strip of creeping grass in the alley) he would manage a few steps looking for a place to go. And she’d caught him doing some awkward hobbles on the bed at night when he wanted to move around. But it seemed that unless it was absolutely necessary, or if he thought he wasn’t being watched, he didn’t want to show that he could walk. It was as if he had a combination of being ashamed of his disability and wanting to exploit it, to use it as an excuse to be babied. But quickly Fugue had become attuned to this, and decided that it was only going to create future problems if she didn’t take a stand and force him to work on getting around on his own.

She had been sitting there for over a half an hour, waiting, waving around the treat, eating one herself, cajoling him. But unlike in the past, she refused to give in, to allow herself to fall back to coddling him. That face sure made it difficult, with its big, sad, expectant eyes and that darling dog smile. She wanted to just go over and give him a big squeeze, to rub her face in his fur and pop that cracker right in his mouth. But she waited. He might be obstinate but she would be more so, and in the end it would be worth the struggle. So she waited, and so did he. His eyes on the vibrant square and hers on him. Each waiting for an imminent satisfaction.

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Mās sat behind the bush, watching the house, filled with rage. It was dark, but the sky was starting to just slightly lighten with the first wisps of dawn. He had been sitting there for hours, worked up and unable to sleep, ready to confront at the first opportunity. His depression had worked its way through his system, evaporating almost as if by magic that evening. For the first time since the incident, he had felt the urge to eat, and got himself off of the couch and out to search for food. As he roamed around, avoiding the night people, sniffing for scraps, he felt an anger build within him. He was mad with himself and with the situation, with the fact that he may never see Bē again, and with the paucity of food that he was coming across. But most of all, he was pissed at one thing, and as he obsessed over it more and more he realized he was going to have to deal with it right away, before any more food, before it made him crazy.

He sat and watched. Furious, boiling, yet surprisingly calm. He could be patient. He had been in that half-house for days, a few more hours was nothing. He tried to think through what he would say, how to properly express his feelings. He imagined himself enacting revenge, ripping flesh, destroying his foe, no matter its size. He knew this was senseless, but it made him feel good, like he was properly avenging Bē.

Finally, a light appeared in the back of the house and then a door closed. Shortly afterwards the garage door lifted and a pickup squeezed its way through the opening. The brake lights lit up and the driver rolled down the windows and pushed out the side mirrors, increasing the width of the vehicle by at least a third. The windows lifted, the garage door dropped, and the truck pulled away with a loud acceleration that included a completely necessary squealing of tires and ejection of dark, thick exhaust.

Mās crossed the street towards the fence. As he approached, he started calling out his quarry. ‘Tôrō! Tôrō! Tôrō! I want to talk to you. Get out here!’ He stood by the fence, as tall and fierce as he could make himself. His eyes darted around, looking for movement, looking for the target of his spite.

He heard heavy galloping first, and Tôrō came flying around the corner. Mās had forgotten how big he was and was unexpectedly intimidated by the horse-sized beast thumping towards him. He took a step back and prepared to engage, but as Tôrō trotted up, tongue wagging, excited and happy, the other dog’s affect disarmed him, leaving him speechless.

‘Hey buddy,’ Tôrō said rapidly, ‘how you doin’? It’s Mās, right? I was hoping you’d come back. It’s awful boring out here. What you think of that feast? It’s somethin’, ain’t it. Tell me about the other dogs you saw there. Hey, where’s your friend? Is he around here somewhere? I bet he—’

‘Shutup!’ At Mās’s exclamation Tôrō fell silent, still panting exuberantly but eyes showing hesitance. His attitude had riled Mās up even more, though, and as the little dog found his voice he seethed with vitriol. ‘You bitch. You goddamned asshole. I don’t know what your game is but I want you to know what you’ve done. That “feast” was a trap, and I barely got away. But Dō wasn’t so lucky. He got caught, and he’s probably dead. And it’s your fault you fucking murderer.’

Tôrō looked shocked. He started stammering, ‘I—I don’t know what you’re talking about. It wasn’t a trap. I didn’t mean for any of you to get hurt. He’s dead?’

‘He’s gone.’

Tôrō sat on his haunches, a look of true concern on his face. He actually looked like he was going to be sick. ‘I—I don’t understand.’ Mās was still upset, but Tôrō’s genuine shock lowered his temperature a few degrees. He started explaining what had happened, beginning with him and Bē entering the store. When he got to the barrel of grapes Tôrō stopped him.

‘None of what you’re describing sounds right. It’s not an area in the back of the store. And it’s not nice fresh food. It’s just leftovers that humans won’t eat.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Mās was starting to heat up again. ‘You said it was good eating.’

‘Well it is. I mean, it’s all kinds of food, and lots of it. But it’s basically trash, or things the humans are going to throw away anyway. I guess I

talked it up a little but didn't try to fool you. I don't understand what you guys got into. It should have been the first place you came to.'

'It was. The street was mostly closed down but it was the first place that was still open.'

'On the corner, right? There should've been a side entrance—'

'It wasn't on the corner. It was in the middle of the street...'

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Mās still couldn't believe it. Somehow he and Bē had gotten mixed up with Tōrō's directions and come to the business district from the wrong end. Maybe it was that van that Bē had freaked out about, maybe it distracted them and they got turned around. Maybe they got the instructions wrong. Mās couldn't be sure. But whatever it was, that missed detail, within which Tōrō had embedded assumptions about how they would find the place, it had caused a disaster. Mās was so worked up about it that he felt the need to retrace their steps, to understand how he had messed up. That was how, after a day of brooding in the half-house, he found himself walking through the just-turned night, following the path back to the scene of the tragedy.

He was still upset with Tōrō. If he had been less interested in trying to impress them and just explained things better, all of this could have been avoided. But Mās no longer felt malice towards him. It was clear the last thing the pitbull wanted was for them to get hurt. When he had left, Tōrō seemed more angry with himself than Mās was with him. Mās even felt the urge to have a little sympathy for the big dog, something that he forced himself to suppress. Mās was mad and wanted to stay mad, and he certainly didn't need to be showing any softness towards the fake-balled brute that had messed up his life.

As he approached the street, Mās realized how they had made their error. The road he was on ran straight up to the business district, and Tōrō's instructions required them to make an unintuitive turn at the last minute, heading through a neighborhood to come around from the other side. Perhaps it made more sense when it was light out, but at night the glow of the street drew him forward, so much so that he once again found himself on the corner looking down the street, on the opposite end from where Tōrō told him to come in. As before, most of the stores were shut down, yet halfway down the street, under the awning with that mistaken word, that infernal place was still lit up. Seeing the closed door brought flashbacks, and Mās began to feel panicked. His instinct was not

to run away, though, but rather to go towards it, to look inside. Maybe Bē was right there, waiting for him. Standing at the door, wondering when Mās would return, to save him from the awful behemoth, to take him home.

Mās started walking towards the front entrance, not worrying about staying in the shadows, but making a straight line through the middle of the street. He was about a quarter of the way there when he heard something trying to get his attention.

‘Psssst! Little man. What are you doing?’

Mās stopped and looked around for the source of the voice.

‘Over here, back by the green car.’

Mās spotted the vehicle and then a fluffy head popped out from beside it, staring at him blankly. Mās looked back at the store and then realized he was in the middle of the street. He felt exposed, suddenly in danger.

‘Get out of the road you fool! You’re going to get yourself hurt.’

Mās turned around and started shuffling in the direction of the face, but veered to the side so that he ended up behind a different vehicle, providing some separation. The face was now a fuzzy shadow, two eyes glowing from uncertain illumination.

‘What were you doing back there?’ the shadow said quietly. ‘It looked like you were headed for that store.’

Mās answered the shadow warily. ‘Yeah, so? I wanted to look inside.’

‘You don’t want to go there, that’s no place for dogs.’

‘I know. I have a friend who got caught there. I’m looking for him.’

‘Your friend got caught there? Then your friend’s gone. That’s a place where dogs disappear.’

Mās was instantly crestfallen. To hear confirmation that Bē was gone, to hear it out loud, it was crushing. Mās turned back towards the store, lost in a daze.

‘Listen buddy, let me take you to a better place. It’s around on the other end of this street. They like dogs and you can get yourself something to eat.’ The shadow approached, started to resolve into brown and gold, curly and loose. ‘My name’s Flōps, by the way. What’s yours?’

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Fugue cruised her bike up to the back entrance of the store and quickly parked it inside, tossing off her helmet and coat. She ran up the stairs to her room. She had done school as quickly as she could, did

the little bit of work that Ivor had said she needed to finish, and then rushed home to see B. After a day being cooped up he'd need to go potty and then would probably want a snack. But Fugue knew what he'd be most excited about — going for a walk. It had taken a few days of effort, but she finally got B to semi-willingly try to move around on his three good legs. It took a fair bit of enticement with treats and begging though, and he often seemed to do it out of exasperation rather than any kind of inherent desire.

The one day she had brought home a leash, though, everything changed. When he saw her carry it towards him he started to run around as if he'd forgotten about his missing foot. He barked and spun circles, hopping up on her with such enthusiasm that she had a hard time getting it hooked onto his collar. He was being so wild that at first she thought he actually did not want her to put it on him, but when she laid it down on the bed he obediently sat down on the floor under it, thumping his tail and whimpered with longing. Since that time, their daily walk had been the highlight of their day, a time to get out, away from that dirty and rundown place, away from its confinement. B was getting stronger and more coordinated every day, moving around so well it almost seemed as if he'd been missing the paw all his life. He was even able to move up and down the stairs without tripping or falling, an accomplishment that felt almost profound to Fugue, so much so that one of her very favorite things was to watch him effortlessly fly down them, a sharp contrast to the stumbling mess he'd been such a short time before. He also had a funny habit of skipping on his back legs when he was excited, something Fugue originally thought was the result of the dog still trying to get his legs synchronized, but the tic persisted and now she saw it as an amusing trait, something as much a part of him as his coarse fur or food focus. With only three legs and two of them occupied with skipping, B would bounce back and forth like a bucking bronco until his hind legs found a true running rhythm and he would take off as if released from some invisible restraints. It reminded Fugue of a cartoon and just thinking about it brought a smile to her face.

Fugue opened her door expecting a lively welcome but there was nothing. No running dog, no wagging tail, no breathless panting. Nothing. In a panic, she searched her room — under the bed, behind the door, in the pile of (possibly clean, possibly dirty) laundry. B wasn't there. Fugue searched her memory for whether she had closed the door when she left, if the dog was in the room. She was sure of it. B couldn't have

escaped, and there was no reason for him to. Unless—

*Gordolph.*

Fugue ran down the stairs into the store, looking for her uncle. She called out his name, scanning the store for his big, fat head. She saw movement in the corner and turned to see him emerge from behind the counter.

‘Here, Vanessa. What you want?’ He sounded uncharacteristically calm. Almost smug.

She walked down the aisle towards him, pointing a finger. ‘Where’s my dog? What did you do to him? If you hurt one—’

‘He fine. He here.’ Gordolph looked at her with brutal seriousness. ‘He not your dog.’

‘What are talking about? Let me see him.’ Fugue tried to look over the counter but Gordolph pushed her back. ‘And what are you talking about “not your dog?” I feed him. I take him for walks. He’s only able to walk because of me. I’m the only friend he’s got.’ She had walked down to the end of the counter to go through the access door, but Gordolph was there, blocking her way.

‘I tell you before, no come back here. Rudolpho only.’

‘I just want to see him.’ She managed to lean over the door and squeeze her head past his big belly, but she couldn’t see anything. ‘B? You back there? — Where is he?’

‘He not back here. He fine. He my dog now.’

‘No! He hates you! He needs *me*.’ She swung at her uncle, but he didn’t even flinch. His thick mass absorbed the blow as if she was punching sand. He smirked at her. ‘He’s not hurt is he?’ she said, her anger turned to fear. Gordolph kept smiling, a big mouth of big stained teeth, an unusual display of amusement.

‘He not hurt. He in basement.’

Fugue pushed back and ran through the store and down the stairs. The room was locked. She shook the handle. She called for B. Behind the door there was a bark, then scratching on the floor.

‘He fine. That his room now.’ Gordolph was at the top of the stairs, looking down at her. ‘You no like, I take him to shelter. I take him away.’

Fugue fumed. ‘*You wouldn’t.*’

There was a buzz behind him and Gordolph looked back. ‘I have customer. We talk later.’ He pointed at his chest, at his white apron, stained and stretched taut. ‘He my dog now.’

As he turned back to the store, Fugue faced the door and slunk to her knees, crying. Her eyes blurred with tears, she laid her head on the

concrete, trying to see through the crack under the door, to get a glimpse of her friend.

## Chapter 8

### Watch Your Tone

The door opened and The Górdólf appeared. Morning light streamed from outside, framing him in a harsh glow. Bē slunk back, watching to determine the big man's mood. When he spoke it was clear that it was a good one.

'Breakfast, dog. Eat.'

A metal bowl with kibble was put down in the middle of the room. Bē slowly moved forward, crouching, tail between his legs, eyes frozen on the man. When he got to the bowl he leaned down and took a bite, crunching the brown pellets.

'I give you food. Today you watch better.'

Bē knew this tone. After he finished eating they would go upstairs and The Górdólf would expect him to roam around the store, watching the other people, making sure he didn't get the neckbuzz. If he was lucky he might see Fyüg, but usually she was not around. Bē missed her. He didn't understand why he had to sleep on the cold floor in here, rather than with her. They had started a den, but now that he couldn't go there anymore and it was just him alone every night. The den was gone.

'Hurry up.'

The tone was changing, it was more stern. Sometimes that meant The Górdólf would take the food away. Bē began to eat faster, not worrying about chewing, hoping he wouldn't get angry. Yesterday morning The Górdólf was very upset and only gave him one kibble and then hit Bē and yelled at him. He took Bē up into the store and put him through testing, checking that he remembered. The Górdólf would walk around and take things from the shelf, sometimes he would put them back, sometimes place them in a basket, and sometimes trying to hide them. If Bē saw him put something in his pocket, or under his clothes, he had to bark

and bite at his leg. If he didn't there was the neckbuzz. If nothing got hidden, he had to be very quiet and keep his distance, otherwise he'd get the neckbuzz. It was like that every time: if he performed correctly, he wouldn't get hurt. It had taken Bē a couple days to figure these tests but now he knew what he had to do by heart. Yesterday, for some reason, The Górdólf tested him again.

When there were other people in the store, Bē tried to act the same as when The Górdólf had taught him, but the neckbuzz wasn't so consistent. Sometimes Bē saw someone hide something but because the person looked mean he'd get nervous and hesitate, and there would be no neckbuzz. Even if he waited until they left there would be nothing. But sometimes when he waited he would get it, and it was bad. The Górdólf would be angry, pulling the stuff out of the person's pocket and shaking it at Bē, or yelling and pointing as the person ran away. Then Bē would get the neckbuzz, strong enough that he would need to lay down. And it was even worse if he barked at someone who appeared to know The Górdólf. Sometimes Bē would see something get hidden but after barking and grabbing at the pants The Górdólf would come over and talk to the person and then Bē would get the neckbuzz. One time, he saw a man talk with The Górdólf and then put a bag of chips into his jacket. The neckbuzz he got after barking was particularly long. So anyone who talked to The Górdólf Bē would leave alone.

Unlike the day before, however, there almost certainly wouldn't be any testing today. Bē could tell from The Górdólf's tone. The man took his empty bowl then they went upstairs and Bē felt the need to go so he ran to the back door. The big man let him out and Bē went straight to the corner, did his thing, and came back. He knew that if he took just a couple steps away from the wall he would get the neckbuzz, and it wouldn't stop until he moved back close to the building. It was the same with the front door and going up the stairs. After his first night alone in the room, when The Górdólf had opened the door Bē ran out, heading towards Fyüg's room. He made it up to the main floor just fine but when he headed up the stairs to the second floor he felt the neckbuzz for the first time. He didn't understand it and kept running towards her door, the zapping at his throat causing him to thrash and jump around uncontrollably. Unstable on his three legs, he fell back down the stairs and when he reached the bottom the neckbuzz had stopped. It only took one more time trying to go up the stairs to learn the boundary within which he was to stay.

Before that first neckbuzz he hadn't noticed that he was wearing a

different collar. It was tighter and held something bulky under his chin. He tried to pull it off but it wasn't possible, especially with just one paw. He didn't like it and especially missed the sound of his old one, its tinkling tags. He tried not to think about it, especially during the day, because it reminded him of Mr. Krüzēn which only made him want to tube out and not watch people.

Although the store had customers every day, there were not that many and rarely were there more than a couple at the same time. For much of the day the place was only occupied by himself and The Górdölf, and during those times there was nobody to look after and he was free to rest. So he learned to settle into and come out of a tube state faster than he ever had before. The minute the last customer left the store, Bē would immediately drop down and rest, his unfocused eyes aware of just enough to register if someone new came in. It was cool in the store, and when a customer started talking to The Górdölf (which meant that no alerting would be needed), Bē would search out a location on the floor where sunlight was shining and stand on it, waiting for the person to exit so that he could collapse on the warm spot without unnecessarily wasting any time.

‘Come.’

Bē followed The Górdölf into the front. The light pouring through the windows, too bright to look directly at, filled the store and warmed the concrete under Bē's three feet. When he'd gone out he was disappointed to see that Fyüg's bike was gone. The last few days it had not been here in the morning, and that meant he wouldn't see her come downstairs and wouldn't have a chance to greet and sniff and lick her before she left. Bē wasn't afraid that she had left forever, since almost every evening he'd see her when she came in through the back door, and they'd get a few minutes together before The Górdölf took him down to the basement. Also, every night Bē was awoken from deep, lonely sleep by Fyüg whispering and scratching at the other side of the door. She would stick her fingers underneath it and Bē would lick them and they would scratch his little chin. She wouldn't stay long but it was the best part of every day for Bē, although sitting in the pitch dark feeling and smelling her, deprived of any sense of time or space, he often wondered if it was just a dream, the same dream over and over every night. Through the door he could barely hear her yet thought he heard tones of sadness, happiness, anger, and love, but he couldn't be sure. However, every time when she pulled her fingers back to leave, he would hear clearly the same hopeful and determined tone and the same words, spoken through the crack under

the door:

‘I love you Bē. We’ll get out of here. I promise.’

The last couple of nights, Fyüg had come home while it was still light and tried to spend some time with Bē while he was watching the store. The Górdólf would get very angry with her, pointing at the stairs and shaking his head. Fyüg would reluctantly go up to her room, returning after the store was closed to spend a few minutes with Bē before he went downstairs. Before The Górdólf took him away, Bē would get to play a little with Fyüg, him hopping around and she laughing. Once they even did a little walk around the store, though they had to do it without a leash because when Fyüg came down from her room with it Bē got very excited and The Górdólf noticed and took it away. They walked around the unpackaged food area, Bē intentionally avoiding the aisle with the grape barrel (he wouldn’t even look down it) and instead taking her to his favorite secret spot.

Bē had discovered it when watching a young man who spent an inordinate amount of time picking a cantaloupe. The customer would pick up a melon and knock it by his ear, and then smell it, and then put it down and check another, and then hold the two in separate hands as if balancing them. Bē was sitting behind a basket full of pinkish rocks, closely following each piece of fruit that was picked up to make sure it didn’t disappear. By the time the man had repeated his process at least twenty times, Bē’s focus began to wane, and he rested his head on the edge of the basket in front of him, mindlessly licking his nose. His tongue just brushed one of the rocks and he tasted an intense saltiness. He licked the rock again and the saltiness was so strong he found himself uncontrollably running his tongue all over his mouth. The cantaloupe man looked over at Bē smacking his lips and turned back to the fruit for a moment of irresolution before just picking one and walking past Bē — both eyeing each other suspiciously and licking their chops — up towards the checkout counter. Neckbuzz being more important than salttaste, Bē followed the man to make sure he didn’t purloin the melon en route to The Górdólf.

But Bē did not forget the delicious treasure, and when the store was empty and he was certain The Górdólf wasn’t looking, he’d meander over for a quick taste. Unfortunately, there were three problems with this. First, if the store was empty, The Górdólf was almost always paying attention and would yell for Bē (‘Dog! Get back!’) if he sensed him creeping away. Second, even if The Górdólf didn’t catch him sneaking away, something about that taste was addictive and once Bē started lick-

ing those colored rocks he had a hard time stopping, the result of which meant he'd inevitably be away for a long enough time for the big man to notice his absence ('Dog! Where are you?!'). Finally, even one lick of those chunks would cause Bē's mouth to simultaneously dry out and salivate like crazy, forcing him to tongue his lips and gums for minutes afterwards. This meant that even if The Górdólf didn't notice him slip away or that he was missing, he definitely noticed when the dog appeared to have just finished eating something quite savory ('Dog! No eat!'). In all cases he would get a shot of neckbuzz and because of this Bē tried his best to forget about the strange treat.

However, when Fyüg took him on a little stroll around the store, Bē put aside his concerns and led her to the basket. Part of it was that he wanted to show off his discovery and part of it was that he thought she might enjoy some herself. When they got there he started licking and stared at her to see if she would join him. Of course, once he started he couldn't stop, and found himself in an awkward position, stuck in between Fyüg and the basket, looking at her with expectant side-eyes in one direction while lapping at the pink rocks in the other. She must have found it funny looking, because she started giggling like crazy and tried to pull him away, talking with a tone of amused admonishment. Even when he could no longer reach the rocks, Bē had an urge to get more of that flavor and kept leaning and swiping his tongue in their direction. This tug-of-war caused Fyüg's giggling to increase in intensity, and when Bē saw that big grin he turned his attention to her and tried to get a taste of her shiny white teeth. The shift in momentum caused Fyüg to fall over and Bē was still licking like crazy, not just trying to get at her face which was swinging side to side as she tried to fend him off, but also attempting to deal with that salt taste that had completely coated the inside of his mouth. It was a fun time that was broken up when The Górdólf started yelling, asking what all the commotion was. Fyüg stood up quickly, composed herself, and calmly guided Bē away from the delicious secret.

Perhaps they would go on another walk tonight when Fyüg came back. Perhaps they could even stroll over by the salt rocks again. Maybe the neckbuzz would stop and they'd get the den back together. It would be nice to not have to sleep on a cold floor, to have a warm body to press against. This is what Bē focused on as he lay in the sun, settling into a tube, watching the door for any new customers. It wasn't a conscious effort, but Bē naturally would tend to think about good memories, finding that even if they made him a little sad it was a better sadness than

that caused by the miseries he'd been through. In this way he was able to avoid being crushed by the awfulness of his situation: being locked in the basement, subjected to neckbuzz, having to be around that monster, barely able to see Fyüg, and never seeing Mäs, or Mr. Krüzēn. He was lucky that his default state was to suppress this, as otherwise it would have been unbearable.

The one thing that was difficult to avoid thinking about was the way The Górdölf would get on some nights. In the evenings when there were particularly few customers, Bē would watch him start to drink out of a big clear bottle, gradually becoming louder with a tone that would turn more frightening — the same tone he had when he'd caught Bē on the first night. Just the thought of it would almost paralyze the dog with fright. When The Górdölf got like that, he would walk around heavy and yell for no reason, sometimes crying too. But it was not the sadness that Bē had seen in other people, the type where he'd feel sad too and want to console them. No, this was a sadness that was dark and terrifying, something not to sympathize with but to run from. However, by far the worst part about The Górdölf getting like this was that it was accompanied by the neckbuzz. The Górdölf would be drinking, or hollering, or lumbering, or sobbing, and Bē would get zapped — sometimes short, sometimes long, always unexpected. It seemed more painful because of its randomness, no clear cause for Bē to avoid, just an inescapable series of tortures to be endured. Bē would get so scared by The Górdölf's tone and the neckbuzzes that he would try to hide, running down the stairs to the basement door and waiting to be locked away. Yet even if he was let into his unlit and lonely sanctuary, after the door was closed and he heard The Górdölf pound up to his room, Bē would still get little shots of neckbuzz, reminders that the bad man's temper had not yet passed.

Waiting for Fyüg's arrival made the day crawl by interminably. When there were customers Bē would hobble around after them, and when they left he would languish in the sun, at least until it had crossed overhead and no longer touched the floor, at which point he would lay wherever since the green concrete was cold everywhere. It was midday and a sliver of sunlight still shone through the windows. A group of young boys came in to shop for some snacks and Bē found he could not watch all of them at the same time, so he picked one to follow around, a tall, lanky kid with dusty hair and shifty eyes. As he strolled the aisles, the boy kept checking back at Bē apprehensively. When he was looking at the candy section, he picked up a shiny purple and black bar, stared right at Bē and, with a wink, dropped it in his pocket.

Bē immediately started to bark and lunged for the kid's pantleg. The Górdólf yelled, 'Hey, what happen? You steal!,' and all the other kids ran out of the store, grabbing as much as they could on the way — chips and snack cakes and gum and lighters. Bē, afraid of the neckbuzz, was holding onto the skinny kid's leg desperately while the bastard kicked at him with his free foot. One of the kicks landed a direct blow to his leg stump and a shot of pain surged through his side, far worse than the neckbuzz. Bē yelped and let go, baring his teeth at the retreating boy not in anger but fear, fear of pain, fear of failure. The Górdólf tried to grab the runner but he slipped by and got away to join his friends with their spoils. The big man cried out in frustration.

Bē was whimpering when The Górdólf walked up to him. The man's tone was angry and disappointed, but also confused. 'Why you cry? You do good. He steal, you get him, that good. But you get hurt, you cry, that no good. He hurt you, you hurt back.' ZAP 'This hurt because you no angry. This hurt remind you. You get mad.' ZAP The Górdólf went back behind the counter. Bē flopped on the ground, trying to relax, his neck and leg buzzing. He wasn't angry, not at The Górdólf, not at himself, not at the kid. He wasn't sure exactly what had happened, or just what he was supposed to do. The only way he might have stopped that boy is if he actually bit his ankle, made it so he couldn't run, except Bē wasn't mad at him and didn't want to hurt him and who knows how much worse the kid would have lashed out if he had done that. He also didn't want to get the neckbuzz, though. He really didn't understand what The Górdólf wanted him to do.

Nothing much interesting happened after that until Fyüg returned, even earlier than normal. Bē came running over as she parked her bike and she threw her arms around his thick body. Almost just as quick The Górdólf was there, waving his hands and talking in a tone of annoyance. Again he pointed up the stairs but this time rather than going off to her room Fyüg challenged him.

'I don't understand why I can't spend more time with him. You've got him locked up in the dark all night, and during the day you have him "protecting" the store. He's a dog. He needs some companionship. He needs a friend.'

'He need work.'

'I need a friend too. I don't understand why you have to make everyone so miserable. When somebody's in here, I'll let him do his "job," but most of the time the place is empty. He's got nothing to do then. Why can't you just let us hang out?'

'You need work too.'

'I *do* work. Talk to Ivor and Dee if you don't think I work enough. I'm leaving earlier in the morning so I can finish up and come back before you jail him up for the night. Maybe you need to work — work on being nicer. Maybe then people would actually want to come in here and you could afford pay for a real guard dog, not some poor thing that you maimed!' As she said this last bit Fyüg rubbed her fingers and thumb together in The Górdólf's face.

'I don't know *maimed*.' He knocked the hand away and wagged his finger. 'You no complain about money. I spend money on you. You should be thanking.'

'That's bull and you know it. You get a check for me every month. That's the only reason you took me in. This place would've closed a long time ago if it weren't for that.'

It continued like that, getting more and more heated. A few times Bē saw a customer come to the door but, upon looking in and seeing the two of them screaming and waving their arms, had second thoughts and passed on by. Bē was nervous, The Górdólf's tone was getting more intense, like when he would drink out of the bottle. He was scared for Fyüg, although she didn't seem worried at all. At one point The Górdólf's face turned red and he moved towards her, his mouth spraying spit as he yelled. He stuck a finger into Fyüg's chest and as she fell back into the shelf Bē didn't even think he just leapt at The Górdólf. He was angry, he wasn't going to let The Górdólf hurt her. Bē snapped at an arm but at the last second it twisted and pushed the dog away, out onto the floor. The neckbuzz started and did not stop. Bē was on the floor, struck with pain, tensed. He was still angry but through his blurred eyes he could see that at least The Górdólf was focused on him and not Fyüg.

'What are you doing to him? Stop it!' It was Fyüg's voice, afraid, desperate. Bē's body was vibrating. The world was humming. He felt like he was hovering above the floor.

'You see? He try bite me.' The Górdólf was still enraged. Everything was shaking. Bē felt like he was coming apart.

'STOP IT!'

The neckbuzz stopped. The pain dampened, everything settled back down together. Fyüg came into focus and then came towards him but The Górdólf was suddenly in front of her and picked Bē up.

'See what you do? I take him to room now.' The Górdólf was calmer, but stern. He was carrying Bē to the back of the store.

'What I did? Are you crazy? Is he even okay?'

‘You go to room. You get up less early and you see him then.’ The Górdólf stopped and turned. ‘Or if you like, I take to shelter now.’

Fyüg let out a cry of rage, a tone that Bē had never heard before. She ran past them to her bike and left out the rear door.

The Górdólf took Bē down to the basement. He laid the dog on the ground and placed his hand in front of Bē’s nose. Bē watched him fearfully, waiting for the hand to swat at his snout or his neck to get buzzed. After a minute he stood up and left and a few minutes later he came back with a bowl of kibble and left again. Bē wasn’t sure what to think. Since he’d been staying down here he’d never been left alone with the lights or to eat. He waited for a while and then ate slowly, spending the time to savor the tasteless crunch. Even though it was a little strange under the lights, even though his nerves were still buzzing from the day’s shocks, Bē managed to settle down into a tube, and then into sleep.

Bē woke to the sound of someone unlocking the door. When it cracked open there was no light beyond — it was still night. Bē watched as Fyüg slipped into the room and quietly shut the door behind her. She put a bag on the table and then came over to him and snuggled, burying her face in his fur.

‘You okay? I was worried about you.’ She sounded relieved and happy. Then her tone switched to something mischievous. ‘I have some things to do. We need to be quiet. Old Gordolph got drunk out of his head and so I was able to get the key but if he wakes up there’ll be hell to pay.’

She gave him a head rub and he watched with interest as she pulled things out of the bag, human things, plastic and wire. She went over to the corner where there was a file cabinet and carefully walked it away from the wall. She took the things and strung them behind the cabinet, plugging one of the wires into the wall. She moved the cabinet back and arranged something on top of it, in between some books and papers. Then she pulled a rectangle out of her pocket and looked at it, adjusted the stuff on the cabinet, stepped to the opposite corner of the room, looked at the rectangle again, and then said, ‘Perfect.’

She went and sat down next to Bē. She nuzzled him and let him lick her face for a bit, and then said with excitement, ‘Look what I got. The old bastard put this in the trash.’ She reached into her pocket and there was a jingling noise that Bē knew so well and he knew it was his collar even before she pulled it out. He whined a bent his head down, trying to get the collar on his neck.

‘I know, Bē,’ said Fyüg, ‘but we can’t put it on now. When we get

out of here we'll take that nasty buzzer off and put your real collar on.' She was apologetic, hopeful. She put the collar back in her pocket and lay down on the hard floor, pulling Bē to her. He quickly settled into a tube, happy to have his den back. Fyüg was rubbing his belly slowly, meditatively, her hot breath spreading over his head. She was talking to him gently, with a tone that mixed contentment and worry.

'I love you bud. I wish I could stay here all night. I'll need to put the keys back soon. But not just yet. I'll stay here with you for a few more minutes. Just a few more minutes...'

## Chapter 9

### Back Down

The dog was laying on the floor, staring at him with big, unmoving eyes. It was annoying as shit. Rudolpho was tempted to yell at it, but he knew it would do no good. It would just sit there, staring. He could throw something at it, but it would just move out of the way and then sit back down. He could shock it, but that would just confuse it, and when it was over it would still be there, watching him. He hated being watched. It was like the dog knew something, but it couldn't know anything. Rudolpho didn't even know, he hadn't worked it all out yet. Somehow the store would have to burn down, and the dog the cause of it. But he didn't quite know how to do it just yet. But he would. He would just have to keep thinking and a good idea would eventually come. Rudolpho pulled out his necklace, his good luck charm, petting it. Maybe it could be something to do with it being a gimp. Tripping and knocking something over. That was good, he would have to work on that. He held the charm, looked down at it. It was too bad the dog didn't seem freaked out by it. Maybe then he wouldn't be staring all the time.

Bē watched The Górdólf sitting behind the counter, playing with the tag that was hanging from his loose collar. He'd been wearing it for the last few days, but usually kept it inside of his shirt, occasionally rubbing his chest as if to remind himself that it was there. He only pulled it out when it was just the two of them, and only when they were far apart. He'd hold it up for Bē to see, just like he was now, but never let him get close. Bē didn't understand if he was supposed to be impressed or something, it was just a white lump. It didn't even jingle or make any noise. Now he was rubbing his face with it. Ever since he and Fyüg had that big fight, he had been acting strange. His tone was more wary, unsure. He seemed to be less angry which, combined with seeing Fyüg

every morning and evening, made Bē's days much more pleasant. But Bē was still getting the neckbuzz, and every time it happened he'd start to panic, remembering that horrible experience when he'd gone after The Górdólf. Overall, though, things seemed much better.

Rudolpho really hated the dog. The mutt had caused nothing but trouble. He wished Ivor had just taken it. The stupid thing had to come into his store and steal from him, force him to teach it a lesson, and then Ivor won't touch it. Then the dog has to make friends with Vanessa, make her hate Rudolpho even more. It was a good thing he'd stepped in when he did, otherwise she probably would have run away with the dog by now. Rudolpho probably almost caused a disaster with his original plan to take it to the shelter, but thankfully he'd instead thought of using that as leverage over Vanessa. But she was still upset with him all the time, much worse than before the dog. It would have been better if it had never existed. Now he had to spend all this time watching after it, feeding it, trying to get the dumb thing trained. The dog was a curse.

But Rudolpho was going to turn that around. He had a talisman now, something which showed he was the dog's master. Soon that curse would become a blessing. He held it up again for the dog to see. Surely it knew what it meant, that it was powerless. Rudolpho wanted to go over there and rub it in its face, make it smell it, remind it of its weakness. But he was afraid the dog would try to steal it, to take the power. He would just have to wait, wait to figure out a plan, wait for a chance to change his luck. The dog kept trying to mess everything up, but Rudolpho would win in the end. He just had to be careful and not let the dog screw things up. He was letting Vanessa see it twice a day. Letting her feed it, spend some time with it — but not too much. If he could manage that relationship just right, she would stay around. He needed her too. Her support money was the only thing keeping him afloat right now. It was necessary until he figured out how to get rid of this place. Then he'd send her back, let someone else deal with her and her attitude. He'd once had dreams of her going off to college and getting rich and supporting him, but he now knew that wasn't going to happen. She was bright but a dreamer, the kind of person who would be happy doing something they liked for a tiny paycheck. Even if she did make a bunch of money he'd never see any of it. She hated him. After all that he'd done for her.

The sun was setting. It was getting darker outside but it was bright in the store under the lights. Bē curled up a little tighter on the cold floor, trying to preserve warmth. There had been no customers for hours and The Górdólf was staring at the door, perhaps expectantly, perhaps not. It

would be a few more hours before Fyüg come home and the store closed up. Bē sighed heavily. This was always the longest part of the day. He tubed, watching The Górdólf but not really watching him, just biding time, hoping that nothing happened, because nothing would mean that the next thing that happened would be seeing Fyüg, and that would be just fine.

The Górdólf stood up and leaned forward towards the door, then turned and looked out of the window next to the counter. He grunted and reached up, pulling something down. Walking around from behind the counter, he stopped in front of the door and peered out, grunting again. He had what looked like a rope in his hand. He turned to Bē and held up his hand, palm out.

‘You stay.’

The words were firm. Bē had no idea what he was saying, but he also had no interest in moving to find out what he was looking at. From his vantage point Bē could see nothing past the door, and he couldn’t go outside anyway. If it was important, it would come inside.

Rudolpho walked outside, his eyes fixed on the shadow across the street. He was pretty sure it was a dog, but it was small enough that it could have been a cat. It was dark outside and the store it was standing in front of was empty and lightless. He couldn’t quite make out its shape, but what he did see, that which had caught his eye from inside the store, were the reflections off of two eyes and some tags, a motionless triangle pointing downward as if to mark its location as something important. Tags meant it probably was lost and not a stray, but that wouldn’t matter, Ivor would never see them. It also meant it probably wouldn’t be too afraid of a human, as long as he wasn’t threatening. He bounced the rope in his hand, thinking. He reached in his pocket and pulled out the bone-shaped dog treat, something he had been saving under the counter for a time when he might need to bribe that three-legged mutt, but was certainly going to be put to better use now. He waved it in front of him, calling out in the gentlest voice he could muster.

‘Here boy. Food.’

Mās watched the huge man shaking his hand, unsure what to do. He had been sitting out here watching the store, trying to muster up the courage to cross the street when that horrible beast had walked out looking right at him. His original plan was to go to the store and get himself caught, hoping that he would be taken to where Bē was, that they would be reunited. He wasn’t sure what would happen after that, but Mās really just wanted to be back together with his friend. He had spent

many days with Flöps and her pack, forming new bonds, being accepted, discovering a sense of security that he'd long forgotten. They'd showed him how to navigate the area safely — what spots to avoid, where the safe sleeping spots were, when to travel, who the friendly humans were. That first night Flöps had taken him to the shop on the corner, the one which Tôrô had been talking about, the one which Bē and Mās were supposed to have gone to. *Bějāmāns*. Flöps told him that once a week the shop put out old food — raw meat, soft fruits and vegetables, occasionally some odd canned goods — that apparently humans wouldn't pay for. Owners could pay to bring their dogs, but the man at the shop also let strays eat for free. And he wouldn't let any humans take them away. Flöps and her crew weren't exactly sure why it was set up like that, but from the way the shopkeeper interacted with the other owners and the dogs, it appeared to be a combination of charity and a strange socialization opportunity for the owned dogs.

Whatever the reason, that night with Flöps was *not* scrap night, however when Flöps scratched on the door a man came out and, after taking a look at Mās and his tags, brought out a neckbone and some warm milk. Flöps sat back and allowed Mās have them to himself, letting the shopkeeper know that she wasn't getting greedy herself. Mās wondered what would have happened if Bē and him had come here on that one evening? It wasn't scrap night — they would have heard the dogs or at least Mās would have smelled them — and they wouldn't know to scratch on the door. They probably would have just left hungry and disappointed. But they would still be together.

Mās missed Bē terribly. Even though he was becoming part of Flöps' den and was getting comfortable with them, he ached for his friend. He wondered what happened to him and was consumed with guilt. Mās had told nothing about that night to Flöps and the others, ashamed and afraid of what they'd think of him. Mās had had many dog pals in his life, all of which he'd eventually become separated from, and over time was always able to let them go. But not Bē. Every night, as Mās lay in the den, surrounded by so many warm bodies, his thoughts always ended up with his old pal, wondering if he was alone, wishing he was with him.

So Mās found himself across from the store, wanting to join Bē, but unsure how to do it. He had fantasies of being thrown into a cell with Bē, and the two of them escaping and then joining up with Flöps. Bē might be stuck right now but with Mās' help maybe they could get out. He worried about the other dogs' reaction, thinking of warnings about coup attempts:

*Rule viii: a new member is always welcome, two are suspicious, three means war*

But Mās was sure once they met Bē, all would be fine. They were only a pair, anyway, and Mās was smaller and quieter than any of them. He'd intentionally kept his mouth shut most of the time, as he'd learned to be cautious around an already established pack, but was also worried he might let something slip about the Bē situation. But keeping a low profile might work in his favor now. He had to join up with Bē first, though. Going off by himself had been relatively easy, as in the evening the pack split up into small groups to look for food and going off alone wasn't unheard of, although it was discouraged because if you got into any trouble rescue was unlikely. He had come straight to the store and was just about to commit to going over to get intentionally captured when the sight of that hulk had drained him of his courage. In building up his resolve for his plan, Mās had tempered his memories of the man, convincing himself that the horrid mental images he had of him were due to the extreme stress he'd been under. However, seeing him in the flesh again showed that if his memories had been skewed, it was actually in the opposite direction. The man was big and gross, with huge hands and a head that somehow looked out of proportion to his round body and bulging belly. His apron was dingy and stained, his hair uncombed, face covered in stubble. He was not just imposing, he looked mean. He was calling out to Mās with his face contorted all funny as if he was trying to look friendly but instead looked and sounded frighteningly unnatural. Seeing that creepy voice and ghastly smile, Mās was overcome with doubt, worrying not just for his own safety but that there was no Bē to be reunited with.

The shadow was not moving. It seemed hesitant despite Rudolpho's enticements. He broke off a small chunk from the end of the treat and tossed it across the street. It fell short and bounced in the curb. Damn. He was about to break off another when he saw some movement. Was it coming forward? He wasn't sure. Rudolpho was tempted to just bolt across the street and try to lasso the damn thing, but he knew it was too far and would just scurry off. Mindlessly, he passed the treat to his rope hand and grabbed at his necklace, rubbing it with his thumb, contemplating how he could get the dog to come over. Ivor paid good money and it was worth his while to take his time. There was movement again and the thing started barking, loud yips directed towards him. Rudolpho chuckled to himself — *it was a dog.*

Mās was angry and panicked. He hadn't noticed what was hanging from that monster's neck until he grabbed it, massaging it while looking at Mās with his mocking, evil stare. There was no doubt, it was Bē's paw. Mās knew then and there that Bē was gone, and he let out his sadness and frustration and disappointment and fury with his voice, barking at the murderer across the street, calling the world's attention to his guilt and villainy. He was afraid the man would come after him, but he felt the need to confront him, to let him know that he knew.

Bē heard and perked up. Was he dreaming? Any dog would be interesting but this sounded like *Mās*. He stood up quickly and in his excitement forgot that he was missing a foot, causing him to fall face-first onto the hard floor. He shook his head and listened again. Yes, surely that was Mās. He got back onto his feet and stumbled for the door as quickly as his suddenly uncoordinated legs could manage.

Rudolpho stared into the darkness. Whatever was barking had moved towards him but he still couldn't make it out. Its tags flickered reflections. Why did they look familiar? He was holding the furry paw tightly, feeling a sense of disquiet he could not place. He looked down at his gripping hand — he was protected. He began to take a step forward and looked up but the barking had stopped and the shadow was gone.

Bē got to the door right as the barking stopped. He tried to look through The Górdólf's legs but could see nothing. Where did Mās go? Bē was sure he had heard him. He looked up at the man to see if he was holding Mās, but he couldn't see his other hand. Was he holding his friend? He hopped onto the door with his one paw, whimpering, trying to get him to turn around.

Mās was running. Through the shadows, around the corner, off to somewhere else. The man had ignored his barks and instead was crushing Bē's paw, signaling his power. When he had started moving towards Mās the dog turned and fled. His plan was through — Bē was gone. Mās was mad and frustrated and wanted to hurt that huge thing, but there was nothing he could do alone. He was too small, too weak, too gutless. Somehow, somehow, he would get his revenge. But for now, he ran.

A cold breeze blew and Rudolpho felt the chill seep beneath his skin. He continued to stare into the shadows, unbelieving what he saw. A ghost? A demon dog? Those glowing eyes and that dog's tags. He'd thrown that collar away, there was no way anything could be wearing it. He crossed the street, searching the shadows for some trace that the little beast was actually there. He felt the sidewalk, it was ice cold. He turned around and his heart nearly exploded in his chest. That damn

dog was sitting in front of the door, staring at him. That goddamned dog — nothing but trouble. Rudolpho warily walked back to the store. The dog was tormenting him, sitting there with its short leg hanging and its eyes staring. Partway across the street, a knot of worry clamping in his stomach, he remembered to stuff his necklace down his shirt, away from that dog's nagging gaze and waiting jaws.

When The Górdólf had turned, Bē was struck with disbelief. He was certain that he was somehow holding Mās, despite the fact that he'd seen both hands dog-free when he'd crossed the street. He was so stunned that he sat there unmoving, eyes watching but not registering anything, almost as if in a shock tube. The Górdólf was halfway back to the store when Bē snapped out of it and shuffled back to his spot on the concrete, still warm from before.

Rudolpho stepped into the store and looked over at the dog with spite and fear. It was curled up on the floor looking at him, shifting itself into a tighter circle. He had the urge to zap it, but had an image of the dog bursting into flames and that shadow hound leaping from it to rip out his soul. He took a couple steps back from the dog and quickly ran around to the other side of the counter, rushing to make sure the dog was still there when it came back into view. Rudolpho wiped his brow. His shirt was cold and damp against his skin. He reached under the counter and pulled out an unopened fifth of vodka and took a long, throat-burning, eye-watering, frightened drink. He put the bottle down and felt the liquor permeate his breath and belly and brain. The dog stared, right through his apron and shirt, right through to the paw laying on Rudolpho's chest. He picked up the bottle and took another protective swig.

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The Górdólf was laying on the counter, had been for a while. Bē watched him, both confused and somewhat relieved. Before this, every time the man had drunk out of that bottle, he would turn bad and have that scary tone. And there would be those awful, random neckbuzzes. Bē had been waiting for this to happen, but The Górdólf had just drank and drank, not saying anything, rubbing his chest, watching Bē. Eventually he lay down on the counter and didn't move. Bē assumed that he was asleep, but wasn't sure, and, being too worried about the man getting up in a rage, couldn't calm himself down to tube out. He just waited, hoping that Fyüg would come home before long. Once the sun

went down Bē didn't have any way to track time, but it felt like an eternity had already passed. The last few days she would get home around when The Górdólf would close the store for the night, and if the man kept laying there like this and didn't get up to shut things down, she might not show up for a very long while.

Through the front window, Bē saw a silhouette go by and then stop. There was some mumbling and then two boys walked into the store. They were part of the group he had seen before — the day when he got that horrible neckbuzz — but neither was the one he had followed and tried to stop. One was bigger, with a buzz cut and a face dense with freckles, the other was short and wearing a backpack so loose it nearly touched the floor. They were looking at The Górdólf, pointing and laughing. Freckles pointed to the bottle on the counter and grabbed it. He took a drink and then made a gagging sound, passing the bottle to the short one with his eyes shut. Backpack tilted the bottle back but quickly brought it down and a bunch of liquid came spraying out of his mouth onto the floor. Freckles pointed and laughed and the sprayer pushed him and laughed as well. They were making a bunch of noise and looked again at The Górdólf but he was just laying there, completely still.

They put the bottle down and went over to a middle aisle. Bē got up, stretching his front leg and then doing his best to stretch the back ones, using the one to balance and pull on. He had hoped the boys would just leave, but now that they were looking around he would have to watch them. He wasn't sure if them talking to The Górdólf while he was asleep meant that he shouldn't make a fuss if they hid something, but, reluctantly, he figured he'd better watch them. He walked over to the aisle they went down.

The boys were looking through the selection in the candy section. They each had an unwrapped piece in their hands and were chewing on them. Freckles picked up a different type, nodded his head, threw down the partially eaten bar, and opened the new one. 'Man, I love these,' he said. His voice was scratchy and confident. Backpack was up on his tip-toes, looking at the selection on the top shelf. He found something he wanted but could not reach it, so he climbed on the bottom shelf to get a boost. As he reached out freckles stuck his hand in and grabbed something. 'This what you were looking for?,' freckles said, laughing. He was holding the candy high above the other's head.

Backpack's voice was high and whiny. 'Hey, give that to me. C'mon — hey, look.' He had stopped reaching above his head and was pointing at Bē.

Freckles turned around to look. ‘Whoa. It’s that dog that tried to get Dërik. Look at it, it’s missing a front leg. Hahahaha! Can you play fetch with only three legs?’ Freckles took something from the shelf and threw it over Bē’s head. Bē turned watched it bounce off the front of the counter and then turned quickly back to the boys. Before it seemed like they were playing around and Bē thought maybe they’d want him to play too, but now that freckles was talking to him his tone had changed into something nastier and not playful at all. ‘What’s the matter, tripod, forget how to run? Maybe if I throw it right at you?’ He picked something else up and launched it at Bē. He slunk back and to the side, his eyes locked with freckles, who was laughing hysterically. Backpack popped out from behind the bigger boy and something shiny and green twirled towards Bē. It hit the ground next to him and he flinched. He was getting scared and his lip curled back defensively. He wished the boys would just leave. He didn’t want them to hurt him, and he was afraid that if they started hiding things he would definitely have to go after them or get the neckbuzz. He felt himself starting to shake.

‘Oooh,’ said freckles, ‘the little gimp’s getting angry. Eat this, tough guy.’ A barrage of packaged food came flying at Bē, a flurry of colors and shapes and plastic and cardboard. He was able to dodge a few but his single front paw made it difficult to change directions and he slipped, taking a tube of cookies right to the nose. He growled and snapped at the misshapen cylinder, only to see the brown circles of a cupcake twin pack zoom up and goggle him. He backed away, huffing and snarling, all the while getting pelted with a salvo of foodstuffs until he was out of the boys’ line-of-sight. He heard backpack say exuberantly, ‘Yeah, let’s get him!’, but freckles said something quiet, conspiratorial. There were chuckles and Bē heard a big ruckus, things falling all over the floor. There was laughing and he heard the boys move to the next aisle, and there was more loud noises and orange puffs flew in front of Bē. There was some grunting and backpack yelled, ‘Stop it!’ and freckles shushed him and things were quiet.

Bē worried about them hiding something and getting a neckbuzz, but he also worried about being target practice. He slowly peeked his head around the corner, looking down to where he heard them last. They were at the far side, leaning over something on the ground. Backpack’s back was to him and his backpack was gone. A hand reached over and grabbed a bag of chips, pulled it between them, then went for another. Backpack stood up and Bē saw the backpack on the ground but no chips. They were hiding them! He took a nervous gulp, thought about the neck-

buzz, and ran towards them, barking and scrambling and aiming for backpack's white shoe. He wasn't halfway to them when freckles called out and picked up a bottle of something and threw it. Bē skittered to the side and briefly saw an explosion of red as he barreled on towards the now running boys. As they turned the corner a mass of boxes and cans came flying down into the path and Bē, trying to avoid the obstacles, made a late turn and slid into the far wall. He spun his three legs on the floor to continue in the direction of the boys, following pre-amputation instinct and slipping with miscoordination. When he finally caught traction they were already at the end of the next aisle, laughing and hooting, arms out, the floor piled with stuff from the shelves that they had pulled down during their escape. Bē continued through the morass, barking and bobbing, freaking out over the neckbuzz that would happen if those boys got away. By the time he made it to the end of the aisle, however, the front door was open and the boys were gone.

Bē stopped and stared at the closing door, panting and panicking. He started to whimper, waiting for the neckbuzz. Suddenly, freckles appeared, stepped into the door and reached for the bottle. Bē lunged desperately, expecting the boy to escape before he could reach him, but freckles slipped and Bē got a hold of his pants leg. Bē grabbed tight and shook his head, feeling himself getting thrown around. Then he felt the neckbuzz and his jaw released. His body was buzzing and freckles was running down the sidewalk and Bē realized he was outside of the store. His muscles were twitching and fighting his intent but he managed to scoot himself backwards enough so that his body blocked the closing door. A couple more focused wiggles and he was back inside, the neckbuzz stopping but he still vibrating with its aftereffects. In shock, he lay on his side in front of the door, wide-eyed and out of breath. In front of him he could see a spread of orange puffs on the ground. Though he was still tingling, his mouth began to water and he stood his tingling body up and meekly hobbled towards them.

Rudolpho sat unsteady, swaying on the stool behind the counter, blinking his eyes, unsure what to make of what was before him. The store was a mess. The floor was covered with boxes and bags and cans and bottles pulled down from the shelves, the previously ordered arrangement turned into a chaos of colors and shapes. His mind settled and he began to grasp that the scene was not some hallucination or dream. A rage began to burn inside of him. His store, what had happened to his store? Partway down one aisle there was a large splatter of ketchup all over the floor, a smeared patter running out of it. Who

did this? How was he going to clean it up? He heard crunching coming from below, in front of the counter. He leaned over to look, rolling on his big belly. The dog was laying on the ground, back to him, head bobbing, picking at snacks that were scattered across the floor. The dog. That cursed dog!

Rudolpho tried to jump over the counter at the animal, but his feet were off the ground, and he managed to only tilt forward slightly, arms flailing not close at all at the dog, before rotating back, one hand catching the cash register and his other grasping for the edge of the counter. His body was listing, one foot almost catching the ground and the other kicking freely in the air. With a frustrated grunt he tried to right himself but the register gave way and he slid down onto his foot at an angle and with such momentum that balance was impossible, falling first into the shelves behind him then onto the floor. There was a huge crash and Rudolpho was bombarded with cigarette boxes, vape pens, individually wrapped cigars, receipt paper rolls, cleaning supplies, and other assorted crap that had been placed on the shelves and forgotten. The register hit the ground and popped open, coins spraying out onto the floor. Pissed off, he threw off the crud that had fallen on him and got to his knees, about to stand up when he was hit hard on the head by a section of shelf that popped off of its unhinged supports. He felt no pain but the sudden jolt to his head infuriated him and he launched himself up, staggering forward and knocking more things off the counter and shelves as he attempted to keep himself upright in the narrow path.

When Bē heard the noise he stopped eating and backed away, uncertain what was happening. His backside hit something solid and could move no more. Looking up, he could see The Górdólf was gone, no longer laying on the counter. Somewhere in that direction Bē could hear him grunting and mumbling. His tone was unmistakable. Full of dread, Bē looked around for someplace to hide but was unable to think clearly. The Górdólf appeared suddenly, making an awful racket as he stumbled away from Bē on the other side of the counter. Adrenaline overcame Bē's hesitancy and he ran back towards the front of the store, down the front aisle and into the far corner. His back to the wall, he could hear The Górdólf loudly stomping through the litter on the floor, screaming out with a voice that filled the space.

'Devil! Devil! Where you go. You devil! No more!'

The sound was terrifying. Bē was so scared. He was trying to decide if he should wait to see The Górdólf, or make a run for the back of the store now. He was just about to take off when he was startled by a

neckbuzz, a shock which stopped any movement he was about to make.

The yelp was at the far wall, in the corner. Rudolpho headed down the aisle to cut it off. He was on fire, ready to destroy the demon, to stop it from tormenting him, to make it pay for the trouble it had caused. He lurched past the ketchup splatter, following the smear that turned into a red paw trail that disappeared and reappeared from beneath a spread of thrown-down packages. Seeing the direct evidence of the dog's culpability, Rudolpho became even more livid. He stormed through the debris, kicking boxes and cans, his body tensing with madness. He hit the trigger again and again heard the yelp. He cried out, frustrated at not having the words to express his enmity. For the first time in years, he began to speak in his mother tongue, a rush of syllables that came spitting out of his mouth like a spray of hatred. When he came around the corner he saw it cowering in the corner, eyes bulging, staring at him. Always staring at him. It made a run to the left and he zapped it again, causing it to trip and fall on its side. Clumsily, Rudolpho grabbed for its collar but got a mound of fur instead. He tried to lift it but it writhed awkwardly and cried out in pain so he threw down the trigger and grabbed at its neck with his other hand. It nipped his finger and he backhanded it then grabbed its collar and lifted it high into the air. It twisted and jerked, growling and baring its teeth, and no matter how it thrashed it was always looking at him, cursing him with those unblinking eyes.

Bē was almost dead with fright. His heart was exploding in his chest, his breaths short and strained. He was being held by his neck such that the skin pulled tight, holding his eyes open and his head unable to move, facing The Górdólf. He was moving through the store, past the aisles towards the back. It was just like that first horrible night, except that the big man was speaking constantly, a stream of words whose speed and tone were like nothing that Bē had heard from him before. Bē was scared, worse than before, worse than ever before, because he knew what was coming was more awful than he could have ever imagined that first night. And because he had no one to see, even fleetingly, even if they were frightened, even if it was the last time. No one. Bē was alone, completely alone. He was so fucking scared.

Into the basement, onto the table, tied down — body then neck. The Górdólf left and Bē wriggled and pulled, but couldn't get out. He tried biting at the rope around his neck, but couldn't reach it. His stump tingled with memory and he started to panic, skittering at the table in pointless and hysterical desperation. A shadow appeared in front of him and he heard The Górdólf speaking nonstop, varying between mumbling and

yelling, his tone vacillating between anger and misery. Bē tried to look back but could see nothing, his head tightly held to the table. Then a large, fleshy hand grabbed his front paw and his leg was violently pulled straight. Bē yelled and growled in fear, snapping uselessly at the hand, flashing back to a memory he had lost, unable to believe that this was happening, now or again. Suddenly his paw was released and his leg pulled back. Bē looked over in the direction of The Górdólf and then he smelled blood and felt a hot surge of pain and then blackness.

Rudolpho looked at the paw in his hand with satisfaction. It was still warm. He rubbed his fist to his chest, feeling the other beneath his shirt, sensing the power of the paired charms. He looked over at the dog. It was staring back at him (of course) but was unmoving, stiff. It was as if it was dead. Blood was spreading from its fresh wound and Rudolpho realized it might actually die if he didn't do something right away. He wanted it dead, but not quite yet. It needed to feel the pain that it had caused him. He needed revenge, and for that it needed to be alive.

Cursing himself for having forgotten the torch, Rudolpho bolted up the stairs, trying to take them two at a time but in his drunken state mistaking the pattern and tripping forward, sinking the knife deep into a tread. Using two hands to pull it out, he went the rest of the way up without trying to skip, then headed back to the kitchen. He opened a refrigerator and tossed the paw inside. Then he went over and grabbed the nozzled canister but was unsteady when he turned back and stumbled through the swinging door and into the refrigeration case, the cleaver flying from his hand into a package of raw chicken breasts. His breath having been knocked out of him, Rudolpho took a moment to catch it, leaning against the case, feeling the refreshing coolness waft over his hot and sweaty body. After a few seconds he jerked himself up out of the enveloping cold, grabbed the knife, and headed back to the basement.

After closing the door behind him, Rudolpho looked at the dog. It was so completely still that he wondered again if it was already dead, and risked putting his hand by its snout to make sure it was still breathing. He was afraid it was playing a trick on him and would snap at his fingers, but it just lay there, its short breaths panting against his skin. Rudolpho clicked the torch on and adjusted the flame to a tight blue jet. He pulled the leg but it slipped because of the blood so he grabbed up where it met the body and twisted, pushing the red, dripping stump straight out. Using the torch, he cauterized the cut, the air filling with the smell of blackening flesh, boiling blood, and the sweet acidity of burnt hair. When he was finished the leg was twitching, but otherwise the dog

was still motionless. The spasms and the stink turned his stomach, and he spat at the floor. He went around to check its breath again and saw those wide-open eyes, burrowing through him. Rudolpho reached out to force them closed but the lids wouldn't budge. He pulled his hand back in disgust and started speaking again, rapid-fire curses damning the cur for its torment. His voice echoed in the tiny room, filling the space with booming chants of condemnation.

Rudolpho hit the dog's head with his hand, trying to wake it up. He wanted it to feel this. It did not move. He hit it again and again, all the while screaming, frustrated with its obstinance. He finally gave up and, still spouting a frenzied torrent, picked up the cleaver and went to the dog's backside. He pulled out one of its back legs, and lightly pulled the blade across the ankle joint, just slightly splitting the skin. Maybe this will wake it up, he thought as lifted the knife high up into the air. Just then the door burst open and Rudolpho turned around to see Vanessa running at him, crazy eyed and yelling. She plowed into him with straight arms and he tumbled backwards into the corner, the knife falling uselessly away. The girl leapt at him, grabbing at his face and throat. He tried to push her off him but then she wasn't there and instead it was Ivor, leaning on him, grabbing his collar, face filled with disgust. Ivor was saying something with great intensity, inches from his face, slow and deep and resolute. Rudolpho could not understand a word of it.

Somewhere, deep in the protective bubble of his deep tube, Bē heard the sound of Fyüg's voice. He pulled up some, closer to awareness, but hesitated, sensing the pain that filled his body. He felt his body go light, freed from its earthly restraints. He was floating, gliding. Far away, Fyüg was crying out, a distant whisper filled with anguish and hysteria.

'We've got to get this fucking thing off him — we can't leave with it on — no, he locked it on there — get that knife — all right, I got it'

His neck felt free now too. He was breathing easier. He could smell Fyüg. She was talking to him, sobbing. He came up further. It hurt, but she was there, he wanted to be closer to her. Then he heard another voice. Something familiar. Something horrible. The voice was talking to Fyüg, then getting closer, filling Bē's head. Suffering overcame him, and he receded, turning back down the tube, away from the agony, descending to someplace safe from this dreadful world.





*When you're tryin' to find your way home  
You don't know which way to go?*



## Chapter 10

### Set Free

‘Oh B.’

Fugue was sitting on a stool in the kennel, crying. Across the way, B was in a cage laying on a cot, watching her. Even at this distance his lips were twitching, pulling back slightly. If she came any closer he would bare all of his teeth and make the most awful noises, demon growls that sounded unnatural, as if they were being generated by some process in an industrial hell. Fugue had not been able to touch him unsexed since the night they brought him in nearly catatonic with shock. He was nothing like the dog she remembered, the caring, funny, hungry guy with whom you could curl up with and just relax. He was angry and bitter, uninterested in food and any type of human contact. Most distressing, he was always on alert. Even when B was guarding the store, when they had so little time together and he would get incredibly excited to see her, she knew him to be able to shut down in an instant, to readily drop into a state of deep, wakeful rest. He seemed completely incapable of that now. His wide eyes were not unfocused and inert, they were aware. He didn't look, he *watched*.

Fugue convulsed with sobs. Seeing B laying there, head sideways but tense with anxiety, distressed at her presence, made her feel like she had lost a dear friend. She had only known him a short while, but she had formed a closer bond with him than anyone else — human or animal — ever in her life. Now he was gone, and what was left was a different creature, not a source of love or companionship, but one more thing in this world that hated her, that found her repulsive. But it was worse than everything else that had come before, not because of what he was, but because of what he had been. She was stuck here in this new “home,” a freak living in a laboratory, a pathetic child who couldn't even retain

the love of a dog. Sitting on that stool, against the wall, far away from B (but apparently not far enough) she was alone. More so than when she was with Gordolph, or at the girls home, or even before that. She was all by herself, lonely, crying.

‘Oh B.’

She called out to the dog, but he showed no recognition, no warmth. Those cold eyes, harsh and uncaring, they were tearing at her heart, rending her soul. She couldn’t look anymore and dropped her head into her hands, tears filling her palms and running down her arms. In the blackness of her closed eyes, she could see him as he was before: happy, that big dog smile, the wagging tail, those bright eyes, that dark face, soft and furry and so cute, always making her smile. She saw him running around excitedly, proudly going on a walk with her, but then in her vision his front paw receded into a stump and he crashed to the ground, collapsed on his side and staring at her with hostility. Fugue squeezed her head to make the image go away, to turn back to her original memory, but it would not. He was the same if her eyes were open or shut, never the same as before.

She felt so sorry for him. No dog deserved this, but he was such a good boy, why did this have to happen to him? She feared the rest of his life would be suffering, that all he would know from here on would be pain and anger. She worried that his life would be short — even ignoring his mental state, how was he going to survive physically? How would he even function with two missing paws? She looked up, forcing herself to look at the wrapped leg, trying to imagine what could be done. She couldn’t imagine how bad he must hurt. Fugue felt like she was dying inside and knew it was much worse for him.

B sucked in a deep breath and let out a sigh. It was different from what she was used to, rather than tired or exasperated or indifferent it sounded spiteful, accusatory. Tears welled in Fugue’s eyes again and she spoke again, too softly for him to hear. ‘Oh B.’

Fugue should have been angry. She deserved to be. At Gordolph, at her life, at the unfairness of it all. Angry at herself, for letting the dog stay with that asshole, for not running away with him, for not setting him free. She could even be angry at B. He had abandoned her, he was being ungrateful — she had probably saved his life. Instead he rejected her, pushed her away, isolated them both.

But she was not angry, just sad. And an uncertain mix of hope and hopelessness. She wanted B to get better, to be like his old self, to connect with her again. She *needed* him to. But she also realized that he may

have already been lost, that what she hoped for was gone, that she had already experienced the complete disappearance of the dog she loved. Looking at him she could not deny this, but she would not accept it. It just didn't seem possible, that this beautiful creature, that this source of joy, would be turned into one of despair.

Fugue ached — her heart, her eyes, her throat, her whole body. She was exhausted. Maybe she could try again to see if Ivor would help. She knew it was a risk — and Ivor had already said no — but this was no way for B to live. Standing up, she told B she loved him, took a deep breath to clear her emotions, and walked out of the kennel.

Ivor wasn't at his desk. She pressed his call button and sat down. He showed up shortly and, upon seeing her, his expression turned to one of concern. He sat against his desk and bent forward.

'What's on your mind, Fugue?'

'It's B. He isn't—' but she couldn't go on. She put her head down, trying to hold the tears back.

Ivor stood up and walked towards her. 'Come here,' he said, lifting her out of the chair. He closed the door and put his arms on her shoulders, bending down to look into her face. 'Just let it out. It's okay.' Fugue started crying uncontrollably, face contorting, arms at her side, embarrassed but unable to hold back. Ivor pulled her to him and put his arms around her, patting her head. 'It's okay. It's okay.'

After a minute or more she had calmed down, pulling back. There was a huge wet stain on his blue collared shirt and a string of snot running from it to her nose. She swiped at it, self-consciously apologizing. Ivor sat her down and grabbed a box of tissues from his desk. He grabbed a couple and dabbed at his shirt, handing the rest to her.

'Thanks,' she said, wiping her nose. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. It's been a tough few days. I'm surprised you've held out as well as you have.' He was leaning on the desk again, hands on the edge. 'So tell, what's going on with the dog? Is he getting worse?'

Fugue shook her head. 'He's the same. But he's not getting any better. He's not eating. He seems miserable.'

'You're going to have to give him time. He's been through some serious trauma.'

'But he hates me. *Me*. I was the only friend he had.' She sniffled and rubbed her nose in a tissue.

'I don't think he's mad at you. He's just confused and upset. Remember, he's a dog. Take it from me, it can be tough to understand what's going on in that head of his.'

Fugue looked up and smiled, then shook her head. 'Isn't there something you can do? It seems like you should be able to do something. To help him out.'

'We've already been over this, Fugue. Our work is to challenge healthy dogs, to push them out of their comfort zone, see what they're capable of. That dog is in no state for any of the things we do, and probably never will be.' He paused, clutching his hands in front of him. 'Even before all this happened I told you we couldn't use him. He's too damaged.'

'But what if his comfort zone is to be miserable? Can't we push him out of that? I can change the code, make it special for him. Give him an escape.'

Ivor took a deep breath. 'We have to be careful. The mind isn't something that can just be fixed. If we get things wrong, he may end up worse off than he is now. Look at Todd.'

'But Todd's using the equipment.'

'Because that's the only way he can live. He's completely lost, completely dependent. I don't think that's where you want that dog to end up.'

'Well, maybe if he's happy—'

'Do you think Todd's happy? We don't get to pick what emotions they feel, we can only guide them.' Fugue wasn't convinced, but couldn't think of a rebuttal. Ivor continued, 'Listen, it's going to be tough going for a while. I know this is probably not an ideal place for him, but with our work, and your uncle, and you, and the vet — it's a tricky situation. Turning him into an experiment is not going to help.' Fugue remained silent, looking at the ground. 'You know, it may sound weird but what might help is for you to get back to focusing on your work and school. It'll help take your mind off of him. You're here all the time now, so finding a way to have some separation is important. Otherwise you'll just drown yourself in tears.'

Fugue looked up, shrugging noncommittally.

Ivor looked at her with encouragement. 'Just try it. See if it helps, alright? He's not going anywhere. You're not abandoning him. You can go in to see him anytime you want. And you keep on loving him, showing that you care, and he'll come around. You'll see.' He stood up and rubbed her hair. 'Speaking of work, I need to get back at it. You going to be okay?'

Fugue bit her lip and nodded.

'Okay. If you need anything, just ring me again. Or find Dee, she's somewhere around here.' He opened his door and stepped out, turning

back to wink and say one last thing as he left. ‘Don’t wait too long to get back to that code — next week we have a new sequence to run.’

Fugue stood in the doorway and watched him disappear into the rest area. He was right about the work. Not to take her mind off of B — she wasn’t sure anything would help with that — but that she needed to get back to it. With the new living arrangement and the situation with her uncle she really couldn’t afford to let things slip. Ivor was a nice guy and being very accommodating with her but if she did not keep up her end of the deal he would surely cut her loose. There were plenty of other kids out there who would be eager to take her place. If that happened she certainly wasn’t going back to Gordolph’s, and no other place would want to take her on halfway through her commitment and having been dropped by her previous contract partner. Not to mention she’d have no place to stay. She would end up back in the girls home where she wasn’t sure she could survive a second time. She would get picked on worse than before, not just for being ugly and fat and weird, but for being a failure too. Plus, lacking traditional school credits, she would be behind anyone her age, so they would probably call her stupid as well. That also meant she would have to stay there longer before she could graduate. No, there was no way she would go back there. She’d run away instead. Maybe Post could find her someplace to stay and she could work in his shop. But that was too close to the store and Gordolph would eventually find out, which meant that she would get sent back to him or more likely the home. If she ran away, it would have to be out of the city, far, far away. Her only safety net was her current arrangement, and if she lost that she would fall even further down.

There was, of course, another reason to work on keeping her current situation — B. If she got dropped, or sent back, or ran away, she would definitely never see the dog again. That would be devastating. She worried about what would happen to herself if she were out on her own, but she was *petrified* about leaving B. Even if she lost all other reasons to work, she would do it for him, so that she could be with him. Even though he wanted nothing to do with her right now, she could not leave him and felt that somehow he still needed her.

Nonetheless, despite her determination to work hard for herself and for B, she had absolutely no motivation at the moment. She just wanted to go back to watching him. Rationally, though, she knew that returning to the kennel would just waste time and tears, and would make no further progress towards any outcome other than to make her feel awful. So, even though she did not want to, she walked to her desk and switched

on her computer. The twin screens glowed with cool light. When it had booted she started up SPRODE, watching as it loaded her code where she had left it last. She stared at it listlessly, unwilling to grasp its purpose, what she had been doing, or where things needed to go next.

Fugue pulled up her request queue and sighed — it extended beyond the edge of the screen. How did she get so far behind? Maybe there were things she could knock out quickly without too much effort. She scrolled through, looking for requests that looked like more mundane asks. Ivor had a couple of old entries from before they brought B back, but everything recent was from the other staff. It seemed like a lot more than normal. They knew what was going on, that she was staying here. Ivor had to have let them know *something* about why. He must have told them about B. Was this some sort of passive aggressive effort to get back at her for disrupting their workplace? They barely even came over to this side anyway. And if they had bothered to come out of their secret cave they would have seen that she was not doing so well. Instead they're over there firing off extra work at her as if she was a machine and not a person.

Discouraged and annoyed, she minimized everything and stared at her desktop background. Spanning both of her screens, it was a picture of a painting that Post had put up for sale a year or so ago. It showed the deck of an elaborately-rigged galleon sitting in the middle of an empty ocean, its crew being terrorized by rats. The rodents were covering the men, chasing them, chewing at their clothes and hands and eyes. Sailors were climbing the masts, lining up to dive off the plank, flailing around in agony. Rats were everywhere — balancing up the ropes, ascending the sails, watching from the railings, pouring from belowdecks. Blood was all over the place, flowing thick and heavy, pouring off the edge of the ship. In the lower corner was an fancy shield with a calligraphed title in crimson: *Mutiny*. Fugue looked closely at one particular element, a man hanging from a ratline, his knuckles being chewed, desperately holding his feet up from a circling horde. She wondered which one she was right now, the doomed man or the dirty rat, a pathetic victim or one of the forgotten masses, dreaming of revenge.

Fugue's current living arrangement was not unlike being on a ship. Cramped, uncomfortable, no privacy. The night they had brought B back, Ivor had set up a place for her to sleep in the supply room (actually closer to a closet) with cushions collected from the office furniture and blankets meant for the dogs. Fugue did not use it, though, instead staying in the kennel all night to watch over B. The next day, Dee had Fugue (re-

luctantly, for she wanted to keep an eye on B) help her move the supplies out of the room to places throughout the unrest side of the building: unused desks, partially empty cupboards, the kitchen, the bathroom, and (of course) the floor. A fair amount was just thrown away, determined to be expired, unusable, unneeded, or of unknown purpose. Ivor brought a small mattress with some linens and taped up a piece of paper on which **Fugue** was printed in block lettering. On the unrest side there was a shower used to clean the dogs, and they made a "Privacy" sign to hang from the doorhandle.

From the beginning it was assumed that Fugue would not be going back to stay with her uncle. Ivor explained to her that she couldn't live with any of the employees because that was an explicit violation of HS policies. Even her staying in the building was pushing the rules, but nobody would find out about it as long as Gordolph didn't say anything, and that wasn't going to happen. Her uncle needed her support money.

Actually, Gordolph came close to screwing everything up. The second day after the incident, he began to reach out to Fugue on her phone. Disgusted and furious with him, she had ignored his calls but eventually he resorted to pestering her with messages. Whatever the desired intent, his actions from two nights previous were certain to negate any attempts to reestablish or reconcile their relationship, however his brusque combination of apologetics and threats would have turned her off anyway.

Gordolph: Sorry about dog you come home

Gordolph: Keeping dog bad idea my mistake  
you come home

Gordolph: You need come home get away from devil

Gordolph: I not want to send you back  
but you not home  
i call police

That last one got Fugue's attention. If the authorities were called Gordolph's animal abuse would be discovered and she would be sent back to the girls home (though not as a result of his threats). When she showed it to Ivor she found out that he had been receiving messages too, though apparently his were more antagonistic and less sensible. He showed her a couple:

Rudolpho: V mine i take for good

Rudolpho: Where the covfefe big now

Ivor had assumed he was still drunk and was similarly ignoring them. However, seeing Fugue's he took her in a PhRI vehicle to confront her uncle. She needed to get her things anyway, so that would serve as the pretense for their trip (as if they needed one — Ivor extracted from necessity a logic that, though nonexistent, was justification enough). When they arrived they were able to enter through the back via Fugue's key even though the store was closed. Although she was nervous it they didn't immediately see Gordolph. She went up to her room to collect her stuff and Ivor ventured out into the store. Fugue had collected only a fraction of her things when she heard yelling downstairs and ran down to see what was going on.

Up at the front of the store, Gordolph was sitting on the floor, surrounded by food that had been pulled off the shelves and spread all over the floor. He was arguing loudly and was very drunk. Ivor was standing further back, calmer but speaking with a volume that was trying to match his blaring foe. They were talking over each other and Fugue couldn't make any sense of what they were saying. When her uncle saw her coming up, he attempted to stand, first rolling to his hands and knees and then attempting to step up, but an outstretched arm seeking something solid for balance found air and he went flying off towards the ground, disappearing behind the shelves. There was a series of explosions and the sound of scattering across the ground. Ivor, who had gone quiet, started chuckling.

'What's going on?,' said Fugue, 'What are you two fighting about?'

Ivor looked at her with a smirk. 'He's too gone to make sense of anything. I'm trying to explain the situation to him and he keeps blathering on about you and the dog. Did you get your things?'

She came up beside him and looked down the aisle. Gordolph was crawling away from them through a spread of pretzels and chips and puffs. He was speaking to the floor in a language that she could not understand. He kept reaching for the far wall even though he was nowhere near it. Fugue was speechless. She had never seen her uncle this messed up. She had been hesitant about confronting him — as angry as she was he also frightened her — but seeing him wallowing uselessly through a sea of junk food made her drop her nervousness and she willfully headed towards him. She wasn't sure what she planned to do — scream, kick, spit, beat — but she never got the chance to find out. Ivor grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back.

'Hey, what are you doing?'

When she turned to him the look on his face made it clear that her

own emotional state was transparent on her own.

‘You need to ignore him. He’s not worth it.’ She pulled away but he held on tight. ‘You’re going to get yourself into a bigger mess. Anyway, taking it out on him now will just be wasted effort. He probably won’t even remember any of this.’

‘Good,’ said Fugue, tugging on her arm, ‘he won’t be able to blame me. I just want a little payback.’

‘Vanessa!’ Ivor turned her and grabbed her other arm, shaking her once to get her attention. ‘This is not the time. We talked about this, if you don’t want to get sent away, you’re going to have to forget about him. He’ll get what’s coming to him eventually, but not right now.’

Fugue relaxed, feeling chastened. On the ride over Ivor had warned her about this, and here she was ignoring his advice. If Gordolph got into any kind of trouble with the police, or involved them somehow, then that would threaten his guardianship of her, which would threaten her ability to remain with PhRI. Using short and concise reasoning, Ivor had explained to her the reasons why living at the laboratory, continuing her work, and avoiding her uncle was the best — and the only — path for her.

Gordolph slipped and splayed face-first onto the ground. He lay there unmoving, calling out to Fugue in a slurred and tired voice. ‘Vanessa! Vanessa!’

Ivor pulled her chin and to turn attention back to him. ‘Don’t worry about him. Is your stuff packed?’

Fugue shook her head and told him she had stopped partway through because of the commotion. He sent her back to finish, telling her that he’d deal with Gordolph. She went back to her room but even after piling her clothes and most important stuff on the bed and tying them up in the comforter, she still had many things left over. There were books and trinkets, magazines she had enjoyed, magazines she had yet to read, mostly empty sketchpads, office supplies, a PhRI pint glass which she used as a pen holder. None of it was essential, but Fugue felt uncomfortable leaving them behind. One never knows when something once possessed becomes necessary again, and she didn’t want any reason to have to come back here.

There were empty produce boxes downstairs and a good-sized one would be enough for the unpacked remainder. She went down to get one, intentionally ignoring anything in the direction of Ivor and her uncle. As she walked over to the corner with the boxes she crossed by the basement stairs and, without thinking about it, glanced down them. It

was gloomy but she could see to the bottom, the door to the room closed shut. She was hit with a memory of that night — not of her and Ivor and Dee running down this very stairwell to rescue B, but of something earlier, something more horrific. From that impossible vantage point in the corner, in blurry black-and-white, Gordolph strapping B down, pulling his leg out, the knife lifting high...

Fugue shook her head to clear it. She ran to the boxes, quickly grabbed a big one, and raced back to her room. As she tried to fill it she found it impossible to concentrate on the task. Her hands were shaking and her heart hammered in her chest. She felt like she couldn't catch her breath. She tried to push that image away but it lurked there, shadowing her every thought. She finally sat on the bed and mashed her fists into her eyes, forcing an earlier memory to replace it, one of that very first night, of her untying B and protecting him from Gordolph. She began to relax as her thoughts filled with just her and the dog, together, comforting each other. She touched the bed, remembered laying on there with him, snuggling. She opened her eyes and got up to finish packing.

As Ivor helped move her things into the van, he explained that her uncle had passed out on the floor, and that he'd taken his phone and put it in the kitchen. 'With any luck he'll find it only once he's sobered up. We just need to hope he just sleeps things off and doesn't do anything stupid before he comes to his senses.'

It turned out that once he did sober up (at least partially) Gordolph at least didn't do anything too insensible. However, apparently unable to find his phone, he showed up at PhRI, knocking loudly on the glass door and hollering to be let in, cupping his hands around his face trying to see through the mirrored exterior. Fugue had been working on arranging things in her new room and when she poked her head out to see what all the noise was, Dee ran up to push her back through the door.

'Honey, it's your uncle,' said Dee with her sing-song, raspy voice. 'You need to close the door and stay inside. He can't know that you're staying here.'

Fugue sat on the mattress, staring at the wall nervously. Stuck inside the tiny room, unable to know what was happening, it felt even more like a cell. She was trapped, suffocating. She actually was not afraid of Gordolph — Fugue was sure that Ivor would handle him — what bothered her was the thought that she would have to hide out any time there was a risk of her living situation being found out. She felt the looming pressure of a future where her freedom was even more limited than before,

where she was of lesser status, something to be hidden away when the outside world came calling. These feelings were consuming her when there was a knock at the door and Dee stuck her head inside, saying that Gordolph wanted to see her.

‘He wants to hear from you that you don’t want to stay with him. Remember, you’re just here for work and school. Don’t let him know this is where you live now.’

Fugue followed Dee outside. The door slid open and she saw Ivor standing close to the entrance, her uncle further away down the entrance path. He looked cleaned up, at least by his standards. He had shaved, his hair was slicked back, and he was wearing a shabby, button-up plaid shirt that tucked around his belly and into his jeans. When he saw her he raised his eyebrows and smiled in what was probably supposed to be a gesture of friendliness but looked to Fugue more like a creepy sneer. He raised his hand in an awkward wave.

Ivor stepped forward and spoke to Fugue, loud enough for Gordolph to hear. ‘I just finished explaining to Rudolpho the situation. You will not be staying at his place anymore, you will not see each other, you will have nothing to do with him anymore. We will no longer accept dogs from him, so his business relationship with PhRI is terminated. We will allow you to finish your contract, and have made arrangements for you to live elsewhere. In return for agreeing to this, Rudolpho can continue to receive the support payments for being your guardian, but he must not let anyone know that you are no longer living with him. If he goes back on the agreement, we inform the authorities about what he did to the dog, and we will make sure that you do not return to live with him so that he will lose the support money.’

As Ivor talked, Gordolph rubbed his hands and looked around nervously, occasionally glancing at Fugue. The failure of a smile had disappeared from his face and instead his lips were opening and closing slightly, as if he were silently mumbling to himself. When Ivor finished, Gordolph locked eyes with Fugue and spoke up. He was full of contrition and modesty, so much so that if Fugue hadn’t been looking right at him she would not have believed it was him talking. ‘I am sorry. You come back, and I will be good. I still—I can still take care of you.’

Fugue had been focused on Ivor’s explanation and was not expecting her uncle to speak. His tone was such that she had a natural inclination to feel sympathy, but before he finished speaking her rage had resurfaced and she was attempting to destroy him with her stare. Ivor must have noticed because he placed a hand on her shoulder and said qui-

etly, 'Easy. You don't want to mess this up.' Fugue took a deep breath and tried to stay calm. Gordolph was staring at her with a stupid expression, as if he were waiting on an answer to a question. Ivor continued, even softer. 'He needs to hear it from you. You need to tell him that this is how you want it.'

Fugue turned to Ivor who nodded and then back to her uncle. Looking at his stupid face and his messy clothes and his fake attitude she felt a surge of power, a sense of dominance. She was ready to tear him down, to make him feel pathetic, to show him that she was in control. Her emotions filled her and she prepared to let loose on him, to articulate herself with an epic takedown that would show him what a miserable subhuman he was. There was a pregnant pause as she attempted to formulate her invective but her brain wouldn't work and, eventually, all she was able to snarl out was, 'Fuck you.'

Gordolph stared at her dumbly, as if he were still waiting for a proper answer. Fugue said nothing, in full belief that her response was adequate. Ivor squeezed her shoulder and nodded for her to continue. Fugue tried again, reinitiating her momentum and attempting pressing forward.

'Fuck you. You fucking monster. I never want to see you again. I never want to think about you again. You make me sick. I hope you—'

'Okay, okay. That's enough.' Ivor cut her off and pulled her back. 'Satisfied Rudolpho? This is how it's going to be.'

'I see. Goodbye Vanessa,' said Gordolph.

He sounded sad, and Fugue was happy for it. She stuck her head around Ivor and yelled out, 'Don't ever come around me again. I'll never forget. B will never forget.' The look on Gordolph's face, one of deep pain and loss, was incredibly satisfying. She felt the urge to spit at him, but Dee grabbed her and pulled her inside.

By the time Ivor came in, Dee had calmed Fugue down and made her a cup of tea. Fugue still felt pumped for what she had said to her uncle, but with Ivor in front of her she felt a little ashamed for having lost control of her emotions, risking messing things up. Ivor nodded at Dee and gave Fugue a compassionate smile. 'You won't be seeing him again. Which is good because if you did I'd be afraid that you might kill him.' Fugue let out a nervous laugh. Ivor's face turned serious and he continued, 'But just to be clear, you can't go back to the store. Don't go near there ever again. This is your home now.'

Fugue nodded solemnly. 'Thanks, Ivor,' she said. 'You too, Dee.' Ivor patted her head and walked away, while Dee sat there, warmly smiling,

rubbing her back softly.

Fugue pulled the request queue back up. As was typical, most of the titles were deprived of substance, instead consisting of adjectives indicating the importance ( *Urgent!* ; *Critical!* ; *Emergency!* ), directives indicating the importance ( *Open Me!* ; *ASAP!* ; *Don't Skip!* ), or just symbols, as if the entry was too important for words ( *!!!* ; *!?!* ; *\*&#\$\$@!* ). There was a general sentiment that better traction would be achieved if the details were only shown once the request was opened. This was not totally unfounded since the system tracked when the request had actually been clicked on, at which point there was an impetus for Fugue to actually address it rather than being accused of ignoring it (by not clicking on it, she could at least claim to have not seen it). Because everyone thought their requests should have the highest priority, the titles eventually just settled into a constant stream of perpetual escalation. Occasionally some smart-ass would come up with some baiting title that would trick her ( *Is this the most important request ever?* ; *I couldn't believe this happened...and neither will you!* ; *Did you hear what Ivor said about this?* ) but after a couple times she would wise up and deliberately skip those out of spite. (Keith had a system where he tried to translate his request precedence to levels that he thought she would better relate to ( *DEBUG* , *INFO* , *WARN* , *ERROR* , *FATAL* ) but their inadequate descriptiveness just made his requests look weird and her natural tendency to skim past any line with these phrases caused them to be skipped more often than not.) As a result, it was practically impossible to prioritize anything correctly and Fugue generally just picked things at random, hoping she didn't have the poor luck to click something mind numbing or impossible. If something truly needed to be at the top of her list, the requester would come by in person and point her to it specifically, or they would actually break down and put relevant information in the title.

She scrolled mindlessly through the list which was set up so that when the end was reached it would start from the beginning without any visible break. She had zero motivation to do anything. She wanted to go back and check on B, but she needed to get something done first. Otherwise she would risk breaking her contract, and then she would lose everything she had left, including B. The contract established her placement in the HS program, and it continued only as long as Ivor (and the rest of the PhRI staff) agreed that she was fulfilling her obligation. She had always been nervous about meeting their expectations, but sitting there just staring at the work queue, actively doing nothing, was almost

tantamount to ripping up the contract herself.

The Hitech School program was originally established as an alternative to traditional educational paths for adolescents which would provide them work experience and targeted classes to set them up for an immediate career in the technology trades. The schooling side of the program was completely online and paired with work that was required to be physically located at a business. The intent was to combat the “remote curse,” the scourge in which businesses experienced a large number of substandard new hires that showed poor work ethics, lack of actual job skills, and an outsized view of their worth. As the name suggests, this was blamed on the rise in remote positions, where limited amounts of physical social interaction, oversight, and time scheduling were causing workers to flounder and develop detrimental traits. Many solutions were attempted to combat “the curse,” including virtual reality office spaces (e.g. Ozone — the Ocular Open Office), monitoring equipment (e.g. Reddot — aka HAL), electronic time card hardware (e.g. iTCH), and almost impenetrable employment entrance exams requiring years of study to pass (e.g. any one of the MOLARR companies).

The HS program was one of these efforts, conceptualized as combination of traditionalism and disruptive innovation. Being located in a workspace with other people — especially including management — would neutralize the issues of being remote by eliminating them and returning to a tried-and-true system. On the other hand, offloading classrooms to the internet allowed them to be centralized and standardized, at the same time offering more options for bespoke curriculum specifically catered to each individual. However, the primary benefit of the program was that large amounts of useless school time could be excised — everything from superfluous homework assignments to unneeded subject matter to obligatory testing to wasteful (and often ruinous) social interactions to pointless bureaucracy. The program was sold as ‘an Information Age apprenticeship through which kids could develop on-the-job experience and training without being burdened by entrenched pedagogical expectations.’

Of course, the program was beset by problems from the beginning. Since it was not only experimental but also never intended to be a replacement for traditional school/career paths, the number of available spots was extremely limited. The initial cohorts were filled primarily with kids from well-off families — well-groomed sons and daughters of successful tech workers, wayward children of those in big-business management ranks, suburban teens looking for an end-around the

doldrums of school to kickstart their already burgeoning internet companies. The few specifically chosen from lower-class neighborhoods were those identified as being destined to succeed — regardless if it was through HS or not — for which the program’s novelties and innovations were unnecessary and probably gratuitous. The inequities were obvious and even worse were the abuses of the freedom built into the program aimed at fostering innovation but leading instead to unaccountability and a slew of graduates who appeared to be more afflicted by “the curse” than those who HS was created in response to.

The program’s name also presented issues. Originally called High-tech Industrial School, this was deemed (particularly by the moneyed folks whose kids would fill its initial waves) as too working-class and thus a backhanded criticism of its perceived quality. Furthermore, the blatantly masculine acronym reinforced assumptions about the gender divide in the sector as well as the nature of blue-collar work (putting aside that such an association was supposedly invalid). The name was shortened to High-Tech School but the acronym sounded too much like a drug reference, and then to High-tech School where the acronym was rejected because it sounded too much like the original male possessive. Various other options were tried: High-tech Education and Research School (also sexist, too reactionary); Innovative Technology School (too dull, unimaginative); High-tech Immersive, Synergistic, and Heavily Experiential Research School (enough already!); Learning, Innovation, Future Technologies School (where’s high tech?). Eventually they dropped the “gh” (hitech looked cooler) and settled back on HS with the agreement to pronounce out the acronym (āch ěs) to avoid any appearance of preferentialism.

Despite its troubled start, the program did have some initial successes and once the business motivation was established it settled into its present form, one which solely worked with disadvantaged children to provide them opportunities to access experience and employment in technology fields. To protect against a repeat of past abuses, a vendor was brought in to create a single development environment (the Super Productive Restricted Organizational Development Environment) which all participants used and whose tracking capabilities provided accountability for both the HSers and the businesses. SPRODE was deployed on a dedicated system (also provided by the vendor) which had various restrictions, the most important of which was a firewall which limited the student’s access to the internet, blocking them from non-work-related material and controlling their use of technical forums

and Q&A sites. The intent was to instill highly productive work habits and establish a deep knowledge of SPRODE and their business-specific technical work without relying on quick web-lookups and copy-and-paste solutions. In actual practice, most HSers used their phones extensively, so the firewall was more an annoying formality than an actual restriction.

When a business and student were paired up in the program, they each signed a contract establishing certain obligations. The businesses agreed to take on the HSers for a five-year paid apprenticeship and to provide high-speed internet connections, dedicated workspaces, time to complete coursework, and appropriate project work. HSers agreed to keep up with their schooling, work at least thirty-two hours a week, and exclusively develop within the SPRODE system.

The program was extremely competitive, even more so than when it began, in a large part because of the limited number of companies that would agree to its stipulations. The use of SPRODE was considered to be limiting and difficult to interface with existing programs or processes. As a result, most of the business participants were new or at least new to incorporating “technology,” and they were further narrowed by the five-year commitment which if not met resulted in a large financial penalty personally accountable by the owners (even if the business failed). Acceptance to the program was based on geographic closeness to a business participant, aptitude potential, and a qualitative assessment of the applicant’s hard-luck story. This latter aspect played the biggest part and, combined with skills that were honed somewhat in isolation and with a non-standard system, there was a fairly derogatory assessment of HSers in “normal” tech circles as being unsophisticated, somewhat incompetent, and unhireable. Because of this, even after completing the program HS alumni essentially only worked with companies that used the SPRODE system. Since the number of these companies was tiny, and because HSers usually stayed on with their original sponsor after they original term, new openings were coveted and fought over by those who coveted long-term stability, often without fully appreciating its consequences. All of this led elitists (which included everyone from precocious high schoolers to hot-stuff code jockeys to burnt-out corporate programmers) to refer to the program and its members with a slew of derisive monikers: Homeless School, Hacker Slaves, Hella Stupid, Hashtag Suck, Heap Shit, etc. etc.

Despite the program’s questionable reputation, Fugue considered it a great privilege to be an HSer. She really had no other opportunities

and the tech world was otherwise closed off to her. She was beginning her third year with PhRI and was their sole developer, having gained extensive experience with both SPRODE and their specific applications. She tried hard to do good work, to meet everyone's expectations, to provide them with tools they needed to perform their jobs. But she also had deep doubts about her abilities. After so much time, she felt she should know more, be faster, more innovative. Her lack of creativity was almost embarrassing. She applied the same techniques over and over. All of the lab staff were always coming up with new ideas, new things for her to implement. She listened and did exactly what they asked, but never offered anything fresh or insightful in return. They told her that her work was important and appreciated, but she had no doubt that she was completely replaceable, that if she failed to meet her contractual obligations she could and would be let go and another HSer — or perhaps a graduate of the program — would immediately be brought in to take over. They were probably secretly hoping she would mess up so they could bring in someone more talented, brighter, less of an emotional mess. The only reason she was still around was the contract, and that became unenforceable if she failed her half of the agreement.

Fugue sighed nervously. Sitting here doing nothing was making her anxious. Why was she being so unproductive? Why couldn't she even get started? She felt like, in the mood she was in, if she even tried to get anything done it would be worthless. There were plenty of other people out there who could do this job, who would do it way better than her, who would be getting stuff done right now. Maybe they deserved this more than her, maybe she deserved to get dropped. She was a fraud, a fake. She rubbed her eyes with her hands, trying not to cry. She needed to get control of herself, and to get to work.

'Hey hon, doin' alright?'

Dee's voice provided a comforting escape from Fugue's self-perpetuating angst. She uncovered her eyes and the older woman's look of concern and warmth brought her to the edge of bursting into tears again. Fugue bit her lower lip, trying not to fall apart in front of her too.

Dee came into the office and pulled Fugue's head to her chest, rubbing her head. 'I know Va—. I know Fugue, it isn't easy. The dog'll get better, they usually do. Even if he doesn't, at least you get some time with him. Doesn't always work like that.' Fugue nodded, sniffing. Despite her attempts, tears were running down her face again. Dee kept petting her, talking gently. 'Just be sure you don't let it take over your

life. Have a good cry, a real one, and then pull yourself together. You can't let yourself stay trapped. That's not livin'.'

Dee pushed her away and pulled her chin up. Her eyes were kind but stern. She wiped a tear from Fugue's face with her thumb. She looked at the screens and back down at Fugue. 'Ivor was right — you should try to get some work done. It'll take your mind off of things. I don't think it's time to have that real cry just yet.' With a smile she walked out and closed the door. Fugue stared at the doorknob, still feeling like she just wanted to open it back up and go out to see B. She pulled out a tissue and wiped her face, then turned back to her computer. She scrolled her queue to the most recent entry. It was from Fred. **!!Look! Important information! Don't skip!!** With a deep breath, she clicked on it.

Hey girl. I noticed you haven't opened any of my requests. What's up with that? You're too busy for me? Well, don't worry, they aren't actual work anyway. I'm just checking in on you to make sure you are doing okay. We're all worried about you. Take your time and don't be a stranger - to me or that poor little guy.

Fugue smiled. Fred was so nice. She was relieved that his requests weren't going to require any effort. The next one was from Cindy (**URGENT! URGENT! EMERGENCY!**).

Fugue, just reaching out again to let you know that I'm thinking about you. My offer (from a couple days ago) still stands.

Fugue went back two days. There were a few requests from Cindy. She picked the one titled **There's at least one thing in this request that you must see!** It was a long message in which Cindy explained how important Fugue was both as a worker and a person. She related a story about a tough time she'd had after breaking up with a boyfriend, and how she was able to get over him by talking to her friends. It was kind of trashy and self-indulgent, but Cindy meant well and Fugue couldn't help but be touched. At the bottom was her invitation:

When you're feeling up to it, I'll treat you to a girl's night in. I'll mix us some drinks and we can watch a rom-com on my laptop in your cute little bedroom. ;)

Fugue rolled her eyes. Hanging out with Cindy would be bad enough, but in her closet-room? That would be awful. She imagined Cindy trying

to act comfortable and cute sitting in that cramped space, and giggled at the thought. She clicked a message from Keith ( INFO ).

Why did the dog stop?

He had two paws.

The joke was stupid and ill-timed and it made her think of B but Fugue chuckled nonetheless. She quickly clicked on another message so that she didn't dwell on it. And another, and then another. It was a flood of good wishes and awkward sentiments and compassion and friendship. As Fugue read through them all, she smiled and laughed had herself a good cry.

# Chapter 11

## Out of Mind

Bē was lost. He didn't know where he was, or when it was. He didn't understand how he came to be like this, or what he was supposed to do. He looked out into the shadows. There were no windows but the lights were off, so it was probably night. He had no sense of time. He drifted in and out of the tube, exhausted but rarely sleeping. He was never hungry, hardly thirsty, his body seeming to be stuck and unfunctioning, any sense of progress or movement gone. He could see the bars in front of him and beyond that, in the dark, there was emptiness, but that was not much less than when the lights were on. He knew there was a blank wall and an empty chair, a bare floor and nothing else. Sometimes her, but not now. He wasn't certain that he'd smell her, but he would know. His sneer would tell him, his warning sneer.

His leg hurt — throbbing, burning, stings, aches. It never went away. Bē wanted to touch it, to lick and rub it, but he just lay there. He couldn't reach it and he was too tired to move his head. Pain filled him, consumed him, to the point where it became a constant, like breathing or the room, only much worse. He wished it would just go away, leave him in peace. All the time he thought he could not stand it anymore, but there was nothing he could do. Minutes or hours or days would pass, and it was still there, and he was still here. He had no sense of how much time had gone by, he just waited, waited, hurting and tired and bored.

'How you doing, man? It's all good.'

Down at the end the room, the other dog had started up again. When it had first happened, Bē had answered, but the responses never made any sense. He began to wonder if it was a ghost or something he was imagining, but at some point he saw people go over there, talking and attending to it. He was pretty sure they called it Täd. The people dealing

with it always sounded sad — not sad like they were with Bē, but a tone that was more hopeless and resigned, as if they'd given up something.

'Beautiful. Every day is beautiful. Love to hear it.'

It would go on like this for a while. Bē would have thought that hearing another dog would be comforting, a way to break up the monotony, to pass the time. But it was maddening. A stream of nonsensical happiness. There was no story or pattern or point. It didn't recognize Bē's presence, was unresponsive, would talk over him. It made Bē feel even more alone — and jealous. Why couldn't *he* be happy? If he was going to be stuck in this cage, staring at the darkness or a blank wall or that bitch, why on top of all that did he have to hurt so bad? Why couldn't he just go nuts? Why did that other dog get to escape, but not him?

'You betchya. Now we're kicking. Love this stuff.'

He lay on the cot, eyes open, waiting. Something would have to change. It couldn't be like this forever. Whatever *this* was. Maybe *this* was the *Shēltār*. Parts of it seemed like Mās' description. Maybe someone would come and save him. Someone like Mr. Krüzēn. Someone other than Fyüg, that traitor. He couldn't believe she had joined up with the other bad men to take him away, just like they had taken *her*, taken him away to someplace worse than he could have imagined. Someplace where dogs don't come back from.

'Alright. Sweet.'

But Mās had come back, so maybe this wasn't the *Shēltār*. Bē sighed. He hurt, and was lonely, and that fucking dog wouldn't stop. He mustered the energy to yell out. 'Tād!' But it kept droning on, pleasantries and affirmations that enveloped him like this pain, an everpresence to his misery. 'Shutup!' It just needed to stop. He just needed everything to stop. Oh, why had Fyüg done this to him? She seemed so nice. He thought she was a friend, but she had brought him here, where he would never come back from. She would sit in that chair and mock him with her sorry tone and sad talk, doing nothing for him, leaving him, never even trying to release him from this hellish prison. Bē hated her and he missed her. He just wanted to forget everything. Go crazy and go away. Get lost, get really lost.

'That's nice. You too, man.'

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The store was unlit, shadowed. It was the fourth night Mās had come to watch, hoping to see the big beast, *needing* to see it, to confirm its existence. Three nights in a row of nothing, of a darkened store, of the

threat of irresolution. Mās had feared that it was gone for good, that it had killed Bē and left, leaving Mās with little more than an irreparable lack. His friend gone. The perpetrator gone. And Mās waiting, endlessly. The emptiness was consuming him, draining him. Flōps and her gang couldn't fill it. Mās was sure that time wouldn't either. But the big beast could. Mās knew it was around somewhere, but not knowing where made him feel stymied and anxious. Mās had no plans if he saw it — there was nothing the little dog could do. He was too small and weak to take revenge, and there was no way to hold the big beast accountable. But if Mās could at least see it he would have something at which he could direct his anger, his frustration, his rage. Without that tangibility, that physical presence, Mās was sending his fury and despair out nowhere, which meant they ended up back at himself, hollowing him out and leaving him empty.

Mās was haunted by his last memory of Bē, stiff and unmoving, being carried away. It burned in his mind, horrified him. He should have gone back sooner. He'd waited too long. He'd failed.

So, for a few hours every evening, he would come out and watch the store, searching for hints of life, for a glimpse of that murderer. Thus far he had seen nothing, but he had nowhere else to look, no clue where else the big beast would be, so he kept coming back. He would wait until the sun set and sit across the street, in the shadows, waiting until he needed to return to the pack, to do the nightly hunting. For now they accepted his disappearances, understanding that he had issues of his own but always returned with plenty of time to fulfill his obligations. He was a good contributor and, from what Mās could tell, beginning to be fully accepted into the group. He was warming up to them too, opening up more, letting his personality show. He could nonetheless tell that they were concerned with his troubles, those things he would not talk about, his nightly withdrawals.

*Rule ix: a little alone time is sometimes a necessity, just don't make a habit of it*

Tonight was going to have to be a short one. It was scrap night. Soon Mās would have head over to the other end of the street, join up with the pack. He looked down the sidewalk. The light was on at the corner, but it was still, no sounds, no smells. He didn't have to leave just yet, though thinking about it made his mouth water with anticipation.

He thought he saw something out of the corner of his eye and turned back to the store. Was there something moving in the dark? He couldn't

be sure. He stood up, peering forward but staying in the shadows. There was a flicker and the store lit up. Mās blinked his eyes rapidly at the glow, trying to keep his lids open against the sudden brightness. His eyes bounced around, searching through the windows, looking for motion, looking for *it*.

He waited a long time. The lights were on, but nobody seemed home. Mās was getting worried. He looked down the street nervously. Stuff was beginning to happen down at *Bějəmən's*, he could smell the stink of other dogs. He should go soon, but there was no way he was leaving now, when he was so close. He turned back to the store, wagging his tail anxiously.

Then Mās saw it. Just its head, swaying far back in the store, barely visible through the window above the shelves. It was moving slowly and eventually came around a corner, tottering up to the front, holding something in each hand. Through the door Mās could see the frightening beast, lumbering like a giant, wearing only tiny white boxer shorts, a tight t-shirt which had pulled up to expose its massive, hairy belly, and a pair of unlaced boots. As it got closer Mās saw it was carrying buckets, sloshing chaotically with its uneasy steps. When it got to the front it put them down and opened the door, carrying them outside one at a time and tossing their contents in a big spray out over the sidewalk. It rested its hands on its sides and stared at the draining liquid.

Mās glared at it, raging. He could barely keep from barking or running forward, actively forcing himself to stay back. It was a beast, a horror. Mās hated it. But as he watched it there was something else, something he hadn't noticed before, something vulnerable. It stood there apathetically, looking at the sidewalk as if it was looking at nothing. Its shoulders drooped, its head hung, it was soft. Mās felt a surge of confidence — he was no longer looking at an indestructible brute or a crazed killer, this was a thing that was feeble and weak, something that could be beaten. It was almost as if it had already been beaten.

It turned suddenly, looking right where Mās sat. The dog didn't move or blink. The big beast squinted, then grabbed at his chest and pulled out the necklace, holding it out in Mās' direction. There were two paws — Bē's paws — hanging stiffly from the chain. Mās felt his fury return along with his fear. He bared his teeth. His body shook. He remembered that night, returning after running away. He had been ashamed for not following through, for wimping out, ready again to get captured. He saw the van, the one Bē had been so afraid of. He approached it, wondering what it meant. People appeared, someone tall, something blue, but Mās

barely looked at them. He was watching what they were carrying. A stretcher with a dog, a limp, motionless dog. A dog with two stump legs. A dog with its head thrown back, its tongue lolled, eyes wide open and staring lifelessly at Mās.

The beast cried out something, gathered up the buckets, and quickly went inside. Mās could see it looking over its shoulder as it hustled to the back. The lights turned off and the store was dark again. Mās was furious, his anger surging out of him at that butcher, that coward. He could still see those two paws — white and white/black — trophies of his dead friend. This wasn't over. He was full of rage, full of purpose. Full again.

There was a noise down at opposite end of the street. Barking. Mās looked and saw a couple shadows crossing under the streetlights, low to the ground. He licked his lips and disappeared into the darkness, crossing back through the neighborhood towards his new friends and the waiting feast.

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Post: So how long b4 u can come out  
Fugue: Not sure, they want me safe from G  
Also worried about HS status  
Post: U cant b in there forever  
Fugue: Maybe  
Cannot break contract  
Post: F contract, u can work 4 me  
Fugue: LOL  
It's not bad here  
I have the whole place to myself  
Post: Whole place hmmm  
Where are u right now  
Fugue: My closet  
Post: Haha  
Living the life  
Fugue: ...  
STFU  
Post: Srsly  
Why stay in that little room  
Go exploring

Fugue: It's creepy  
Nobody here

Post: Dude, make a horror movie!!

Fugue: Dude no!  
You want me to lose contract?

Post: At least write a script  
Ur wasting opportunity

Fugue: Nothing to write about

Post: What do u mean  
What about that dog

Fugue: Not funny

Post: I wasnt joking

Fugue: B's movie not horror  
It's tragedy  
It's sad

Post: The best horror movies are sad at heart

Fugue: You can stop now

Post: K sriry  
Srsly why u not with dog

Fugue: I told you  
He hates me  
He's miserable around me  
He's just so sad

Post: Y not use that vr stuff  
Isnt that what its for

Fugue: Ivor said no

Post: Is ivor there

Fugue: ...

Post: U going 2 try it out

Fugue: Not sure  
May hurt B

Post: He already messed up  
Maybe worth a shot

Fugue: Maybe

Post: What does b like to listen to

Fugue: ?

Post: If you need music I can hook you up  
Ill blow that dogs mind  
Right out of his funk

Fugue: I'm listening

Post: Say you, say b  
Bt it  
Take a look at b now  
Lean on b  
She drives b crazy  
B fallin  
Up where we b long

Fugue: LOL

Post: Dont worry b happy

Fugue: LOL

---

Across the street the sidewalk was empty. It was daytime but Rudolpho found himself checking through the window every few minutes. Maybe that dog showed up when it was light and he never noticed. He rubbed his chest, pressing the talismans against his skin. They were protecting him, they had protected him, yet it wasn't enough. He would have to catch the dog and destroy it. It wanted his paws, instead he would take its. Then things would be better. It was hard times now, but if he could just do away that thing it would get better. He would find a way to get Vanessa back, then he could get rid of this store. And he would be free.

He took another drink from the bottle and looked out of the window. Still nothing. He was almost certain he wouldn't see anything, at least not until dark, but he had to keep checking, just in case. That thing was a demon, haunting him, trying to bring him bad luck. He needed to banish it, drive it away. Maybe it was a real dog — in that case it would be easy, just snatch it and deal with the bastard. But if it *was* a spirit, that would be more difficult. Rudolpho would have to confront it, to show he wasn't afraid. If it sensed any weakness it would keep returning, screwing with his life. No, he wasn't afraid of it, but he was afraid of what it would do to him. He'd already driven one dog away and had the trophies to prove it. That one had seen no fear from him, and neither would this one. He reached for a drink.

The bottle was empty. Rudolpho looked at it stupidly, then tossed it in the trash with the others. He peered out the window again. He needed to get rid of that little beast. It was making him drink too much. It was a good thing that bottle was empty, now he could stop until he had to close up. All the drinking lately made him shut down early most nights, before dark. That meant he wouldn't see the dog but it also meant he wouldn't have a chance to stop it. He was just putting off what needed to be done. No more drinking. He'd deal with this today. Tonight. He took another look across the street.

He thought that last dog had been a good chance, but it was just trouble. With Vanessa and the store and now this other dog. It had completely screwed everything up before he could figure out to use it. Now Vanessa was gone, which made everything impossible. He'd need to get her back, somehow. She was the beneficiary and he was still her guardian, but the whole setup seemed ready to fall apart. He couldn't switch her now, it would look too suspicious. He wasn't even sure that he was able to — Gideon had set it up and Rudolpho didn't understand why they had to use Vanessa but she seemed important for some reason. Then there was that animal thing that Gideon said could be useful and Rudolpho had mostly ignored until he got stuck with that dog. Real useful. That dog was there to tempt him and it was a mistake to even think about it. Now he needed to clean up all the mess that it had caused.

He didn't know how he was going to get Vanessa back. When she had yelled at him at Ivor's she seemed pretty certain, certain enough that it had really freaked him out. Right then he'd thought about just ending it. But now he'd thought about it some more and was sure that there was still a chance. Maybe he'd have to tell her about the plan, offer her some of the money. She was just mad in the moment, but he could find a way to convince her to return. Money is a great motivator. Before that, though, he had to handle that dog. He looked out of the window again. The sun was still high overhead, it was a long time until the evening.

The store was empty. It was the middle of the day and it was empty. It didn't used to be like this. He remembered when there was a steady stream of customers from morning until night. Then Benjamin's went in, the economy went down, and for a while it was mostly regulars until eventually they started disappearing too. In the last week there had been even fewer people, as if they knew the store was haunted, as if it was cursed. He squeezed the paws in frustration. Two men came in this morning, the only customers so far, two laborers he'd never seen before and probably would never again. The place had failed and if it wasn't

for Vanessa's support payments he'd have closed by now. He needed to keep afloat a little longer, maintain appearances for the settlement, bring his niece back, and then he could deal with the store and be done with it. But first that goddamned dog had to be dealt with.

It was strange being in the store alone, knowing he would probably be alone until he closed and then alone all night. He never saw Vanessa much, didn't even really like her, but he'd gotten used to her being in the other room, seeing her in the mornings, even arguing with her. Rudolpho knew he didn't speak very good, and it was annoying to not be able to express what he was thinking to anyone, or to fully understand what they were telling him, yet now he missed talking to someone, anyone. That dog had been only trouble but at least it would listen, even if it just stared at him like a freak.

Rudolpho sighed, staring through the window. The truth was he was glad he didn't have to talk to anyone. He hoped nobody came in for the rest of the day. He wished everyone would just leave him alone, forever, that everything would just disappear. If there was no store, no Vanessa, no Ivor, no dogs, things would be much easier. He could just live his life and not have to worry about anything. He imagined the whole world going away and being by himself, someplace else, someplace where everything and everyone was different. But nothing was going away. Not him or the store or this window or that sidewalk. He turned away from the bright outside and stood up, heading back through the barren space to look for a bottle.

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Fugue walked across the kennel towards B's cage. As she approached his sneer turned into a snarl, his rumbling growl got louder, turning into an awful noise that sounded like something being torn apart. She was glad the lab was empty, otherwise she'd be worried that someone would hear and come to investigate. By the time she was next to him his mouth was wide, his eyes bugged out, the hair on his head spiked. He looked like a hyena that was going to rip the flesh of her bones. It looked pretty frightening but Fugue was relaxed, partly because she was committed and partly because other than his face, the rest of his body was just laying there motionless. She unlatched door and his eyes started moving around as if in a panic. Fugue stepped back as she opened it, talking to him softly.

'It's okay B. I'm not going to hurt you. I wish you wouldn't be so mad at me. I'm going to find a way to make you better.' The dog was

breathing rapidly, the horrible noise still coming out in brief, rhythmic spurts. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the collar. 'Look what I brought. I told you I'd get it back for you.' She brought it forward to his face, letting him smell it. The noise died away as he sniffed and licked the collar, looking back and forth between her and it. He started whimpering and biting at it, shaking his head slowly and feebly.

Fugue took the collar with both hands and carefully brought it towards his neck. B opened and closed his mouth quickly and she jerked back. The dog looked at her dumbly with his mouth agape and she realized he wasn't biting at her but was just jawing, something she'd seen before when she used to rub his belly. Her eyes welled up and with a smile she said, 'Oh B,' bringing the collar around his neck and strapping it on. She brought her face close to him and he licked her cheeks fast and unstopably, his tongue rough and dry despite the wetness of her tears.

Crying quietly, Fugue brought the water bowl over to his head and he lapped at it thirstily. After a bit she put it away, not wanting to get him sick, and he stretched his snout towards it, licking at his nose. She picked up a kibble and he took it from her hand, crunching loudly. He ate another but the third he turned away from and she put it back. Fugue sat on the ground and petted his head, whispering to him. Delicately she touched the bandage high up on his leg, away from the stump. He didn't seem to notice so she pushed a little harder and he jerked, letting out a loud bark. Fugue pulled her hand back and apologized, then went back to just petting his head and cylindrical body. The dog let out a couple of loud sighs and then a stream of piss started flowing through the hole in the cot, down onto the absorbent pads below. Fugue got a towel and pulled the blanket back, sure that, like most men, B had splattered outside of the lines. The dog groaned.

'What's the matter, you don't like me touching you down there? Well, we got to keep you clean.'

She finishes drying him and pulled the blanket back. The dog let out another giant sigh and looked at her with exasperation. She gave him a kiss on his nose and he licked at her lips.

'See, I'm not so bad. Guess what, I've got something else for you.'

Fugue stood up and walked towards the opposite wall, where her bag was. B started whining and she turned around telling him to calm down, that she wasn't going anywhere. She picked up the equipment and looked at it. She wasn't exactly sure how to put it on. She walked down to the other end of the kennel, shushing B who was yelping at her

as she disappeared from his sight.

‘I’m right here, B. I’ll be right back.’

She looked at Todd. The dog was creepy as shit. He was sitting up, almost at attention, facing the wall, completely unaware of her. Every second or so his head or leg or tail would twitch slightly, as if he were getting mini shocks. He seemed almost lifeless, unreal, like a glitchy statue. She bent down and tried to get a good view, seeing how everything was arranged on him. He was also wearing a big helmet which blocked some of the details, though she thought she could follow the strapping well enough to replicate it on B. However, looking at that screwed up dog gave Fugue second thoughts, wondering if she should be doing this. She took a deep breath and told herself that she wasn’t doing any crazy experiments, only basic stuff to give B a little escape. She turned away, trying to remember how the equipment was set up without thinking about that weird, jerking body.

Fugue picked up her laptop and went over to B, sitting down and plugging everything together. As she put the apparatus on him and he tried to move his head away to slip out.

‘I know, it must feel strange. Just wait a second.’

Holding him at his neck, she got it strapped snugly and let go, leaning back to watch. He was waving his head around, bringing his useless little stumps up as if he were trying to pull it off with his missing paws. He leaned against the cot, trying to push it off, but it held tight. It was kind of pathetic, but — especially compared to Todd — Fugue had to admit that wearing the gear B looked pretty fucking cool. Transfixed, she watched him writhe around like a blind musician, looking amazing.

After a while, still wanting to just stare at his awesomeness but satisfied that the equipment was secure, Fugue opened her laptop and selected the first scene. It was a basic landscape with blue skies and green hills. She initiated it and B immediately stopped moving around. He was so still that Fugue was worried that she had turned him into a Todd. Nervously she sent a butterfly across the view, and B started to move his head, tracking it. She raised the volume and birds and wind filled the soundtrack. B twisted his head curiously, Fugue could see a big dog smile spread on his face. She clicked another button and a giant rainbow flew across the sky, glowing vibrantly, soaring past the horizon, behind the hills. B barked and turned his head up towards the ceiling, looking at the colorful arc that had split the sky.

Smiling, Fugue inserted a projection into the scene, a table sitting on the grass with a shapely woman sitting at it, typing on a computer. She

turned on her camera and placed her face on the woman. 'Hi there, B,' she said. The dog looked back, waited a beat, and then growled.

'Whoa, boy, it's just me.'

But the dog was sneering, clearly upset with something. Fugue wasn't sure what to do. Her fingers hovered pointlessly above the keyboard. She was about to just remove the projection when she had an idea. She changed a few parameters and the woman filled out, her body size approximating Fugue's. The dog seemed to calm down, now showing no emotion.

'Is that better?'

B barked loudly, happily, and started panting again. Fugue shook her head. 'B, I'm not sure if I should love or hate you. As a friend, you can be a little too honest.' Smiling, she started to work, setting up scenario ideas that she thought B would enjoy. The dog grinned and watched her projection as it matched her, typing and talking and winking at him. Fugue was excited, happy and energized and filled with new ideas, experiencing again something she had thought long gone.

## Chapter 12

### Pedigreed

It was amazing. Ivor might have called it a miracle but, being of a solidly scientific (outwardly agnostic but internally leaning atheistic) mind, he considered it a massive coincidence. A massive, this-is-how-people-believe-in-miracles coincidence. He looked over the DNA analysis again. He didn't exactly understand all of the reported data, the percentages and centimorgans and whatnot, but the bottom line — outlined in a thick red box in case he might miss it — was that Todd and B were siblings. They had the same parents. The same mother. Luvah.

When Dee had told him about the collar he thought she was kidding, or mistaken. Why would the dog be wearing a Kreuzen tag? It hadn't even been wearing a collar when they brought it in. Turns out that Fugue had put it on the dog. Ivor thought she must have been digging around the lab at night and had found some of their old junk, something from Todd or its siblings or mom. But Fugue insisted that B was wearing it when she had first found it at her uncle's. (By the way, what kind of name was B anyway? The dog had a name tag but it was one of Kreuzen's dopey words. He'd need to ask the crew to come up with a new one.) Not that she had any reason to lie, but Ivor really didn't believe her. Nonetheless, he got Pat over at Genome-It to run the tests and the results were undeniable. Brothers. Fucking incredible.

Ivor could feel pressure releasing from inside him. Muscles relaxed in his shoulders and neck, in his chest and around his face. He was starting to form a plan, a way to continue the research. Not just remote, either, but the local option they'd been pushing for a while now. The next shot was soon, and if he played things right, they'd get a ride on it, get to reestablish their work. Their bad luck had pushed them aside, but now they could move to the front. The little advances they'd made over the

past couple years would finally come together, and they would have a chance to win a full contract.

The dog was going to jumpstart things, though Ivor would have to figure out its medical issues — not just its legs but its mind too — as well dealing with Fugue. She was becoming more and more attached to it which was going to make the research, not to mention going local, extremely difficult. She was in there every few hours checking on it. She probably even slept with it at night. She'd always been a bit of a mental case, constantly appealing to everyone (especially him) for affirmation, crying at little things, just being terribly emotional. Also, her personality was so bizarre — it was like she was trying real hard to be weird but it was only superficial. He thought that when she started she was just young, just needed time to mature, but she never seemed to grow out of it. Then there was the silly name change and the weird hair colors. It was to the point where most of the time he found her rather irritating, but if he said anything to her, even small suggestions about how to change the way she presented herself, she'd only get worked up and create more of an issue. And now, with the Rudolpho situation and the dog and living here at the lab, she was really on edge. Ivor actually felt bad for her, it was obviously an incredibly difficult situation, but her way of dealing with things seemed to make them worse.

Like with this dog. Getting so tightly bound up with him, having her mood rise and fall according to their relations, having to go check on him constantly. It was like she had a boyfriend. And it was seriously impacting her work. They had tried to be sympathetic, hinting at her obligations but not pressing her too hard, however it was starting to become a problem. The request queue was backing up, the test scenarios she had coded would soon be exhausted, and she seemed altogether demotivated. Ivor wasn't even sure if she was keeping track of her schoolwork — and though this mattered less as any failures would just keep her on the hook until she passed, he wanted to be certain that PhRI wouldn't get blamed for not holding up his end of the contract. Ignoring the fact that they would need it for research, Ivor was convinced that the dog was a problem, and finding a way to separate Fugue from it — and then for her to get over it — was an immediate concern.

The primary issue was that they needed Fugue. She was not just some intern helping out with menial tasks, she was an essential employee. She was the only one who knew the scenography system. The only one who knew how the projection mappings worked. From what he could tell, she didn't understand how the AI math worked, but she

was the only one who understood the code since she had written it. Ivor now understood why most companies didn't participate in the HS program. It created an interdependent relationship that was bad for long-term business health. The requirement to use SPRODE limited them to an incredibly small labor pool, and the poor reputation of the system (and the HS program in general) ensured that most potential employees were underperformers. For a small upstart like PhRI a few years back, software tooling was considered a commodity, the real expenses would need to be paid for the artists and psychobiologists and algorithm developers. Programming had become so widespread that kids were doing it just as well as adults with years of experience, and there was no reason to pay the outsize salaries that supposedly professional developers — or fee-obsessed consultants — demanded. The minimal costs, government subsidies, and good PR that the HS program provided made it strongly attractive when PhRI was struggling into its adolescence.

The Phrenic Research Institute had first began as a hobby project between Ivor and a few of his research peers. After the big crash, venture capital was gun-shy about working with anything involving live animals and (especially) brain studies, and as a result the initial team just worked out proof-of-concepts by moonlighting and self-funding. The programmers were a mix of out-of-work (read: over-the-hill) developers and college whippersnappers, all of whom cycled out of the project regularly as their interest waned and job prospects waxed. According to one of the later developers, the result was a massive, over-engineered, kludgy framework that often didn't work and was awful to work with. When the company got traction with Luvah, a seedling contract was finally set up but there would not be money to pay the programmers what they were used to. The funders knew the existing issues with the software and determined that the project would actually be harmed by — and thus would be provided no budget for — expensive, so-called “professional” software engineering. They suggested the HS program and, after brief consideration, Ivor bought in.

He now wondered if that was a mistake. Interestingly enough, the problem wasn't that Fugue lacked competence. She was an incredibly talented developer who was able to implement solutions quickly and correctly in a way that allowed the research to flourish. The problem was that she was *too* talented. She created her own custom tooling engines, data pipelines, and compile setups that nobody else understood. Within those she was able to express incredibly rich and complex ideas, but she was the only one who could actually do the work. A few months

back, Ivor had secretly brought in a potential replacement for an interview, a supposed SPRODE master who was highly esteemed, and he claimed her code was too complex to follow. He said he'd refuse any job offer because he would not be able to make a meaningful contribution quickly enough and it would be detrimental to his SPRODE resume. He told Ivor what she was doing seemed brilliant — especially for an HSer — and that he'd better not let her know, otherwise he might lose her to other SPRODE opportunities or, very possibly, the legit industry. (Immediately after this Ivor worried about word getting out and Fugue getting poached, but after a while he realized that she was competition and others in the SPRODE labor market were likely happy to have her isolated away.)

So now, Ivor — and the rest of the PhRI crew — had to coddle Fugue, to play into her emotionality and oddness, trying to find ways to cajole, inspire, or otherwise persuade her to actually get the needed work done. Ivor had been careful how much he told the rest of the staff about Fugue's supposed genius so that they didn't inadvertently let something slip (Dee was the only other one he trusted with the full knowledge), though in the last few weeks he had to directly ask them for assistance in trying to cheer her up so that she would become productive. Ivor planned to play a bit of good-cop/bad-cop and hold the contract requirements over her head, but he was playing it slow so that he didn't cause her to have a major breakdown of some sort. Dee was currently acting as the closest thing to an enforcer, though if Fugue didn't start performing they would have to actually start getting aggressive.

The thing was that Fugue was actually slipping up enough that she could be considered in violation of the contract. The past week and a half was enough evidence for Ivor to sever his ties to her and HS. Now, with the discovery of this dog, all he needed to do was to push her through a bit longer, just enough to prove out their new research and then they were sure to get a full contract. At that point there would be generous enough financial resources and timelines to allow for real developers to redo Fugue's work outside of SPRODE. He could cut her loose and not have to deal with her hassles. She was gifted enough that she would have no problem finding new work, whether or not it was in the HS program. He had some reservations about doing this to somebody so young, but, to be honest, she brought it on herself. She needed to grow up and it wasn't his obligation to provide her the environment to do that in.

Ivor was working with Dee to figure out how to split Fugue and that dog up, so the dog could stay on this side for the real experiments. He

also needed to determine how he was going to get the kid to adapt her scenes and projections and systems to B (they really needed to figure out a new name) without her knowing what she was doing it for. She didn't know what actually went on in the restricted area and she never previously had much interest in the strays they brought in. Now that she had a bond with a research subject — and one with very particular physical issues — it was going to be tricky to prevent her from recognizing the target of her programs. Kate had already started work on a prototype rolling walker for the dog, but she had already showed it to Fugue (trying to keep her spirits up) and spec'ing controls for that could be another vector for information leakage. Ivor would need to come up with a proxy subject for her to work with, something with characteristics that could be transferred to the abnormalities specific to the dog. Perhaps the augmentation engine could be adapted. If the animal's enhancement was *intrinsic* rather than extrinsic, the manipulation training could be easily mapped to actual limbs.

He opened up the shelter sub-app so that he could add the new proxy to the system. First he opened up B's file, wanting to make sure there wasn't some forgotten details that might be relevant for his new virtual test subject. He noticed that Fugue had a couple links in there and, out of curiosity, he followed them. One mapped to simple scenes which were used for basic testing and training. Why were these in B's file? The other link mapped to some projections. There were a number that depicted a fat woman in different clothes, a few balls of different colors, and then two unevenly shaped white cylinders. He opened one up and moved it around and realized it was a crudely drawn dog foot. Hmm, must be wishful thinking on her part, hoping that Ivor would finally let her use the equipment on the dog. Spending her time on this rather than the work that needed to get done. He went back to the main file and saw something he hadn't noticed before. A brain map.

Shit. What was she doing? Shitshitshitshit.

He got up and ran out of his office, out the double doors, over to Fugue's office. She had headphones on and was staring at a music visualizer, bopping her head. The faint sound of something screaming was leaking out.

'Hey,' he said. She started to weave her head back and forth. 'Fugue!' he pounded on her desk. She jumped back and pulled off the headphones. The sounds of distant, high-pitched something filled the room.

'Sorry, sorry. I didn't see you,' said Fugue. She fumbled with her mouse to stop the music and minimize the screen. 'I was just taking a

break. You know, to clear my head. Is something wrong?’

Ivor was glaring at her. He didn’t know where to begin. He shut the door and stood over her, making himself as intimidating as possible.

‘Have you been sending that dog in?’

Fugue stammered, shaking her head but not able to get any words out.

‘I told you it was too dangerous. That dog is *broken*. Are you trying to screw things up? Do you know what kind of mess it’ll make if we create another Todd?’

‘I—I—I wasn’t doing anything crazy. Just basic training scenes. I wanted to give him some—someplace else to be instead of that kennel.’

‘You don’t even know how this stuff works. How do you know you’re not doing something “crazy,” huh? You’re screwing with that dog’s mind.’

Fugue’s face had lost all color. She was just staring at Ivor, speechless.

‘And what are you doing messing with the equipment? You know you’re only allowed to do that when one of us is with you. We try and help you out by letting you stay here and you go and do this? What the hell is wrong with you?’ Ivor was pointing his finger at her, he could feel blood pulsing to his face. Fugue had shrunk back against the wall, her eyes wide.

‘L—Listen, Ivor, I’m really sorry. I didn’t m—mean any harm. Since you weren’t going to do anything with B I just thought I’d—’

‘You just thought what? That you’d start doing research on him yourself? Did you think that would convince us that we should have brought him in all along?’

‘No, no. I just—I just wanted to make him happy. He seems so sad.’

Ivor was about to really lay into her when he stopped himself, putting his hand over his mouth and sitting down in a chair. He needed to think this through. Yelling at her wasn’t going to do anything. He directed an intense stare at Fugue, forcing her to be quiet, while he thought things through. He wasn’t sure she actually knew how to run the gear. He needed her to show him what she was doing. But first he needed to calm down. He could go get Dee, and she would help keep him steady.

‘Vanessa,’ he said, forcing himself to sound composed, ‘this is very bad. But in order to properly assess the situation, I need you to show me exactly what you did with the dog. How you hooked it up, what you showed it.’ She nodded and started to get up but he stopped her with an

outstretched hand. ‘Not yet. I need to talk to Dee about this. I imagine she’ll be even more disappointed in you than I am, but she knows the hookups better than me. You just stay here until we come back.’ He looked at her computer screen and said with a malicious tone he couldn’t hide, ‘Maybe you can try to actually do some work while you’re waiting.’ She looked like he had slapped her. He got up and walked out to find Dee.

After explaining the situation to Dee, the two of them got Fugue (who actually had her request queue open) and a headset and went to the kennel. Ivor hadn’t looked closely at the dog since they’d brought him in. He walked up to it and said, ‘How you doing, guy?’, and it snarled and started barking like mad. Ivor backed up, looking at Fugue apprehensively.

‘It’s okay, he just doesn’t know you. Just stay back there until I get this on him, then he’ll be someplace else.’

Ivor watched Fugue place the gear on the dog’s head, pulling on the visor and adjusting the headphones. She seemed to be doing it correctly, but it was annoying to have to stand back while she messed around with the expensive equipment. Dee was leaning against the side wall with her arms crossed, watching intently but seemingly less agitated than Ivor. She pointed and said softly, ‘Make sure you don’t over-tighten that bottom strap, he’s got to breathe.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Fugue, concentrating on fine tuning the rest of the equipment. She opened her laptop and typed a few things. ‘Okay, he’s in. You can come up and see what I’m doing. I’ll shut off the external audio so he won’t hear you and get confused.’

Dee didn’t move. She just stayed by the wall, staring at the dog as if she were judging something. Ivor stepped forward until he was over Fugue, looking down at her screen. There was an open field with green grass and a clear blue sky.

‘What’s that rainbow for?’

‘Nothing specific. He just likes looking at it. He’ll sit there watching it for hours.’

Ivor looked up at Dee. She didn’t even acknowledge him, just kept looking at the dog, but said out loud, ‘You know something, Ivor? That dog looks pretty cool with all that stuff on. Pretty darn cool. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

He looked back at the dog. He had to agree. Every other dog he’d seen looked like a freak with that crap on it, like some sort of technomutant, yet this one looked like it was born to wear this stuff, as if it was a cybernetic specimen. He would have to remember this when they

needed to publicity pictures. He got down on his knees to get a closer look. Without thinking he touched one of the straps, sliding his finger under it to test its snugness. It felt really warm. The dog twitched and he pulled his hand back.

'Is it okay? It's really hot.' Fugue refused to make eye contact. 'Hey Dee, get over here and feel this.'

Dee came over and laid a hand on the dog's shoulder. A growl rumbled in its throat. 'Geez,' she said, 'he's burning up. Get this blanket off of him.' She pulled off the blanket and the dog yelped and jerked its head. Fugue's eyes were fixed on her computer screen, she was unnaturally stiff. 'What is that?' said Dee.

Ivor stood up to get a better view. The dog's back leg was swelled up and there was a gaping sore on its ankle, pink and black and seeping. There were dabs of a translucent goo all around it. Ivor started to panic. He needed this dog. What the hell was this kid doing to him?

'Did you know about this?,' he snapped at Fugue, 'Why didn't you tell anyone about this?'

Fugue continued to stare at her computer screen. Tears started to flick from her eyes. 'I thought you'd take him away. That I'd never get to see him again. I put the antibacterial on it. It was going to make him better.'

'What is wrong with you?,' said Ivor, 'Are you stupid?' He turned away from Fugue in disgust. 'Dee, go call Dr. Vince. Tell him to get over here right now.' He grabbed Fugue's arm and shook her hard. 'You! Help get this stuff off of it. We need to take it back to the exam rooms.' Fugue finally broke her gaze and looked at Ivor fearfully, shaking her head.

'No no no no. I'm not allowed back there. You can't take him away.'

'We can't do it out here. We need to be on the other side.'

She grabbed his shirt. 'Let me go with you. Please.'

Ivor grabbed her hand and threw it off. 'Just help me get this crap off.' He picked at the straps and the dog started snarling and showing its teeth. Fugue pushed in and worked on removing the device, sobbing loudly. When she removed the visor the dog was panting, looking around wildly, making a strange sound that was halfway between a whine and a growl. Dee came back in the room.

'Dr. Vince is on his way. I sent Fred to prep the room. Let me help you carry him.'

Fugue pushed into the cage. 'I can help, let me do it,' she said breathlessly. Ivor grabbed her and pulled her back, hard.

'We don't have time for this. Just stay back!' At the sound of his voice

the dog's eyes bugged out and it hissed at Ivor, like some sort of wild devil. Dee grabbed its collar and twisted, securing the neck. With Ivor's help they pulled the cot out and got in position to lift the dog. Ivor slid his hands under its backside and it started wailing, making crazy noises high and low that echoed throughout the room. In the far cage, Todd began to bay loudly. Fugue was yelling. The sounds were deafening.

The two lifted the dog and raced to the double doors. Cindy was waiting, holding the outer one open. Fugue was running beside them, screaming wordlessly. 'She can't come,' said Ivor loudly, 'hold her back!' As they moved past the doorway Cindy stepped forward and grabbed Fugue in a bear hug. Her momentum was slowed but she was bigger and kept barreling forward, but not fast enough to make it through before the door slid shut. She was still screaming. As the inside door opened, Ivor could hear her bawling nonsense, banging on the door in futility. The inside door closed and as he and Dee carried the howling dog through the rest area the lab staff paused and staring as if hypnotized by the shrieking beast.



*The dogs of doom are howling more*



## Chapter 13

### Express Train

He was back in the bright world, the sky a deep blue, the land a never-ending green. The grass extended in all directions, in front and behind and on the sides, over the hills and forever. Sometimes there were other things, but today it was just green and blue and bright. Bē began to walk. He had moved before in this place but that had just happened, like he was floating. Now *he* was moving, moving his legs, moving himself. He looked down at his feet. Something was strange but he didn't worry about it, he was walking!

Suddenly the sky turned into stripes of all colors, covering its whole expanse. Bē stopped and looked up, awestruck. He had seen something like this before, only never this big. His face felt hot, he opened his mouth, trying to drink the light. The colors started to move, compressing from each horizon until they formed a single thin strip directly above him, the strip he recognized. He loved this. He followed its path with his eyes to where it met the hills. He felt compelled to seek out its termination point, to see where it led. He began to run.

Running! He had forgotten how wonderful this felt. The world was slipping past him, faster and faster. He was going someplace new, towards that spot, yet no matter how much he moved, past the swaying grass, up the slopes and down them, everything was the same. The green hills, the blue sky. And the colored stripes, never getting any closer. He moved his legs faster and it felt like he was flying, floating over the landscape. There was no wind and no sound, he could not feel the ground or the grass, he was breathing hard but felt like he could go on forever.

Again he looked down at his feet. They were moving but something wasn't right. They were moving separate from his legs. There was a flicker and they disappeared and then came back. What was happening?

Something sharp shot up his back leg and he yelped and stopped and lay down. He tried to lick his back paw but couldn't reach it. It looked fine but was throbbing. The pain was awful. It felt like something was crushing his paw, but there was nothing there. Bē put his head down and tried to settle into a tube, the way he had learned to put aside the pain. He stared at his front paws, paws that looked wrong for some reason, paws that he realized he could not feel. They flickered again and he started to feel scared. He didn't like this. He turned his head away, up to the sky, falling into a tube, dropping the hurt away as he looked at that colorful line.

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'I'm sorry, I didn't expect him to be moving so much. I should have tightened it up more.' Kate was truly apologetic. The experiment had fallen apart because her harness had slipped. But she felt worse for Phreeto. He had hit his back stump, and from the sound of it was clearly in a lot of pain. The poor guy. As if he hadn't been through enough.

'Well, I hope he's not afraid to go back in.' Typical Fred — blunt and snippy. 'It'll suck if he got messed up on the first go.'

Keith chimed in, placating. 'I'm sure he'll be fine. Can't learn to ride a bike without falling once or twice.' Kate smiled at him, he was always trying to deescalate.

'I was just worried about the tight straps pulling him out because he could feel them.' Kate was being apologetic. Fred and Cindy were staring at her with looks that said she should have known better. She forced herself to not worry about them and move forward. 'The wheelchair uses the same harness, so if we can get him used to that then we won't have to worry about what it feels like when he's inside.'

'Except that he'll wonder where the wheels are. And why he's got to move all his legs.' Fred had a point, as much as Kate didn't want to admit it.

Cindy spoke up, her know-it-all, little-girl voice as annoying as ever. 'Yeah, it's probably better if we didn't confuse him. You know, you haven't even tested your wagon-thing yet. It'll probably break and screw him up even more. I say we just leave him on the cot when he's not in.'

'It's a *wheelchair*', Kate tried to not sound hateful, 'and he needs to be able to get around. Just letting him lay there all day is cruel.'

'Whatever. It looks like a wagon. Anyway, when we send him off he'll just be laying there so he might as well get used to it.'

‘Ladies, please’ said Fred. ‘Now, I’m with Kate. While he’s here we should allow him to move around. Otherwise he’ll probably just get sick. Or another bedsore or whatever that was.’ Kate was glad that Fred was back on her side, but she was even happier to see Cindy’s stinkface. Fred continued, sassier than usual, ‘I think we should just implant him now and be done with it. Then we won’t have to worry about any of this interference crap.’

Kate was immediately annoyed with him again. ‘You know we can’t do that. It’s way too soon. You’ll just turn him into another Todd.’ She wasn’t sure if Fred was being serious or just trolling, but she wished he would just quit pushing on this. The establishment of a continuity between the physical and virtual space was necessary, not just for the animal but for the interface algorithms. Todd had been implanted with no transition and was completely lost. The poor thing could only function on the inside, and even there just barely. On top of that, their goal was not to see if these dogs could live in a virtual world, but to explore and enhance their link with reality. The physical connection was essential. Often it felt like everyone treated her as a second-class part of the research, as if she was just a stepping stone on the path towards unlocking some amazing advancement in psychobiology or cybernetics or quasi-reality. But without a connection to the real world, what was the point?

Kate summed up her thoughts with a reflectively sassy look at Fred and a matching quip: ‘You should know better.’

Keith, who had been sitting back and uncomfortably biting his lip, started to talk with understated authority. With his frizzy beard and beady eyes, Keith was a strange looking guy, and if you tried to make small talk with him or have any kind of personal conversation it would often devolve into an awkward mixture of oversharing and unrelatableness. But he was a smart dude and when he had a comment about work it was usually worth listening to.

‘Before we start getting worked up over implanting and physical interference, let’s remember that there were other problems in the experiment.’ He turned to Cindy. ‘The projections were glitching. I don’t know if that was something you did or if it was a problem with Fugue’s code, but it needs to be fixed.’ Cindy pursed her lips and he turned away from her impassively. ‘And you all saw him running to the rainbow. Nothing changed. Something happened with the pedog and it froze up so it wasn’t able to try out any variations or capture any data. I’m going to have to work with Fugue on that. It will be a real problem if we miss

out on these early collection points. On top of all that, this animal is old and busted up. Who knows how long it will take him to get used to all of this — losing another limb, being separated from Fugue, getting thrown into all of these experiments. We should be careful about throwing implantation into the mix too soon. We're not at crunch time yet, and it behooves us to take it slow for now.' Keith sat back, his speech finished.

'Well, if we wait too long he'll get implanted the day before he goes and I bet that'll go great,' Fred sniped.

'Okay, okay, that's enough,' said Ivor, who had been watching silently this whole time. He walked to the center of the room. 'Keith is right. It is still early days, and we all have a lot of work to do. That includes you, Fred. There should be enough brain maps for you to start preparing for implantation, even if we're not going to do it right away. Let's all break up for now and get to our jobs.' As everyone dispersed he turned to Kate and motioned for her to come over.

'How much time is it going to take to get, uh, Phreeto into that wheelchair?'

'It's pretty much ready right now.'

'And how much time will you need to spend working with it?'

'Not much. Just keep an eye on things to make sure it's not shifting or something. Other than that, he'll just need to take the time to learn it.'

'Good, good. The reason I ask is because it looks like that antenna issue is going to be the main thing we'll be selling for the excursion. That dog's going to need to knock that out of the park. So I need you to get mockups and study materials ready so that we can start on the training ASAP.'

'Before implantation?'

'Oh yeah. We're going to have to multitask. Wrap our initiation and mission training into one.' Ivor lowered his voice, getting close to Kate. 'Your work is essential. Without the physical, all this has no point. I'm counting on you. We're all counting on you.'

Kate nodded with conviction, feeling empowered. 'Oh, yes.'

Ivor's voice went back to its normal volume. 'Good. Now go get that dog moving and let's go change the world.' With a wink he slapped her on the shoulder and walked away.

Kate took a deep breath of satisfaction and headed off to her workspace to get the wheelchair.

Bē was running again, over the hills, towards the colors. He was worried when he first came back. The last time had hurt and was scary. But this was different. He could hear the air and birds. The butterfly came back and flew around him. There was a big tree off in a direction different from the colored stripe. Something was tight around his body, like he was still in the wheelthing that Kāt had made for him. It allowed him to get around and kept him from falling, and just like it this feeling on his body made him feel secure, safe.

First he tried walking and then running and it was different from the last time. The landscape changed — the tree moved behind him, the grass turned into a field of orange flowers and then into dirt, huge clouds appeared in the sky. The colors were still not getting any closer, but it felt good to run to them, to just run.

So he ran. Ran and ran. Bē was comfortable. He let his mind wander, thought about his body, the way it felt. Something was strange. Tap...tap...tap. The rhythm was wrong. It was like he was hopping. But his body was moving like it was supposed to. He looked down. His feet weren't right. Somehow they were different from how he remembered them. He stopped, breathing heavily. He stared at his front paws. The color seemed off. They were too big. He couldn't feel them. He tried to flop down on his side but he just stayed there, standing. He turned to look at his back foot, then the other. They appeared the same, but one felt totally different. Only one of them actually *felt*. He tried to stretch them out, but only one moved like he wanted, the other hung there oddly, askew.

Bē wanted to get back running, to forget about his legs. But he couldn't get moving, nothing would work correctly. Frustrated he looked up at the sky, away from his screwed up body. It had turned a deep orange, like an afterimage of the flowers. The colored stripe ran through it and he focused on that, trying to forget everything. Wishing he could just go back.

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'I watched the end. Seems like something's wrong with the projections.'

Cindy looked up. Ivor had showed up at her office door and started talking as if they were already in mid-conversation. She had to take a moment to process what he had said. Coming by and interrupting her without any warning and then attacking her? What a dick. 'I know. I'm

working on it.' She didn't even bother hiding her disgust. She wished he would just go.

He didn't leave, but instead came in and sat down. He was clueless. It was obvious she wanted to be alone. He was going to sit here and jaw her ear off about what to do, offering no ideas and just wasting her time. She folded her hands in front of her keyboard and forced a smile.

'So what're the next steps?'

'What do you mean?' Cindy thought about twiddling her thumbs, thinking he might take a hint. But he'd probably get the wrong idea and think it was some nervous twiddle. Then he'd try to touch her to put her at ease. Ugh. He had no boundaries.

'I just want to know your thoughts on the situation and what the plans are for next time.'

She ran her tongue in her mouth, pretending to be thinking. As usual, he didn't trust her. Thought she was in over her head. The curse of being pretty — no way she could actually have a brain. Comes by, picking at her about her competency when he's the one really doing nothing. Going into the full complexity of the situation would just be a waste of her time since he wouldn't offer her any useful ideas. She'd just throw him some basic shit and try to get him out of here.

'Something's wrong with the way he's experiencing the paws. I'm working up some variations to see if it works better.'

'Maybe we could use some of Keith's AI to search for a solution.'

What a doof. He clearly didn't understand how any of this worked. Keith's crap was for figuring out how to fool the dog into substituting one task for another, to trick it into enjoying something menial. Her job was to create virtual analogues of the physical world. AI couldn't help with that. She'd seen AI applied to this space. It only created some mutant guesses at reality, something that seemed true but on closer inspection was fundamentally wrong in one or more ways. Not only would trying to use that here waste a bunch of time setting things up, the result would be creepshit like a fore/hind paw combination or green fur. No, this work took artistic skill, something that Ivor didn't appreciate.

'I don't think that would be worth the effort. Just plugging in AI doesn't automatically get you a solution.'

Ivor smiled, smugly. 'I know that. I'm just thinking about ways to automate coming up with variations. To help save you some time.'

If he wanted to save some time, he could just leave. 'I think I'll be fine. I'm pretty sure we'll figure this out pretty soon. I was just working out some ideas when you came by.' She'd see if he'd take the hint.

‘Such as?’

Christ almighty. Cindy sighed in exasperation, stretching the exhalation out slowly enough that it appeared to be a normal breath. She was going to have to give him something.

‘Well, I’m focusing on the front paws first, since that seems to be what tripped him up initially. They were based off of Fugue’s designs, but I’m thinking maybe she got them wrong. Maybe something with the color, or their size.’

Ivor was staring at her, waiting for more. Maybe she should start a diary so that next time she could just hand it to him to peruse while she got back to work. Cindy coughed, hoping it would signal something, though she wasn’t sure what.

‘The current models were based off of scans I made from some of our other dogs. It’s possible there is some subtle variation that he’s picking up on. I’m going to use the rear foot scan to make some adjustments, see if that makes a difference.’

Ivor was nodding. Now he would repeat back to her what she said using fancy words, maybe some mathematical analogy, as if that created new meaning. Wait for it...

‘I see. So you take the known biological structures to infer the unknown variable, using a related baseline as an initial starting point. Kind of like an optimization algorithm searching for the minimum in a solution space.’

‘Well, not exactly,’ Cindy couldn’t help herself, but she wouldn’t risk belaboring it, ‘but I think you get the idea.’ Maybe she could head this off by changing the subject. She didn’t want him to think she was passing blame, but all this focus on her was unfair. She really wanted to point to that little brat Fugue — if anyone wasn’t keeping up with their work it was her. Her software was just as bad as her paw renderings and she wasn’t keeping up with the backlog of requests. Always finding some way to call attention to herself with her bright hair and changing names and sob stories. Cindy knew better than to criticize her, though, especially to Ivor. She was his little pet. Fred’s was an easier train to jump on, even if she only half-believed in it. ‘You know, I’m not convinced that the projections are the actual problem right now. I think that the dog just needs to get implanted so that we can reconcile things at the nerve level. Until then we’re only showing him shadows, and expecting him to believe they have substance.’

Ivor was staring at her with his eyebrows raised, trying to comprehend her statement.

‘That may be true, but it is too soon to implant him, you know that. Listen Cindy, this isn’t an interrogation. I’m not searching for blame, I’m just making sure I comprehend how everything fits together. This is an important moment, we’re on the cusp of something big.’ He leaned forward and placed his hand on hers. It took everything inside of her for Cindy to not recoil from his touch. His voice got quieter. ‘I want you to understand: Your work is essential. Without these projections, all of this has no point. I’m counting on you. We’re all counting on you.’

He made her sick.

Ivor sat back and started talking normally again. ‘Now, just to make sure I fully get what you are talking about, why don’t you show me what you’ve done so far.’

Cindy shot lightning bolts out of her eyes. They bounced off of him, useless. She pulled up her latest renderings. She was never going to get any work done.

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He was back. Blue skies, green hills, that distant tree. Bē felt fraught. Every time he was here things ended up awful. But as he looked around him, he had a powerful, almost nostalgic, sense of freedom. Whenever he came here, at the beginning, when it was like this, things were good. His body was right. He could run. But it never lasted. Maybe he shouldn’t run. Maybe he should just stay in the good part.

Usually, eventually, his feet got messed up. Bē was afraid to look at them. If he didn’t look, perhaps everything would stay fine. He leaned back and forth. Everything felt okay. Or, actually, he wasn’t sure. He couldn’t remember what it was supposed to feel like. Maybe he should look. He tilted his head down and the horizon lifted and then stopped. His head was pointed all the way down, pointing where his feet should be, but he was looking straight ahead. He lifted his head back up. The horizon was immobile and then it started moving again. Bē looked up into the sky, and then down again. The world stopped at the same place. He nodded his head up and down — motion-stop-motion-stop. He began to feel dizzy. He looked straight ahead, blinking his eyes. Why did this place always turn out so strange?

The colored lines filled the sky and then focused into the strip running off into the hills. He felt weird. He didn’t want to run. Yet he had a urge to follow the line, to seek out the its termination. He started to walk, keeping his head focused on the spot where the colors and the hills and

the sky came together. The landscape passed slowly. It was tedious. He wanted to run, but was afraid. The green grass turned yellow and tall, swaying in the breeze.

Bē heard a sound off to his side. He turned. It was from that tree. Was that its leaves blowing in the wind? It sounded like a voice, something familiar. He couldn't make it out. He began to walk towards it. The voice seemed human, only faint and muddled. If he was closer he might be able to see who it was, someone Bē felt he knew.

He pushed with his back leg to get going faster but nothing happened. Then he remembered where he was and began to hustle all of his legs. He was running, running again. The tree was getting larger, the voice clearer. And then silence. Bē stopped. There was nothing. No voice, no rustling grass, no wind. He backed up, trying to find the sound again. It was gone. He turned around and back, trying to decide what to do. He looked up at the tree and then down at the ground but it was just the tree, looming over him. He felt dizzy again, unwell. He tried to lie down and made it partway, hovering over the ground awkwardly. Up in the sky, the colors glowed above him. He wanted to hear again. Not only the voice but anything. The silence was frightening. Bē groaned — he could hear that. So he continued groaning and whining, staring at the colors, filling in the space with the noise of his anguish.

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Keith was at his computer eating reheated leftovers, perusing the Homunculus message board. Homunculus was an electronic multiplayer strategy/story-building/mindhurt game which involved creating and manipulating swarms of little humanoids in an evolutionary simulation. Within each female humanoid was another Homunculus simulation, which itself contained females with their own simulations. As the simulation progressed, males and females could mate which resulted in one or more humanoids from within the female's internal simulation being brought out into the outer simulation that she was part of. Also, if a particular humanoid was found to be similar enough (in terms of physical and behavioral characteristics) to another humanoid in any of the other Homunculus instances, then that pair would be linked, allowing them to teleport across simulations. If the paired humanoids diverged, the link would be broken and they might end up stranded away from their origin Homunculus simulation.

The result was a complex system where players would, depending on their interests, develop fiefdoms, stage coups, troll, explore, play in iso-

lation, or use the game for other, less expected, purposes. One of these latter purposes was narrative creation, where causal storylines were created after the fact to match observed gameplay. Keith was part a small group (who called themselves Munoncles) who did just this. They had a restricted server set up where they would initiate a recursive, repeating, stable Homunculus instance, and then insert a single crazy humanoid into a simulation to see what chaos ensued. When it was finished — “end” was a relative term, but typical stopping points were when a single simulation was devoid of humanoids, when all humanoids were paired to another within the same simulation (creating a homogeneous teleport freeze), or when a couple hours had passed — they would construct comic narratives consisting of pratfalls, visual puns, and bumbling sexual misadventures.

‘Keith!’

Keith looked up. Ivor was sitting in a chair, legs crossed, looking at him strangely. Keith had no idea when he had come in.

‘What’s up, Ivor?’

‘Really into your work, huh?’

‘I’m actually not working right now. It’s my lunch break. I’m perusing the Homunculus message board.’

‘Do you really think this is the time to be playing games? There’s a lot of things to get done.’

‘I’m not playing. I’m reading. And I’ve talked to you about this many times before. I take three half-hour breaks every day. One-point-five hours of break equals two-point-five more hours of productivity. It’s a net gain for you.’

‘Yeah, yeah. You’ve told me that before. I just thought that, considering this is a *pretty important time*, you might cut back on the breaks so that we could stay on schedule.’

‘If I cut back on my breaks, that means fewer productive hours, which means the schedule will be more likely to slip.’

‘Yes, but — well, never mind. Can you talk to me about how things are going? I’m particularly interested in the dog’s veering off-path in the latest experiment.’

Keith turned back to his screen. Since they were now on work time, he’d stop his break clock and bank the time for later. Splitting up the break wasn’t ideal, and it was sure to lead to performance degradations later in the day, but when the boss wants to talk you don’t really have a choice. He paused the timer and switched workspaces, bringing up his notes from the last experiment.

‘There was an auditory anomaly that distracted Phreeto. I talked with Fugue, she said she would look into it. It might be an artifact from the integration algorithm, though the volume seemed too high for that.’

‘So Fugue’s looking into it?’

‘Well, she said she would. Lately she hasn’t been as responsive as we’d like. I’m not sure it was the right idea to split her and the dog up. Having her think that he’s dead is really distracting her.’

Ivor looked resigned. ‘It had to be done. If we’d put it off it would only be worse later.’

‘Later probably would have been better.’ Keith stared at Ivor, trying to see if he saw the flaw in his reasoning. Making her go through her blues now, when they needed her, was not productive. If they could maximize her focus and attention in this crucial period, and put off the emotional distractions for when the dog was better established, that would be a preferable path to take. Ideally, they would have put off the separation until Phreeto was localized, and then they probably wouldn’t need Fugue much anyway.

‘Don’t forget she was a mess even before we took it away,’ said Ivor. ‘We’re just going to have to figure out how to deal with the hassle. Teenagers are tough.’ He looked directly at Keith with a hint of regret. ‘Lesson learned.’

‘You know that I’m not the right person to motivate her. You or Fred or Dee needs to do something to get her mind squared away. We’re not behind right now, but I expect we’ll have schedule problems very soon if she keeps slipping.’

‘Okay, I’ll work on it. How about the actual interfacing? Is she holding you up with that?’

‘Her existing programs are suitable for right now. We’re establishing a good baseline from the variations and, other than the diversion issue, starting to get some positive feedback. The horizon block should be helpful, and that rainbow ended up being really good fortune. The system is starting to create state analogues and value functions that will map onto that projection which the dog already associates as a desired objective.’

Ivor was staring blankly, mouth agape. Keith wondered if he knew he looked like he’d had a stroke. Ivor shook his head as if he was clearing water from his ears.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t follow that.’

Keith cut to the chase. ‘We’re in a good position in terms of the algorithm. Once he’s implanted I believe progress will proceed more quickly

than the mean.'

Ivor nodded quickly. 'Good, good. So you think it's ready to be implanted?'

'I didn't say that. He's still likely to have serious problems meshing. I'd be worried about creating a crisis.' Keith also wanted more time to establish the rainbow as a goal and not just an object of interest. Explaining the difference, especially with respect to the cybernetic interface, would only confuse Ivor. Also, there was no need to offer up reasons why he should be blamed for delays, so he kept that to himself.

'Yes, though we may need to be a bit more aggressive than we're comfortable with, if we're going to make the schedule.' Ivor pulled the door closed and lowered his voice. 'Keith, we're heading into unknown territory here, and you're a key reason I'm confident we'll find a path. Your work is essential. Without these algorithms, all this has no point. I'm counting on you. We're all counting on you.'

Keith stared at Ivor, nonplussed. The boss was probably looking for some attaboy response, but he refused to feed him such idiocy. The conversation had obviously run its course, so it was time to just kick him out.

'Sure thing, Ivor. You can leave now. I need to get back to my break.'

He didn't even bother waiting for him to go, taking a bite of meatloaf and starting the timer and pulling up the message board to peruse where he left off.

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Bē sighed. Here he was again. He didn't know how many times he'd been here, but it felt like the same thing every time. Grass, sky, tree. No strange sound, not since that one time, just the wind breezing. He was starting to feel more comfortable with his body, but he still couldn't look down. He looked up, waiting. The sky would turn colors and then it would be a stripe. He watched disinterestedly. He really wanted to just sit down.

The colors appeared, and his gaze was drawn to the horizon. As always, he felt the urge to run, but he knew he would end up someplace bad. Whether it was his legs feeling wrong, or hurting, or the sound gone, or an ugly landscape, or the colors disappearing. He turned to the tree, wondering if he might hear that voice again. Maybe if he headed towards it. He sighed again. He didn't want to risk having things get weird. He just didn't care.

Instead he stood still and relaxed and looked up into the sky, into the colors. This is how it always ended, this is how to get out. He waited. He sighed.

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Fred sighed. Loudly. Everyone was bickering about this incremental crap when what they needed to do was take the leap. He was a broken record on this but eventually they'd hear him. Or keep putting it off and wonder why they were unable to launch.

'We should just implant him.' There were audible groans. 'People! Show a little respect. I know you're probably sick of hearing it, but it's well past time. He's ready for it. I'm ready for it. Frankly you all should have been ready for it by now, with all the tinkering you've been doing. We're gonna run out of time unless we get a move on.' Let the bitching commence.

Cindy spoke up first. 'We still aren't letting him look down at his feet. Without that baseline how are you going to get a correct mesh? Huh?'

She was usually on his side, but now she was worried that her paws weren't perfect and was trying to block him. 'I've got a plan for that—'

'What? Just buzz him randomly and hope he doesn't end up like Todd?,' said Kate, acting sanctimonious like always. 'You're being reckless, Fred.'

'Maybe if you just listened rather than yap over me you'd think different.' He turned to Cindy. 'How long are you going to be perfecting those projections? You should at least have Fugue turn off the horizon lock once in a while to see if you're even making any difference.'

'Screw you Fred,' said Cindy, 'I've put the requests in and she hasn't gotten to them.'

'Well maybe if we didn't *lie* to her she wouldn't be too sad to do her job.' Fred looked at Keith, who was shrinking uncomfortably into the background as he spoke. 'I know that some people agree with me on that.'

'Gimme a break. If she knew he was still alive she'd be too busy wondering what was happening to get *any* work done.'

'Hey, hey!,' said Ivor, 'can we lay off Fugue? I think we can all appreciate that this is a hard time for her, and maybe we can cut her a little slack. I'll work on keeping her on task, but right now let's focus on what the next steps are for those of us in this room.'

Always coming in to protect his vulnerable little programmer. Fred liked Fugue, thought she was pretty damn smart and a hell of a lot more

interesting than a princess like Cindy, but having Ivor shelter her from any legitimate criticism was getting pretty old. If that kid toughened up a little she'd be a hell of a force when she got older. Ivor wasn't doing her any favors by insulating her. He was always overthinking his concerns and doing more harm than if he just stayed out of the way.

It was like with the dog's name. Ivor didn't want to use the dog's original name ("too clumsy") nor Fugue's ("a letter is not a name") so they had to pick something new. Keith had a good idea going with the B-theme in Belka, but Ivor said they'd have to modify it like with Luvah and nobody could come up with anything satisfactory. Cindy suggested Baxter which was just weak and Kate liked Biff which was frankly a bit mean. Fred thought they should keep with the theme of his original name but nobody (not even Fred, really) liked Notsure but when he suggested Frito everyone was on board. Kate and Keith thought it was particularly appropriate since they thought his paw smelled like corn chips (Fred didn't get it, but then again he didn't spend much of his time sniffing dog feet or junk food). Then Ivor got all worked up about potential trademark infringement and implied sponsorships. So after all that work to find a good name they had to change the spelling and ended up with something dopier than what they started with. Phreeto was just head-shakingly bad. At that point, though, everyone was used to calling him that so the name stayed along with that awful spelling. Every time Fred saw it written down he cringed.

Fred stepped in before Ivor screwed things up with some more of his quasi-leadership. 'Can I explain my plan? Thanks. For the first phase, I'll only do a partial implantation. Right-side only to favor the side he's missing two limbs on, and only a subset of insertions. This will avoid any chance of an overload crisis like with Todd yet will allow us to start the actual learning process. As he gets more comfortable, we can add the rest of the array.'

Fred looked around to gauge the reaction. Nobody was saying anything. Everyone was looking in a different direction: Cindy at Ivor, Ivor at Fred, Kate at her feet, Keith off into space, Dee (who never participated anyway) was just hanging back looking at everyone. If they weren't complaining, they must like it, they just didn't want to admit it. Finally, Keith spoke up.

'I think it sounds like a reasonable idea. As long as your sure a partial implantation will work.'

'Sure it will. Remember Rattail and Buck? That was effectively the same thing.' Those two were recent experiments where the dogs

were implanted but the arrays engaged incrementally. Keith and him had worked closely together on them, testing the lower limits of the cybernetics-algorithm interface. For Fred, engaging only a few implants at a time allowed him to pinpoint which lobe sectors provided the most responsiveness and plasticity to the stimuli. From Keith's perspective, by reducing the complexity of the system it provided better insight and explainability in the algorithmic solutions. Trying out different implant combinations against the AI was like pulling control rods to determine the criticality point. Those experiments were digging into the fundamental core of this whole project: how the brain and computer can learn towards one another to enhance mental capabilities.

The idea was simple in theory but incredibly complex in practice. Effectively, the algorithm (artificial intelligence was the accepted term, though "intelligence" was probably a bit of a misnomer) would test different stimulation patterns and observe the responses. Desired and undesired responses produced, respectively, positive and negative (algorithmic) feedback. A reinforcement cycle developed which led the algorithm to determine ideal stimulation patterns. On the practical side, this was coupled with augmented, virtual, and deceptive reality so that algorithmically determined stimulations were mapped to psychologically interpretable actions, which themselves could be mapped to physical processes. As Fred liked to say, they fooled the machine into thinking it tricked the mind into thinking there was no machine. Keith, with a slightly more pragmatic poetry, said they were training the beast to drive a car by jumping through a hoop. He would then correct himself and say it was training to jump through the hoop by driving a car.

Ivor spoke up, clearly excited. 'So it sounds like we can get started. I've been waiting for this. What's the timeline, Fred?'

Fred had an urge to slap the smarmy bastard. Where was this opportunistic punk the last twenty times it'd been brought up? 'Because the implantation is limited, we can get him up and going in a couple days.' He looked around the room with an air of success as the meeting disbanded. Cindy gave an annoyed shrug and left. Keith looked genuinely hopeful. Kate, ever-pleasant in defeat, came up and offered conciliatory and hopeful remarks about their next phase. Dee was gone. Ivor pulled Fred aside. His ebullience was clear even as he whispered to Fred in low-key confidence.

'This is a big step, Fred. I'm glad you pushed for it. Your work is essential. Without the implantation, all this has no point. I'm counting on you. We're all counting on you.'

It was about time he admitted it.

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Bē looked around. Green grass, blue sky, the tree, the wind. It all looked the same, but it was all different somehow. Both more vibrant and more muted. The last time he was here he just wanted to leave, but not this time. This was unlike anything he had experienced before, so maybe it wouldn't turn bad. Maybe he'd find the end of the colors, or the source of that voice. Or maybe he would just run, run forever. His legs felt different, like it was possible.

He looked down. The world didn't stick. He was looking at his feet, and they seemed real, realer than before. They still looked wrong, however he could *feel* them. He didn't remember them ever feeling like this, though anything was an improvement on nothing. It was like they were tingling in spots and numb in others. Bē stretched his back legs, watching them one at a time. The one still hung there limply, not doing what he wanted, but he swore it was extended. He could feel it pointed straight back. It was confusing, but not troubling.

He began to walk through the field. His feet were prickling and moved differently than he meant them to, but after a few steps he started to get the hang of it. He watched as he dragged his paw through the grass. If he closed his eyes, the feeling was unreal, like being poked by a million tiny and sharp things. Yet when looking at his foot those strange sensations were the blades tickling against him. He closed his eyes again and it was no longer something uncomfortable or odd, instead just the grass rubbing against his fur. The tingling was receding and a sense of being *touched* was replacing it.

The sky lit up with the colors and focused to a ribbon, but Bē was not even paying attention. He was flexing his toes, pushing down, feeling the solid ground. Something was on his face — it was the wind, blowing across it. That had never happened before. But it seemed wrong, it wasn't cool, it was tingly like his feet, like he was being pelted with sand. He opened his mouth to taste the air and it was not what he expected. There was no flavor of grass or earth or open air, it was stale and unnatural. Bē turned his head into the breeze and found that the half of his face could not feel the wind, felt hot in its absence. He realized that on the same side his front paw was touching nothing, as if it was standing on emptiness. His back paw was on ground that was rough and hard and bare, ground that didn't match up with the grass and dirt.

Bē felt a twitch, and his legs on one side started moving but the others stood still. He didn't want to move, but he couldn't control the two legs. He was sliding forward. Half his body could feel the world, and the other half was someplace else. He tried to stop his legs, but they fought him. Step. Step. Step. As he unwillingly dragged himself up the hill, he looked out at the colors and then up, searching for an escape, focusing on his numb side, trying to push all feeling away.

## Chapter 14

### Remote Work

Post was with an older couple when she came in. He looked towards the door and when he saw her his eyes went wide and he nodded her back to the Blood Alcove. Fugue sat down and began to thumb through some pictures, half listening to the conversation.

‘everything is so inventive ... amazed at what people are able to come up with ... have this without a, uh— ... penis, Ralph. The word is penis ... great next to my stereo ... Ellie is going to flip ... what is your refund policy?’

The pictures she was looking at included movie posters, art prints, matted reproductions of genre paperback covers, and gruesome photographs (which looked too awful to be real, and too awful to be staged). The styles ranged from atmospheric to provocative to silly to just plain gory. She pulled out one she hadn’t seen before. It depicted a huge wolf in a bonnet laying in a bed, a small girl’s dismembered head in one hand and her body in the other. Its eye sockets were empty chasms and its eyeballs sat on the bed below the child’s limp, red-stained hands. The wolf’s head was tilted up in a howl of agony.

‘It’s called “Grandma’s.”’ Fugue looked up at Post, who had gotten rid of the couple and come over. ‘Did you notice this?’ He pointed to the girl’s ankles, around which were twisted a pair of bloody panties.

‘That’s fucked up,’ said Fugue, putting the picture back. ‘Fucked up just to be fucked up.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that. *I* think it’s tapping into something about depictions of trauma, pushing the fairy tale away from the safety that its fantasy provides.’

She looked at him skeptically. ‘You just like it because it’s sick.’

‘Well, there’s that too. The best art works on multiple levels.’ He gave

her a snarky smile which she didn't return. 'So, what are you doing here? I thought you were on house arrest?'

She looked away sheepishly. 'I snuck out. Nobody's there right now so they won't notice. Gordolph's not going to show up here.' Fugue turned back to him. 'I needed to talk to you. I didn't mean to disturb you. This time of night on a weekday, I thought the store would be empty.'

'Don't worry about it. Those old fogeys have been bugging me for a week. Still haven't bought anything. I'm beginning to worry they might not have any money. I'm sure nobody else will come, so let me go lock up so we can have some privacy.' Post went up to the front to secure the doors and turn off the main lights. The alcove fell into shadow, just barely illuminated by the string of multicolored LEDs that were strung around its perimeter. Despite the horrific surroundings it felt comforting, a contrast to the dull and impersonal lab. Fugue was happy to get away, to escape from that little room and all the work she was behind on and the bad memories and her solitude. She was exhausted, tired of everything, lonely. She began to cry, burying her face into her hands.

'Hey now, don't tell me you're that afraid of the dark.' Post was carrying a steaming mug in each hand and passed one to her. The rich smell of coffee filled the air. Fugue wiped her face and nose with her sleeve then took a sip. Post sat down and drank from his own, waiting patiently.

Staring into the dark liquid, she began to talk. 'I already told you about B. How his leg got messed up and then he died.' She was crying again and took another drink, trying to keep from breaking down. 'What I didn't tell you was that it was my fault. I thought—I don't know what I was thinking. But I tried to help him out and he got worse and then Ivor and Dee took him away. They said they tried to save him but he didn't make it. Died on the operating table. So I killed him.'

'Fugue, you can't say that. If you were trying to help him—'

'I know. I mean, I know I didn't deliberately hurt him. But because of me, he's gone.' She stopped and sniffed. 'That's not my point, though. I think—I think that they're lying to me.'

'What, about the way he died?'

'No, that he died at all. I'm pretty sure he's still alive.'

Fugue went on to explain how she had been suspicious from early on, when they wouldn't let her see B's body, and especially when they wanted her to keep working on the rainbow program. She had put some Easter eggs in the scene, testing for reactions which, indirectly, she could try to see if it was B who was being sent in. One time the reaction was

too disruptive and she had to pull back, though that particular instance was when she became convinced it was B who was being experimented on.

‘I sent in a lot of voices. From what I could tell, he went to mine.’

‘If you think he’s still alive, why don’t you just go and see him?’

‘I can’t go into the restricted area.’

‘Then just tell them you know. They’ve got to let you see him then.’

‘Why do you think they told me he was dead in the first place? They don’t want me to see him. They’ll just keep saying that he’s dead and I’m wrong. I think they think it’s distracting me from my work.’

‘Screw those tyrants. You’re a kid, not a slave.’

Fugue shrugged and sniffled. She didn’t know what to do. Knowing that B was alive but not being able to see him was worse than thinking he was dead.

‘Well, Fugue, it looks like you’ve got one choice: you’re going to have to break into that restricted area and find that dog.’

She looked at him incredulously. ‘There’s no way. It’s all locked up, there’s no windows. The security’s super tight.’

‘You’ve got plenty of time by yourself in there. I’m sure you can find a way.’

It was like him trying to make an artist out of her. All this misplaced confidence. She sighed dispiritedly.

Post leaned forward. ‘You’ve got to at least try. I’m sure that he’s missing you as much as you are him. Plus, if you get in, it’ll be great material for a movie.’ Fugue rolled her eyes and he sat back, arms behind his head. ‘But you know what? Sitting here worrying about it isn’t going to solve anything. You need to clear your mind, make a little space for some inspiration. How about we find a movie and forget about things for a bit? Something that would go well with a big bowl of popcorn.’

‘I guess.’

‘I’ve got a splendid choice: *Pieces*.’

‘I’ve never heard of it.’

Post shook his head. ‘Never mind — that was a joke. No, we’ll do something silly. Maybe *Star Pack*. It’s space opera, with dogs. If you like it enough, there’s even a couple sequels: *Wrath o’ K9* and *The Search for Bones*.’

Still sniffing and trying hard not to smile, Fugue gave him a suspicious look. ‘That sounds incredibly stupid.’

‘It is. Totally stupid. It’ll be perfect.’

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*Rule xii: one alone cannot avenge a lost member*

Mās sat down on the sidewalk, trying to calm his nerves. He'd been pacing for a while, but the activity was only working him up. He watched the flickering inside the abandoned building across the street, a fire lit by the latest homeless denizens. Mās didn't understand much about fire, but he was surprised that the place hadn't burned down by now. It seemed that every day or two there would be someone new in there, sleeping, hiding, burning stuff. In his past he'd seen fires spread quickly, and heard of whole structures succumbing to them, but this one somehow withstood the lick of the flames. The surrounding buildings were crumbling and some even black with soot, so perhaps this one was specially selected to stand by some unknown power. Maybe that power was secretly trying to help out the pack, providing a waystation by which they could keep the vagabonds passing through.

The itinerant men and women never stayed long thanks to the dogs' efforts patrolling the area. The pack's den was a small warehouse with high, mostly intact windows, an unbreached roof, locked doors, and a small hole in its side through which the dogs could come and go. Guard duty was shared to keep an eye out for humans — hobos were chased away, normals were hid from. The rebuffed bums often found their way across the street to the only place on the block that was not locked-down, fallen-down, or occupied by unwelcoming animals. Guard duty included regular trips over to the building to check for left-behind scraps and to scare off any potential congregating masses. Anyone staying more than a day got steady visits from an increasing segment of the pack. They generally did not have to confront anyone, just hanging back and watching usually was enough to cause the neighbors to seek out more private abodes.

Tonight somebody was in there, sometime tomorrow they would be gone. The pack controlled the man, not the other way around. They had strength in its numbers and knew how to wield it. Don't risk getting hurt or caught, trust the group and not any human. It was a collective attitude that not only felt instinctually correct but also aligned with his suspicious nature. Even their associations with Bēnjəmən, who seemed kind enough, were reserved and viewed as a reluctant necessity. Being a pack, Mās had felt drawn to bonding with and joining them, however there was an elemental aspect to their general rejection of people that he

found particularly compelling. It was still unusual for him — he found it hard to ignore the deep connection he'd had with Mr. Krüzēn — yet it was a worldview that fit with his experience, especially recently.

However, he worried that he'd pushed too hard on them, stepped out too far. He began pacing again, nervous. They'd only recently accepted him, and now he was asking them to join his anger, a feeling which for them would be abstract, not tied to anything tangible. Mās had framed it as an existential crisis, where the pack's philosophy, if extended beyond its typical immediacy to something more forward-thinking, would require them to act. He then tried to weave in a *Den Rule*, an effort through which he could express his passion and possibly kindle theirs. Unfortunately, he could tell he had lost many in the group, that he had gotten too complex for them to follow. He would have to rely on those who had understood (and bought into) his argument — which hopefully included the leadership — to convince the others. He wondered if there was another way he could have achieved this, if his strategy was flawed. He really believed in the pack, was he just setting them up for destruction for his own selfish ends? Doubt weighed on him. Had he just screwed everything up?

Mās turned to look at the warehouse. It was dark, there was no sign of any other dogs. He was filled with anxiety, not just for his gambit but also for his place in the den. Were they deciding right now that he *had* gone too far, that he was *not* an authentic member of the pack, that he was to be rejected? Had he already spent his last night in there? Had he set himself up for being abandoned once again? It felt as though, no matter how life toyed with him, he was doomed to be alone. He looked back across the street. The flickering had died down. Then it was split by a large shadow and the orange light increased, followed by a trail of sparks that drifted out of an empty window. The shadow disappeared and the building was glowing again, a pulsing that made it appear to be moving with life. He smelled something and turned.

Flōps was walking toward him in the darkness, her dangling ear curls catching moonlight and firelight but her face otherwise unreadable. Mās sat down, nervously waiting and trying to appear calm. Upon reaching him she sniffed his face and his backside, then sat down next to him, facing the same direction.

'We've talked it over and we agree with you.' Mās felt a surge of relief, and excitement. 'This is a real threat to us, especially being so close to Bēnjāmān's. Also, we agree that it is almost certain that your friend, this Bē, would have been accepted into the pack, and so we can consider him

a fallen brother.'

Mās felt like crying out, like he wanted to run around. But looking up at Flöps, unmoving and serious, actively refusing to look at him, told him he needed to just be still. She was unusually impersonal, as if she were reciting a memorized script.

'I won't lie to you, there were some who were not in agreement. The discussion was intense. But a consensus was reached, and we all accept the need to act as one. However, there is one concern which we all share: there is no large dog among our pack. Our size is our strength, but in this case it may be a weakness. We feel that we need to recruit another, perhaps a temporary mercenary, to ensure we have the appropriate tactical advantage. We agreed to wait for the next scrap night and see if we might find a suitable candidate there.'

'That may not be necessary.'

Flöps turned to him and for the first time showed genuine emotion. 'Really, how's that?'

Mās, sick of sitting out there in the cold and feeling a surge of confidence in himself, smirked his nose and said with more than a touch of intrigue, 'Come on, let's head back inside and I'll explain it on the way.'

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Every time it was different. Things looked the same, however all the other senses were changed. New smells, new tastes, new sounds. A touch that he'd never experienced before. A tingle transformed into understanding. Sometimes they were reminiscent of something from before — before in this place or often even before that — but didn't match what he was seeing. Sometimes they were completely unfamiliar. It was exciting and frustrating, a fresh world that was amazing yet also continually posed challenges. He'd relearn to use his legs, or to interpret noises or odors, and the next time things were messed up again. Early on, his reaction often was to tube out, to blow off whatever stimulation (good or bad) was flooding into him and just be free of it. But lately he found himself spending more time exploring and working on figuring out his body. Especially now that both sides had started to feel the same again. He wasn't sure if the annoyances were actually lessening or if he was getting used to them. Whatever the reason, he now could spend hours — *wanted* to spend hours — in here whereas before it seemed like he'd give up after a few minutes.

Sitting in the field, Bē began to go through his routine. He looked around, paying close attention to what he saw and focusing on his other

senses one at a time. Smell, taste, touch, sound. Identifying changes, recalling associations, establishing what the world would be like today and what he was going to have to work on learning. He had taught himself this routine, it was the most comfortable way of experiencing things, it was something that made him feel good. The only thing that seemed different was his back leg, the one that on the outside still existed. It always felt unusual compared to the other three, and now it was tense, as if it was being crushed by an enormous pressure. Bē looked at it, it appeared fine. But when he tried to move it, it took an extreme effort, so much that he began shaking with strain, although there was also a sensation was that the leg was minute in size, almost nonexistent.

He stood up and tried to walk around, testing things out. If he tried to step he collapsed onto his haunches. That leg often caused him difficulty, but never like this. Usually it was out of sync with the others or was slower, and it always had a different sense of touch, but he could always use it. Now it could bear no weight and was making it impossible to get around. It felt like it was being pressed into nothingness and acted like it was already gone.

So Bē tried walking gain, only this time ignoring the leg completely. It reminded him of when he'd been with Fyüg, learning to walk without his front paw. It took a little trial and effort, and eventually he found that if the hop-skip that he naturally did in small doses was just extended repeatedly, he could get around quite easily. It was actually kind of fun. He started bouncing around the field, heading semi-committally towards the color stripe, which had long since appeared in the sky.

There was something strange in front of him. He stopped and cocked his head. It was next to where the colors met the hills. He looked at that spot more closely. It was hard to make out, a hint of a shadow. It looked like a tree, like *the* tree. He turned to the side — the tree wasn't there. Had it been gone the whole time? He was unsure. He turned back to the shadow. Yes, it was the tree. It had moved somehow. Or he had come in someplace different, but would mean that the colors should have shifted as well.

A sound came from that direction. Something he had never heard before, but it reminded him of the way humans sounded now. Blips and static, the rhythm. Whenever he exited this world, only a little bit of the strange senses would carry over, except for sound. Once sound started to get weird in here it stayed weird on the outside. It was scary at first, but Bē had been adjusting and now was able to interpret the strange sounds. This sounded like someone whispering, but it wasn't a voice he

recognized. It wasn't like Īvôr or Frëd or Këth, more like Dē or Sīndē or Kāt. Yes it was close to Kāt, but it wasn't her. It was quiet and hard to make out, but the pattern seemed familiar, something he knew but couldn't figure out.

He hoped it was someone like Kāt, he liked her. She was always coming by to pet on him and was the only person who brought him treats (he particularly liked the pull cheese). She had helped him learn to use the wheelthing. Këth and Dē were alright — they at least would talk to him and turn him around when his wheelthing got stuck. Dē also was the one who brought food every day and cleaned him up, although the kibble was bland and he'd seen her get angry at Kāt after she passed him something tasty (especially if it was hard — perhaps Dē wanted to be the only one to give him something he could crunch on). Frëd spent most of their time together poking at Bē's head and it would make him feel funny or hurt, and Sīndē always had a shitface when she was around him (he was still working out tone, but given the way she sounded before and the way she looked at him now, he was pretty sure she was hating). Bē really didn't like Īvôr, not just because he was so mean when they'd taken him away from Fyüg (especially compared to Dē, whose tone at the time was compassionate) but also because he never bent down and tried to interact with Bē, instead just standing close and talking over him. That was all Bē saw of Īvôr: legs and feet, legs and feet. Like the man was mocking him.

It sounded closest to Kāt. Maybe he would finally get a friend in here. He was always so lonely, and even though he kept busy working on figuring out his senses he longed to have someone else around. Someone like Kāt or Fyüg or Mr. Krüzën. Or Mās. Even though he certainly had nothing to do with the mysterious noise, the thought of Mās got Bē very excited and he took off towards the tree, ready to find the source of the sound, ready to have a new friend. However, he'd forgotten about his leg and immediately stumbled onto the ground, landing on his side clumsily. Normally he'd just get back up and at it, but something about having his high hopes dashed by his stupid leg put him in a sour mood and he just lay there, annoyed and disgusted. Slipping into side-tube mode, he looked up at the colors in the sky, wanting to see where they led to but giving up hope of making any progress today.

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Fugue sat at her computer, trying to knock out a few more requests on SPRODE. Already today she'd sprinted through a whole week's worth

of homework and made a significant dent in her work backlog. The PhRI staff (especially Cindy) had been getting noticeably impatient with her for not keeping up, something exacerbated by her recent motivation issues and the sudden, mysterious deadline that everyone was now concerned about. This had resulted in an increase in requests which, while larger in number, were more focused than normal and sometimes a bit unusual. For example, Cindy, who, apparently changing her mind from wanting to be best buds with Fugue to acting like she deserved as much respect as stepped-in dogshit, had demanded a sit-down session to teach her how to use the SpcSvr 3D scanner. **You won't believe what I'm about to ask!** , indeed. On top of that, in the actual meeting Cindy spent less time showing her SpcSvr than she did picking her brain about how she had created the paw projections for B. It felt like Cindy was threatened by Fugue and wanted to be sure that if any new technology was being used (it wasn't — just the plain old SPRODE RolyPoly software) she knew about it. More than once Fugue got pretty emotional in the meeting having to (indirectly) talk about B, and Cindy's unsympathetic attitude made her wonder if the meeting wasn't just an excuse to make her feel like crap. It seemed particularly mean-spirited given that Fugue was almost certain that B was still alive and that Cindy did not know that she knew this.

She was concerned that there might be a plot brewing to get rid of her. The contract wouldn't let them separate from her without cause and it wasn't clear to her what threshold her work had to fall below to allow that to happen. Instead, it felt like there might be an effort to make her miserable enough to quit. Faking B's death, more requests, Cindy's bitchiness. It was even possible that they had let her slip in her obligations so that she would set herself up for an underperformance rating. She wasn't sure she could trust anyone, whether they were acting (supposedly) nice to her or not. Every way she looked at it appeared that they wanted her gone. Not only would that be a disaster (she would probably never get back into HS and would be forced to return to Gordolph or the girls home) it would also mean giving up on B. That was something she decided she would not do. If for nothing else, she needed to stick around for him. Putting her hand in her pocket, Fugue rubbed B's collar. They'd given it to her when they told her he'd died. Just thinking about the situation made her upset. He was right on the other side of those doors, if she could only find a way to reach out to him.

So she was making a concerted effort to catch up on school and work, to — at least objectively — present herself in such a way that she could

not be let go. She was avoiding any show of emotional extremes (especially crying) in front of anyone, something that was facilitated both by a belief in B's existence and a conscious attitude change through which she stopped being sensitive to the way anyone thought about or treated her. Today she had seen Fred, Ivor, Dee, and Keith, and their attitudes towards her had been, in turn, flippant, anxious, stern, and aloof. But as far as she was concerned, they might as well have all been exactly the same. She listened to what they had to say, made enough conversation as was necessary, and got back to work.

There was another, deeper goal to all this effort. By cramming through a bunch of tasks, Fugue could make more time for finding a way to contact B. Originally she had used the rainbow scene as a way to deal with her grief and had inadvertently caused a response that made her believe that he was still alive. Then when she had created her first eggs she had gotten close — almost too close — and it had been necessary to try to be more subtle. The problem was that the only way to know if her efforts were actually connecting were through the requests and conversations she had with the staff. Neither her nor they could talk about anything directly, so she was forced to infer everything and lately the signals had been extremely muddy. When she had set up the talking tree she was specifically asked about sound aberrations; when she had added a preference for orange Keith had requested that she change something to prevent the randomizer from allowing repeated selections of a particular hue. However, the less obvious things she'd been doing lately — barely noticeable projections, faint sounds, slight changes to the search algorithm — weren't creating any obvious indicators. She'd even dared to be a bit more bold and added back the talking tree (close to the rainbow so that any distraction would be less noticeable), yet had no questions about it.

Fugue needed to figure out a better way to communicate with B. Or maybe it was already happening and she didn't know it. If she could only find some way for B to contact her. Maybe Post was right, she should just figure out how to sneak into the rest area. That way she could just see him and wouldn't have to worry about coming up with some impossible scheme. Entrance to the other side required a key card and passcode. She had a card but, obviously, it wouldn't give her access. She wondered if there was something in PhRI's unrestricted data store that might help her. Fugue closed her queue, pulled up the Filter,Look,Order,Obtain Data tool, and started poking around.

Not being directly related to her work, there was a ton of old stuff

here she had never looked at. She started with the animal data, hoping that maybe the fact that the dogs moved across the boundary had allowed something to leak back. It was mostly what she expected: vet reports, brain maps, the occasional memo about suitability for some codeworded project (Zener, Settlecrack, Bend). A section titled 1 caught Fugue's attention because it was older than the others and, given the name, she figured it must have been the first dog. The organization and file contents in there were much different than she had seen before. She did some searches for "rest" and the only relevant hit was a note attached to a budget statement:

A benefit of using Mommy funding for construction  
is that the restricted area's lifetime will exceed  
that of the project.

She moved to a misc area. Basic searches didn't find anything relevant but in the process she found a bunch of message groups from before she came on that had been archived. She opened one:

Fred: I can't get the implant to work  
It totally stinks

Keith: Uh oh

Fred: Know why?

Keith: Why what?

Fred: Brain fart

Fugue guessed this must have been a joke, though she didn't understand it. She was about to look at another group when her phone buzzed. It was the camera in her uncle's basement. Something had moved down there and triggered a notification. Curious, she opened the feed. Gordolph was kneeling at the table, his head down and hands clasped, like he was praying. He stood up and stumbled into the wall, then back over to the end of the table. He picked up the ropes that had been used to hold down B, putting his arm through one of them and tightening it. He slipped it off and went out of the picture, returning holding a large cleaver. He made like he was holding something down although there was nothing in his hand, and he took a couple of practice swings with the knife.

There was no way Fugue was going to let him maim another dog. She stood up, wondering if she should go over there or call the police or what, then stopped herself. If she did that it would mess up everything with HS and she might never see B again. She let out a moan of indecisiveness,

waiting to see what her uncle did next. He tripped into a stack of boxes, knocking one of them over. Without looking back, he put the cleaver on the cabinet right in front of the camera, partially blocking its view. Gordolph picked up the box and put it back on the stack, taking things from the floor and loosely tossing them back into it. Wavering, he turned around and disappeared, then the lights went out.

Fugue watched the video for a few more minutes. It remained black, the barest glint of reflection from the knife blade visible. Maybe there wasn't any dog. She didn't want to risk sending a false alarm. She sat back down and propped her phone up. Half keeping an eye on the video, she poked around some more in the old data. She skipped the silly messages and tried some other areas. In one called `fac` there was a bunch of information about the building such as blueprints and plumbing layouts. In there she found a file called `sesame.smfd`. Standalone MonoFile Database. SPRODE could read that. She opened up a loader to check it out.

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'We may not make it. He's supposed to be transferred soon, and we don't even have approval yet. To be honest, it doesn't seem that we're ready anyway.'

Dee was staring at Ivor, waiting for him to return her gaze, to acknowledge reality. His face was buried into his hands, each pointer finger slowly massaging his temple. She felt bad for him, knowing that being confronted with failure was particularly hard on him. She still marveled at how someone so analytic could delude himself with optimism so easily. She'd seen it happen many times — he'd get energized by some new project or idea, and then as it lumbered towards some imperfect conclusion he'd double down with confidence as if success could be guaranteed through force of will. Oddly enough, given his understated antagonism toward religion and mysticism, it was an almost spiritual behavior, something which appeared to associate a lack of faith with defeat, an impossible task with a shadow of doubt. Sometimes he was successful, able to conjure up almost miraculous results out of what seemed to be assured disaster. But not always. And this time it looked like good fortune would be withheld by whatever fickle spirits ruled over him.

'We could always go back to the original plan,' said Dee, 'Spud was close to approval when we switched to Phreeto, and he doesn't have all of the complications which we're dealing with right now.' Spud (full

name Spudnikenzie, though nobody — not even the kooky namegiver Fred — used that full silliness) was minimally implanted and undamaged, a conservative extension of Luvah and the Mommy project which would be less about showcasing their emerging capabilities than further proving the viability of their program's fundamentals. The risks were lower but so was the chance of getting a full contract out of it. That being said, sending Spud was probably better than missing out completely, as they did not have enough funding to survive to another shot.

Ivor stopped rubbing and sighed. He looked up at Dee, his eyes showing a familiar determination. She almost knew what he was going to say before he started. 'We're not going back. If we want to do that, we should just close this place now. You know as well as I do that if we actually want PhRI to survive, Spud's more of a long shot than Phreeto. Spud was just a delaying tactic, delaying the inevitable. Now we've got a chance to actually succeed. We're going to make it.'

So *now* he admits that Spud was an effort of surrender. She'd been pressing him about that for months, explaining the troubling financial situation they were in. Additionally, the staff — who were not privy to the company's money issues — had become less and less enthusiastic about sending what they considered to be last-gen technology as a showcase. They not only wanted to push the research but also believed that few outsiders would be impressed by Spud. The decision to use him had been made over a year ago, and Ivor was obstinate in his refusal to modify the plans. That is, until Phreeto came along. Then suddenly he was ready to throw caution to the wind, to switch it up. Dee didn't understand what caused the shift, but she suspected that he wasn't confident he could convince the review board that a more speculative option was justified unless it was so radical that the potential payoffs were a good match for the perceived risks. She wondered if she could get him to understand the downsides before everything fell apart.

To be fair, Dee wanted to send Phreeto, not Spud. (She had tried to get the staff to shorten his name like they did with Spud. On syllable is better, the word more meaningful, and, being a fairly common word, Free wouldn't need to use that stupid spelling. They had all voted her down saying that *her* idea was stupid. Oh well, agree to disagree.) She believed in PhRI and felt that their technological advancements should be shown off and funded. It would be a shame to use a dog which the staff viewed as non-representative — almost embarrassingly non-representative — and inadequate for their current research goals. However, reality was reality, and although she was sympathetic to the

disappointment it would cause, the truth was that Phreeto likely wasn't going to get the green light.

'Ivor, I know you're not hearing me right now, but I'm trying to have an honest conversation. If we go with Phreeto and he doesn't make it, if he's not ready in time, we get nothing. Spud is at least something.'

'We're not doing Spud.'

'Maybe we should let everyone else know the situation, and then ask their opinion.'

'Are you crazy? That'll just cause a panic. And we'll probably end up with half on one side and half on the other, everybody fighting over what we *should* do rather than just doing it.'

Dee started to respond but stopped herself. He was right. Changing anything up now would be a mess, as would dropping a bomb about their unstable situation. It was like with Vanessa — often it was better to guide them to being productive rather than let them get flounder in too much truth. If everyone knew what she and Ivor did they'd just get hysterical, rendering PhRI a pointless mass dissipating into uselessness. Ivor's propensity for delusion and her fortitude were what allowed them to get by; most people didn't have the character to handle it.

Dee turned on her motherly voice. There was no need to be stern anymore, it was time to make things happen. 'Alright, I'm with you. So what's your plan for getting approval? The board seems unconvinced about sending Phreeto local.'

Ivor seemed taken aback by her sudden change in tone. He fumbled through a fairly pedantic explanation that involved the implantation advancements, sensory replacements, and cybernetic links over distance. He paused briefly and then added, 'There's also the genetic link. That allows us to exploit the existing assets in a manner that is both novel and sympathetic to the original research directions.'

'Oooh, that last part is getting somewhere. They've heard our spiel plenty of times and you know that lately we've not been getting much traction. Talking about not letting a "failing asset" go to waste may find sympathetic ears not just in terms of economy but also urgency. Luvah has already outlived her expectations, and it would be a shame to let her go to waste. Now, the same argument could be made for Spud, but throw in the link to the original research and they should find that quite compelling.'

Ivor nodded his head. 'That's good, as long as they don't remember the screw up.'

'We just have to frame it as a recovery. We've addressed the prob-

lems, and are prepared to get back on track. And, having them there together gets rid of the legal concern.'

'Aaaah, I didn't even think of that.'

Dee nodded knowingly. 'Now, what about his, uh, disability? That seems to be a particularly important issue.'

'I've worked on downplaying it as much as possible. The latest updates don't mention it at all. The focus is on research, results, quality.'

'Maybe you should address it directly?'

He gave Dee a doubtful look. 'I think that would be a mistake. Using a dog with only one foot was a bit of a sticking point. There's no reason to constantly remind them.'

'You think they'll forget? Why don't you use it to your advantage? Tell them how this poor animal has a miserable quality of life, and that by using him in the program you'll be giving him a means to be happy again, a purpose.'

'I don't know that it's *that* miserable.'

'Are you serious, Ivor? He pushes himself around in that wheelchair contraption and manages to get stuck half the time. Since we separated him from Vanessa, he's got no real companionship — unless you think that Kate slipping him snacks a couple times a day counts.' Kate thought she was being compassionate, but all she was doing was making it harder for Dee to control the dog's nutrition. She did it with all the dogs and knew that it wasn't allowed, but only if she blundered by passing something loud like a rye chip or a pretzel when Dee was in earshot would she get caught. Then she would claim to Dee that it was just ice but Dee knew better because she was the one cleaning up their shit and knew a kibble-turd from a snack-turd. It was obvious that Phreeto was doing plenty of snacking.

'None of the dogs have companionship, that's part of the point. Besides, I thought we agreed that telling Fugue that he died was for the best. I can't imagine how little work she'd be getting done now if she was obsessing about spending more time with him.'

Dee actually thought that Vanessa *did* know. The last couple days she'd been acting strange — pleasant, engaged. Not like she was in some grief denial stage, but as if she didn't need to be sad anymore. Somebody must have told her, probably Kate or Keith, though Fred might do something like that to stir shit up. It didn't really matter how it happened, the fact was the kid was back to working hard so it was best not to rile things up any more by pointing it out.

'Calm down, hon. I'm not criticizing. I'm merely pointing out how

to best present the argument. You want the dog to seem as pitiful as possible, and that by selecting him we're creating the opportunity to rise up beyond his problems. You want to make it sound inspirational.'

Ivor looked at her as though she'd told him that he could bring world peace by cutting off his middle finger.

'I know you don't like to engage in emotional arguments,' said Dee, 'but in this case it may be your only chance. Take your weakness, and make it a strength.'

'You know, you may be on to something.' She gave him a warm smile, pleased that he was coming around. 'Remember in yesterday's meeting the discussion about the last leg, how it is creating all kinds of problems? Maybe Fred's solution — which I know was a little facetious — maybe it would actually work. It fixes the operational issues *and* it makes the dog even more pathetic. So bad off, in fact, that the only *ethical* thing to do would be to put it down or send it up. We force them to do the right thing.'

Dee had to agree that, as screwed up as it was, the plan was kind of brilliant. Time was short, though, and she told him so.

'Maybe we just wait until the staging. Its mobility will be limited anyway and since it'll be completely virtual at that point we can combine the recovery with training. The system has already figured out a majority of the pain management.'

'What if he isn't healed in time?'

Ivor's eyes sparkled with insight. 'Add it to the list of benefits. We can monitor differential healing in microgravity. Maybe they'll even give us extra funding for that.'

A thought briefly passed through Dee's head hoping there weren't dogs in hell.

## Chapter 15

### Admission

The inner door slid open and Fugue got her first look at the rest area. She had been imagining something ultramodern and techno-sleek. Glass and metal, neon lights, perhaps even the haze of some mist from cryo-offgassing or mysterious experiments. Though it was dim it was decidedly not hazy and what she could make out looked very similar to the side she was familiar with. The same tight-pile carpet and vinyl tile flooring with the interlocking spiral pattern, the same plastic, rolled, muted-colored chairs and tables, the same drop-ceiling with chimneyed skylights through which streaks of moonlight were providing faint illumination, the same impersonal functionality whose stylistic goal appeared to be ageless dullness. Even the layout looked the same: a large main space with surrounding rooms and a hallway that ran straight back and presumably did a couple of turns to form a large U. The only apparent difference was there was no entrance and atrium to her left, instead a wall with doors that she could barely make out in the shadows.

That the building was just a symmetrical reflection of itself never crossed Fugue's mind, even though now it was so obvious. The mystery of the place had led her to imagine something grander, more impressive than what was likely there. She wondered what other unknowns she had created false realities for. Perhaps the experiments in here were as mundane as those on the other side, uninteresting tests to see how dogs would respond to VR simulations. She had always assumed that the things she saw were the boring parts of the research, and that all of the cool stuff was hiding back here. VR and AR had been around for years. The application to dogs was maybe a bit novel, but other than the modifications to the gear the technology was pretty commonplace. Headsets that provided images and sound, vertically adjusting harnesses to secure

the dogs but allow up-down movement, roller floors to track their steps. Compared to the latest lightfield and soundfield goggles, the headsets were actually pretty clunky (unless B was wearing them, in which case they were pretty fucking cool).

Fugue just took it for granted that there was something so advanced that it required hiding behind double-door security. Obviously they were doing some sort of AI integration but she knew her secret dream that they were teaching dogs to drive cars or speak was probably wrong. There were those strange scenes they would have her help create, scenes that for all their fantasy seemed pointlessly simple. There was a conditioning aspect, where the computer would try to learn what combinations of inputs would encourage the dog to take certain actions, but the underlying goal was completely opaque. She had used those ideas when she had sent B in, though because he couldn't move around (or even pretend to in a harness) she had hand-tuned the loops based on his reactions, trying to induce positive feelings from tranquil visuals and purported motion.

It was the allusions to there being a dangerous psychological aspect which were the biggest mystery to her. Ivor had implied that just the VR alone could cause injury, but she didn't really believe that. When new dogs would come in they would quickly get sent in, staging them for a week or less before they were transferred to the rest area. She never saw any of them get hurt or nor did anyone appear to worry about such a thing. Todd was the only physical evidence she ever saw of such danger. And he was from before her time, an artifact that was frightening yet offered no insight into the source of the damage.

Todd was on Fugue's mind as she tried to strategize about exploring the area. Since it mirrored the other side, the first place she thought to check for B was the kennel, or rather its equivalent location. Even though there weren't any windows besides the skylights in the enclosed area, she was nervous about turning on the lights, so she crept through the darkness, making her way to the back and around the first bend. Many of the doors along the walls had windows but they were either blocked off or the rooms so dark that she couldn't see inside. Halfway down the hall she had a sudden panic about an alarm system and looked around madly for sensors. Sure enough, up in the corner, there was a light blinking green. They had similar motion detectors on the other side, but since Fugue was sleeping there now they never enabled the alarm system. She couldn't be sure that the same held true here, but she figured it was too late now and that she might as well keep going. There

was almost certainly no cameras as Ivor banned any visual recording devices on either side of the building (likewise, staff were only allowed to use camera-disabled phones).

Fugue made her way around the corner, her heart still pounding about the alarm. When she got to the could-be kennel she carefully eased the handle down and opened the door. There were small reflective hints from the light reaching in but she couldn't make anything out. Contemplating for a second whether turning on the light was a bad idea, she decided she had nothing to lose and flicked the switch. Fluorescents blinked and hummed on, and the large room was illuminated. It was the same size and shape as the kennel, but there were no cages nor a bathing alcove. Instead it appeared to be a medical examination room, with two stainless steel tables bolted to a tiled floor and rows of labeled cabinets and shelves filled with containers and jars. It looked — and frankly, smelled — immaculately clean. Fugue wondered if this was where they brought B to deal with his leg. She stepped in and placed her hand on the cool, clean table, imagining the dog being laid down and worked on. She closed her eyes and tried to sense remnants of his body, the heat and smell and sounds which had long since dissipated. Was this the location of strange medical experiments, where crazed dogs were brought to return them to sanity? Where injured dogs were miraculously healed? Fugue was again constructing a speculative reality to match a self-exaggerated mystery.

She lifted her hand, leaving an afterimage surrounded by condensation which slowly evaporated until all that was left was a smudgy handprint. Fugue swore to herself and, pulling up her sleeve, wiped harshly on the table to remove any evidence of her presence. She left, wiping the light switch and door handle on the way out, shaking her head at her thoughtlessness. She pulled out her phone and checked the time. She'd already been in here for thirty minutes. How was that possible? Well, at least she was pretty sure the alarm was disabled, or else someone would have shown up by now. She needed to be more efficient and not waste so much time, otherwise she might be searching all night. Fugue wasn't totally confident that she could get in here again without being detected, and she wasn't even certain she'd get away with it this time. The database file she'd found had all of the keycard ids that were allowed access along with their four-digit passcodes. Nothing was encrypted or secured. There was a log table of every time someone entered the rest area, and a table which appeared — based on its name (`phone_alert`) and contents — to be used to send messages out when certain people

accessed the area after hours. One interesting entry was a passcode without a corresponding keycard id that seemed to be an emergency entrance code.

At first, Fugue thought about just using the emergency code (which was an imaginative 1234 ) but she was concerned that it would set off some kind of alarm. Additionally, there was no entry in the `phone_alert` table which might imply a default behavior that *any* use of that code would send a message out (the two listed message recipients were Ivor and Dee). Without seeing the access program there was no way to know. The solution she came up with instead was to write a script that added her to the keycard access list with the passcode 9973 , as well as add her to the message table indicating that no messages should ever be sent for her. The program then watched the database file to wait for when her keycard had been used or thirty minutes had passed, whichever came first. At that point, all entries involving her were deleted from the database. This both allowed her access to the area and automatically covered her tracks. She knew she would not need the keycard to exit because almost everyday someone (usually Fred) managed to leave the rest area without their card and, being locked out, had to call someone to escort them in to retrieve it.

The problem was that she was not sure how the underlying system worked. Any number of things could go wrong based on false assumptions, but she didn't have a way of discovering what those might be without exposing her method. She didn't even want to do a test run — entering into the rest area and immediately exiting to check that everything worked — for fear that she wouldn't be able to get in a second time. Just like with the alarm, she would rather plow through and have a chance of seeing B even if she got caught, rather than play it safe and miss her opportunity forever. Thus, time was important and taking a half hour to check one room was unacceptable.

Rather than try to apply any more strategy based off of specious similarity with the space she knew, Fugue decided to just work her way down the hall, trying every door along the way. If she got to the end without finding B, she could come back and start in the other direction. She began with the door immediately across the hall, opening it and turning on the light. There was a drafting table with a tablet and an absolutely huge computer screen in the center of the room. Off to the side was another table teeming with pens and pencils and brushes and other art tools. Exactly one half of the room was covered with pinned up drawings and papers. There were realistic sketches of dog anatomies, plants, buildings,

and geometric shapes casting long shadows; artistic paintings of landscapes and skies, including a whole series of clouds running along the edge of the ceiling which seemed to depict different times of day starting from a purplish dawn and ending at a fiery sunset; color wheels and cutouts from magazines and printed pictures; cartoonish drawings of animals that Fugue suspected might be caricatures of the PhRI staff (she looked for herself but from the only ones that even remotely fit were a ladybug and an ape, and she was pretty sure that those were Kate and Ivor). The other half (facing the drawing table) was a mural of a tropical island scene, with a few hung pictures of what looked like overtanned and underdressed people having a good time and an inflatable palm tree in the corner. Fugue had to admit that she was impressed with the breadth of Cindy's artistic talent, although it didn't mean that she wasn't tempted to go in and fart on her chair.

The next room was another office, almost certainly Keith's. It was spare and extremely neat, almost to the point that at first glance one might have thought it was unoccupied. There was a giant whiteboard with a couple equations in the corner that was otherwise completely clean, and a single poster that seemed to be an elaborate flow chart titled *Homunculus*. Fugue wondered if his home was similarly tidy — she was a bit disordered herself (her living closet was already a mess of piled clothes and clutter) and couldn't imagine how he was able to maintain this near-perfection.

Fugue crossed the hall to the next room. It smelled like something living, and when she flicked on the light a dog that was strapped into a VR harness and facing the wall lifted its head. Its fur was short and completely white, all the way down to its tail. But what she noticed immediately was its head. Something that was a mix of black and bright colors was sitting on top of it, flopping oddly like an awful haircut. Suddenly it looked back towards her and she saw a single black orb surrounded by a huge circular patch of black fur, like an inverted orca's mock eye. It barked loudly and Fugue nearly cried out in fright. She hit the light switch and quickly exited, holding the doorhandle in her sleeved hand and slowly raising it. Her heart was exploding in her chest and she hoped the dog would keep quiet, though she suspected that, given the weight and seal of the door, she might not hear it even if it did not.

As she started to move down the hall, Fugue noticed a label by the door. Putting her eyes up to it in the darkness, she could read something that looked like *SDUD*. At the next door there was another label, which she thought said *BUREETO*. Another dog, but not B. She was about to

move along but stopped herself, wondering if maybe they just gave him a full name. Or perhaps these weren't dog names but instead were experiment codenames. With breath held and senses alert, she slowly opened the door and turned on the light, preparing to reverse herself at the sign of any disturbance.

'B!'

She put her hand up to her mouth, shocked at her unintentional outburst. There was no doubt, it was him. The thick tube body, the dense black fur, the carrot-shaped tail with just wisp of white at the tip. Like the other dog he was lying down, harnessed, facing the far wall, strange stuff on top of his head. He was completely still but his ears were raised as was his nose, as if waiting for confirmation of the intruder.

'It's me, B,' Fugue whispered, 'It's Fugue.' She began to move forward but the dog began to growl loudly, a sound of warning like a motorcycle tuned to be heard if not seen. Fugue turned and closed the door, at the very least to avoid disturbing any other dogs. She turned back, gently saying his name again, but he only got louder, sounding more desperate and angry. His head was turned away from her but she could see white teeth and his whiskers quivering above them. Fugue eased herself around to his front, knowing that the harness would prevent him from lunging at her. Then she remembered his feet and that him coming at her wasn't even an issue. She wondered what happened to his back leg, but it was tucked under him on the bedding. She leaned towards him, reaching out her hand to pet his side, and he start making a loud, awful noise like a broke-down lawnmower tangling with barbed wire. She pulled her hand back and began to choke up. 'B, it's just me. What's going on?'

She stepped all the around to his front and when he saw her fully he silenced but his lips continued to quiver. Fugue tried to ignore whatever was going on with the top of his head and knelt down, pulling back her hood to show her hair with its long shock of blue running down one side of her face. She focused on his eyes and B began to whimper, shifting his body like he was trying to move forward though he remained in the same spot. She put her hand out to his nose and he sniffed it and then began to lick her wildly as if she were one of Gordolph's blocks of salt.

'Oh B.' When she spoke he stopped and pulled his head back, cocking it to one side. 'What's wrong? Do you not remember me?' She pushed her hand closer to him and continued to talk, trying to put him at ease. Hesitantly he whimpered and sniffed and licked, all the while staring at her apprehensively. Fugue wiped tears from her eyes and let him taste

them, calmly brushing the side of his face. She looked more closely at the top of his head. A tight, rubberish skull cap was stretched over it, behind his ears from his forehead to his neck. Regularly spaced metal circles that looked like snaps attached it to his head. Coming out of it were hundreds of tiny black tubes, and from each one sprouted a bundle of thin, multicolored wires. The wires collected together into circular plugs that were similar in shape to a small stack of dimes. The weight of the plugs pulled them down towards his scalp, giving the impression of dozens of thick strands of metallic hair, parted down the middle and combed to each side. It looked freakish and ridiculous and kind of cool, like a lady-killer done up to impress the bitches at some cyber dog dance.

But it was also extremely disturbing. What were they? Two of the plugs, one by each ear, had wires running out of them that attached to a box held by the harness at the top of his neck. She noticed that when she spoke, two green bars lit up on the side of the box, extending back and forth as if they were monitoring the sound of her voice. When she craned around to look at the wires she saw, right at the edge of the head covering, his fur was shaved and one of the black tubes seemed to be running straight through his skin. Was it going into his head, into his brain? Fugue felt queasy with shock. She was afraid to touch any of them, not only fearing that it might hurt B but also because it was gross. Yet she desperately wanted to touch him and wasn't about to let him think that he might disgust her. She brought her face close to his, letting him lick it, and awkwardly wrapped her arms along his body, being careful not to touch those creepy, flopping things.

Tears of joy and sadness and despair poured out of her. Even as she wept she couldn't help but smile as the dog lapped at her cheeks madly, shifting his head rapidly from side to side so as to not miss a single drop. He was panting and whining and so happy and it was great. She felt his back end rise slightly and there was a noise and she leaned back as the harness pulled him up into a standing position. He stood there before her, three stumps hovering over the floor and one foot just resting on it, looking eagerly at her with a big dog smile. Fugue was shocked at the sight, sucking in her breath and putting a hand to her chest. He pushed with his one leg like he was skateboarding but the harness barely moved. He barked and waited with anticipation, tongue flopping and eyes wide. The sound broke her shock and she shushed him, laughing as she closed her eyes and puckered her lips, letting him give her a big wet kiss.

'What the hell are you doing?!

Fugue fell backwards at the sound, as if it had pushed her. She found

herself sitting against the wall, staring up past the dog at Ivor, who was standing in the doorway, looking angry and, she thought, a little afraid. Behind him the hallway was lit up — how had she not noticed that? Her phone buzzed in her pocket. B had turned his head and was snarling at Ivor. It was like a dream. Fugue wondered how she could wake herself up.

Ivor took a step into the room. Whatever bit of fear she thought she had seen was gone. ‘What are you doing?’, he said again, stamping his foot. The dog barked, turning back and forth to each side, frustrated by his restraints. Fugue looked at B and felt a rage explode within her.

‘Fuck you! You told me he was dead! What did you do to him? Why did you tell me he was dead?’ She was crying and shaking, frustrated and scared. There was more to say but she didn’t know what it was and it wouldn’t come out.

Ivor was standing and staring at her, still looking angry but also pensive. There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Even the dog had stopped struggling and had laid himself down, looking at Fugue. Her mind had gone completely blank. Maybe Ivor’s too. They stared at each other and then, after a while, he asked her in a calm but stern voice, ‘How did you get in here?’

She didn’t know what to say. Her keycard shouldn’t be in the database anymore, but she couldn’t be sure. If he found out her elaborate ruse she might get in even bigger trouble. She told him she just tried a code — ‘1—2—3—4’ — and when it worked, went inside. He stared at her some more, either contemplating her answer or challenging her to admit to her lie. She just stared back, willing her face to betray nothing.

‘You know you’re in big trouble,’ he finally said, waving his hands around, ‘you’re not supposed to see any of this.’

She averted her eyes downward, an automatic expression of contriteness. She was looking at B and that junk on his head and her anger rose again. Glaring up at Ivor she spat out, ‘What did you do to him? What is that?’

Ivor hesitated, as if unsure how to answer. ‘It—this is our research.’

‘Okay, but *what* is that?’

He stuttered a few times, then stuck his hand out and said, ‘Come on Fugue, we need to go. You *cannot* be back here.’ Her phone buzzed again and she reached down to silence it without looking. ‘You’re going to get us— You’re going to cause a lot of problems. Come on.’

She cradled B’s head in her hands, rubbing his nose. The dog sighed. ‘The stuff I’ve been working on, it’s for him isn’t it?’

'We can talk about this on the other side.'

'I'm not leaving him.'

Ivor closed his eyes and took a deep breath. 'This dog is part of something very big, very important. If you stay here, if you cause problems, they'll take it away and you'll never see it again.' The threat hit Fugue in the pit of her stomach but she tried not to show it. Ivor continued, deliberately, carefully. 'The work you've been doing has been for this program. You're helping this dog achieve great things.'

'I wish I'd never let you bring him here,' she was more resigned than angry, 'I wish I'd never told you about him.' She clenched her teeth, forcing herself not to cry anymore.

'Well, you did. And don't forget, in doing so you saved his life. Though you may not understand it now, you've made a great contribution to the research.'

B was staring up at her with sad eyes that looked like they were being crushed by all that crap they'd stuck into his head. 'I don't care about my contributions. I just wanted to see him.'

'Well, I guess you got your wish. Just in time, it'll be gone soon.'

Fugue looked up quickly. 'What do you mean? You said they'd only take him away if I made trouble. I'm not doing anything.'

Ivor sighed. 'What I meant was, if you cause problems, they'll shut us down and some other group will take it. But for our research, it's almost time to move on to the next stage, which means it's got to go someplace else.'

'To do what? Can I go with him?'

'We need you here, Fugue. You'll still be working with it, just—it'll be someplace else. But it'll need you. Your work is essential. Without your programs, all this has no point. I'm—*He's* counting on you.'

'Well, when does he go?'

'Soon. I don't know exactly when.'

Fugue hugged B's face, kissing on his nose. Ivor took another step forward and warned her to be careful. 'Will I get to see him again, before he goes?'

'Listen, you're not even supposed to have—'

Fugue cut him off with a look of resolute anger. She put her arm around the dog's body possessively.

'Sure, sure. We'll work something out. It just can't be in here.' He put his hand out again. 'We'll work something out. Now, we need to go.'

Fugue nuzzled B again and said to him softly, 'I love you guy. I'll see you again.' She lifted his head so that she could look directly into his

eyes. 'I promise.'

She got up and Ivor led her out. She took one final look at B before the door shut. Ivor had her walk in front of him to the security door. As they approached it she thought again about the database and got nervous. Not turning around, she asked him how he knew had come in here.

'We have alerts tied to the dogs' biometrics. Two dogs spiking in adjacent rooms was suspicious enough to check — though from now on, I'll be checking for any disturbance.' They were at the double door. 'And don't expect to be able to use that code again, I'm going to change it right now. You go on out and wait for me. We've still got a lot to talk about. I'm going to go make sure that dog is okay and deal with that door code. While you're waiting I want you to think about what you've done and what effect it might have on our contract.'

Fugue nodded contritely and went through the doors. She immediately headed off towards her office to make sure that her database program had worked when her phone buzzed again. She pulled it out and when she saw nearly dropped it on the floor. She looked at the closed double doors, wondering if she should go back in there and get Ivor. She took another glance at her phone and decided it was better not to involve him, especially now, and rushed to the closet to grab her helmet and keys and then out of the building into the pale light of the full moon.

## Chapter 16

### Discharge [sic]

‘Oooh boy, I can’t wait! This is gonna be fun!’

Mās ran up ahead and blocked Tôrō’s path, forcing him to stop.

‘I already told you, this is serious. It’s not a game and it’s not supposed to be fun. You act like this in front of everyone else and they’re likely to cast you out. We needed some muscle, not someone to share some good times with.’

‘Okay, okay. I’m sorry. It’s just exciting. I don’t get out much, especially with, you know, other dogs.’ He looked sincere and had calmed himself down, but he was still making Mās anxious as all get-out.

‘Just be cool until we get inside. Then you can let it rip.’

Given the way he was behaving, Mās could believe that Tôrō wasn’t well socialized, yet it was hard to reconcile that with how outgoing he appeared to be. He obviously wanted to be around more dogs, to have more friendships and interactions, but it seemed that the only thing preventing it was someone asking him along. A big, tough, brazen guy like that afraid to inject himself into another group, perpetually waiting to be invited — it seemed crazy to Mās, but here he was, almost shitting himself like this solemn mission was the same as catching some weekend rays with the buds at a frisbee park. This wasn’t exactly the time for life advice, yet Mās had an urge to let him know that acting like a tool was a good way to stay lonely forever.

Mās realized that part of the current problem might have lain with him. When he’d gone out early this morning to explain to Tôrō the plan and that they wanted him to help out, he was expecting to have to do a fair bit of convincing. Thus, he started out by playing up the thrilling aspects and then planned to build up the case with a reminder of the Bē situation and the existential crisis that faced the pack by the presence of

the big beast. The topper would be to tell Tôrō that he *owed* them since he was the one who caused Bē to get captured in the first place. Well, he hadn't even finished with the first part when the big dog agreed to take part, eagerly asking when they were going. Mās spent more time getting him to calm down and reiterating that it wasn't happening until the evening than he did going over the serious fundamentals of the task and his own personal investment in it. On top of that, he wasn't sure how much the other dog was even listening, seeing how he was pacing back and forth the whole time like a neurotic *Shēltar* long-timer.

Still, despite the issues, Mās was glad to have his help, not just because the pack demanded it, but because they needed him. His size and energy would be necessary and there was the intimidation factor which they knew — even as a group — they lacked. Any reservations Mās might have had about Tôrō's suitability were swept aside when he went to pick him up and the pitbull leapt up and climbed over the fence without any issue. Mās had expected there to be a hidden hole in the fence or a low spot, or that over the course of the day the waiting dog would have dug a tunnel. Clearly, such complications were pointless, and it further reinforced the fact that Tôrō had the means to get out but would not do so on his own initiative. When he had landed, not very graceful but no worse for the wear, Mās asked him about his owner, if he was worried about getting caught sneaking out.

'Naw, he mostly just leaves me alone. I'm not even allowed in the house.'

'Wow, do you ever see him?'

'Oh sure, Chāk used to take me on walks or come out and play when he didn't have to work but not so much lately. Now I might catch him when he puts my food out in the evening.'

So it sounded like he had plenty of freedom to help them out. Mās actually felt kind of sad for Tôrō's — sure he had a safe place to sleep and regular source of food but frankly that wasn't much different from the pack and they at least had regular interaction with each other and weren't stuck behind an ineffective fence, pining for a friend.

Nearing the rendezvous point, Mās reminded him again to be chill, that the pack was going to be skeptical, especially given his size. Sure enough, as they approached, many of the other dogs had looks of unease, obviously (despite Mās' precautions) not expecting something so large and intimidating.

Flōps came forward to meet them first. Her eyes were gleaming under her curls, betraying no hint of worry.

‘Wow Mās, you weren’t kidding. This is quite a specimen.’ She turned to Tôrō, ‘My name’s Flöps, I’m the head of this pack.’ She sniffed at the big dog and then walked around him to check his backside. He awkwardly turned to stay facing her, glancing nervously at Mās, not wanting to make a scene. The chihuahua motioned him towards her and he bent down to her rear, smelling and talking at the same time, words directed right at her brown hole.

‘I’m Tôrō [sniff] it’s nice to [sniff,sniff] meet you.’

‘Ooowee, that’s a set.’ Flöps had her head low and tilted up at his crotch. She came around in front of him, turning dead serious. ‘I want to be sure you understand, this is not an invitation to join us. No offense, but we don’t need any of your kind in our group. This is just a one time thing.’

‘Yeah, yeah, of course. I’ve got my own place, I’m just helping you out.’ Tôrō was panting with either nervousness or pent up energy, and kept looking at Mās for validation. The little dog gave him a wink. ‘Anyways, you’re all too little for me, especially you ladies.’ Mās’ look turned to warning and the pitbull sat down quickly, nervously chuckling.

Flöps didn’t return the laugh. ‘Oh-kay. Well, come on up, dogs, let’s everyone meet the giant. Tôrō, this is the crew.’ The dozen or so pack members filed up, all craning their necks up at the much taller outsider, some friendly, some suspicious, some reticent. Mās knew that he wasn’t going to remember most of their names, but it was important that the others were at least somewhat comfortable around him, as they may end up needing his protection. There was Prīnsēs, the uppity white puffball, barely giving him any notice; the corgi Hævər floating up around his legs and back away; Krük, the pug with a bent spine and a snitty attitude to match; and lil Lāsē, a shelti which whose wide-eyed friendliness masked some mental challenges (a covert nickname from some of the more uncharitable members was Wünsël). The affable pals Brät (dachshund) and Chərəzō (chiweenie) came up as a pair and were enthused to have Tôrō helping out, and Ol’ Gōmər, the mini schnauzer with almost no teeth and impressive whiskers, said he called dibs on the first tail position.

Once all of the introductions were finished, Mās and Flöps went over the plan again, reiterating that two things were paramount: the safety and integrity of the pack. Retreating to limit injury was acceptable but abandoning a fellow member to do so was not. Running away in fear was shameful and would leave the coward branded an embarrassment to their breed and cast out.

*Rule v: the den doesn't follow one who leaves it*

They made their way down to the business area, keeping quiet and staying out of the illuminating beams of headlights or streetlamps. When they got to the street, they stayed back at the intersection, slunk behind parked cars. Mās peeked out to check the store and — as he half-expected — the door was closed. The lights were on, though, which meant the big beast was in there and the plan could continue. There was a tapping sound and whimpering and shushing and Mās turned around, ready to snap.

‘Hush up!,’ he said quietly, ‘let’s not mess this up before we even get started.’ He could see some vague motion in the blackness, and the whining and clicking of nails against the sidewalk continued. From deep in the gloom Krük’s gravelly voice set forth.

‘Somebody needs to tell mister big nuts here to ease the fuck up.’

Shit! That idiot was screwing up. Mās hissed at the moving figure. ‘Tôrō! Stop! What did we talk about?’ The clicking stopped but there was still the distinct sound of panting interspersed with suppressed groans. Mās could sense the annoyance of the others, he needed to separate the pitbull to defuse the situation and so they wouldn’t worry about him giving away their position. ‘Alright, listen. Tôrō, you see across the street there, in those shadows? It’s closer to the store so you won’t have as far to run. You go over and wait there, but you need to be still and quiet. And wait for my signal. You go too soon, and we’ve lost. Got it? Good. Now go. And wait for my signal!’

Tôrō trotted away, tail between his legs and breathing heavily. Flöps stepped forward, a look of concern on her face. ‘You sure about this? He seems pretty jumpy.’

‘He’ll be fine. We’d better not wait around, though. Are you all ready?’ A murmur of assent rose from behind Flöps. ‘Okay, let’s do this.’

Mās took a big breath (or, at least big for him) and stepped out around the car, heading towards the light of the store. He looked over and nodded at Tôrō, barely covered by the shadows, his rear swaying slowly. Mās wished he’d sit still, but there was nothing to do about it now. He slipped along the gutter and when he got up to the store he looked above the curb through the door. Inside there was no movement and he couldn’t see the big beast. He took one last glance up and down the sidewalk to make sure nobody was coming and stepped up towards the door. He stared through the glass, making sure there really was

nothing, and then hopped up and began scratching at the glass door. He pawed at it with his claws, trying hard to be heard, and then stopped, waiting for a reaction. Out of the corner of his eye, deep within the store, he thought he saw something move. He couldn't see what it was but yipped and started scratching again, harder and faster.

Then he saw him. The big beast. Coming around a corner, carrying something in his hand. With Tôrō's antics and having to rush into execution, Mās hadn't had the time to get nervous, but he was now, nervous and scared. His heart was drumming, he was panting. He started to walk backwards, away from the approaching monster. He yipped again, trying to show courage, but he was still backing away. His foot slipped on the curb and he almost fell. The big beast was at the door, looking right at him, its mouth moving though Mās could hear nothing. He was panicking. Every nerve in his body told him to turn and run away, to get out of here.

Not this time.

He stepped forward and growled, showing the tiny little teeth in his tiny little mouth, a fire raging through him, pushing back any nervousness and fear and displacing it with anger. He thought of Bē, he thought of his paws hanging under that shirt, he thought of blood. Come get me motherfucker.

The door opened and big beast stepped out with a huge, evil smile on its face. 'Ahh little beast, you finally come. You curse no more.' A hand moved and Mās was lifted off the ground, choking instantly. He tried to yell the signal but nothing would come out. The beast held him up close to its face, laughing maniacally as Mās spun on the rope. He was looking at a greasy face and misshapen nose and brown teeth and horrible sneer, and then the dark street, and then the laughing face, and the street with something flailing across it, and the face not laughing but looking past him with fright, and Tôrō right on top of him, and then he was flying backwards, into the store. Mās was lying on his side, pulling on the rope at his neck, struggling to breathe, watching the pitbull lunge ahead barking like mad and then stop, run back and slam into the door and hold it open. Mās felt the rope tighten and was pulled up again, flying through the store, the beast screaming words that were unlike anything Mās had heard before. He saw the pack pouring through the door, roaring, running at him, and then he was looking forward, heading towards a stairway going up but Flöps and Prinsēs were there, yelling and leaping. A change in direction and the edges of his vision started to blacken. He caught one last glimpse of Tôrō and ol' Gômær just inside the door and

then he saw lil Lāsē by another door and another change in direction and everything was almost black and the sound was deafening and he was hitting the walls and going down something and there was a terrible crash and Mās slid across the floor into a wall.

Furious, unable to breathe, barely able to move, his vision tunneling, Mās picked at his neck madly. A large metal table loomed over him and beyond that a door was hanging on one hinge. The big beast was stumbling around, yelling. Mās got a claw into the rope and was finally able to wheeze some air into his lungs, pushing back the blackness. The pack began to rush through the doorway, surrounding the giant, snapping and leaping. It was kicking and punching, scanning the room like it was looking for something. Mās had started to catch his breath when the big beast briefly looked at him, then it saw something high up by the door and reached towards it. At that moment, Tōrō came flying through the doorway, knocking it backwards into the table.

The two huge animals fell onto the ground together, blood exploding from the beast's neck. Its screams turned to gurgles and it flailed around wildly as the pack bore down on it. Able to breathe now, knowing exactly what he wanted, Mās stalked forward, the tail of the rope trailing behind him, a slaughter unfolding before him. Prīnsēs was pulling out an eye, her face a bright red stain in a halo of white. Brāt and Chērēzō were trying to catch a leg that was kicking and twisting. Flōps was digging at its chest, trying to unbury meaty rib-bones. Tōrō yelled 'I want the balls!' and started grabbing at its pants. Mās eyed his target, pausing briefly with one leg lifted before leaping.

He clamped down on the wrist, grabbing tightly around the forearm with his legs. It lifted up in resistance but Mās held on and after a couple of feeble swings the arm fell back to the ground, bouncing lifelessly. Mās tore at skin and tendons and bone, getting more enraged as he tasted the vile blood and meat of the awful, despicable beast. He shook his head, frustrated at his small mouth and the tough flesh, ripping and gnawing and beyond angry, jerking and gouging and thrashing and then the hand was free. Mās barked in triumph and grabbed it in his mouth and flung it across the room. He heard Tōrō yell and he looked up to see a small, greyish-purple grape in his mouth with a dangling vine. The pitbull bit down and juice and blood burst across his lips and with a couple more chomps it was gone. The big dog buried his face back into the crotch.

Mās looked across and saw ol' Gōmər chewing on the fat, fleshy fingers of the other hand. Infuriated, he leapt across the body and pushed the schnauzer away yelling 'That's mine!' The other dog yelped and

backed away in startled fear. As he began to chew on the other wrist, Mās stared down the other dog, watching him slink over to the belly for some intestines or soft organs to gum on. His mouth was beginning to cramp, but he kept chewing and pulling, pain reaching around his neck and head, spurring him on. He heard something but his ears were ringing, filled with the grinding of bone and screeching of his jaw as he burrowed in to remove the fucking bastard's hand.

‘Mās!’

He looked up, livid at the interruption. His face throbbed, his mouth and nose were wet and dripping, his eyes wide and crazed. Flöps and Tôrō were standing in the doorway, looking at him as if they were waiting for an answer. He looked around — nobody else was left, except for this dead piece of shit.

‘Mās!’ said Flöps, ‘we need to go!’

He looked down at the half-severed wrist, then at the flayed neck. ‘We’re not done yet. I’m not leaving until we’re done.’

Flöps’ tone turned softer, imploring. ‘The den *is* done, Mās. It’s time to go, it’s over.’

‘Come on, little guy,’ Tôrō was pleading with him desperately, it was the only time Mās had ever heard him sound truly scared. ‘I gotta let these guys out and I can’t come back. If you stay here you’re gonna get caught.’

Mās turned back to the wrist and began to chew ravenously, determined to finish the job. The other dogs said something else but he didn’t understand and then he heard them thump up the stairs. His jaw began to ache again and he closed his eyes and buried his snout, willing himself through the resisting flesh.

*Rule v: the den doesn't follow one who leaves it*

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Mās barked in frustration. His jaw hurt terribly and he couldn’t get any traction on the bloody floor. The necklace was metal and even if his mouth wasn’t so tired he wouldn’t have been able to chew through it. Every time he tried to pull on it he just slipped and fell or his teeth slipped. He was about to start chewing off the head when he heard a noise, something coming down the stairs. He grabbed the chain in his mouth possessively and growled.

A girl appeared in the doorway. He saw a blue streak by the side of her face, something familiar, and then she disappeared. There

was a strange speech sound and splattering outside of the door, and then a scream. She appeared again, wiping her mouth with the back of her wrist. Her big body, that blue hair, he'd seen her before. 'Ohmygodohmygodohmygod,' she said, and then was gone again.

Mās realized that he didn't have much time, and began yanking frantically on the chain.

'Hey! Get back!'

She was crouching, one hand over her mouth, the other steadying herself with the table, looking at Mās. He wasn't going to let her take him away, not before he got Bē's paws. He growled and clamped down on the chain, walking away from her. His jaw was weak and he lifted his head to keep the necklace in his mouth. She looked at him strangely and stood up. Under the table he could see her hand in her pocket then she was down again, holding up something.

'Do you know B?'

Mās recognized the name and what she was holding and who she was all at once. Without thinking he dropped the chain and backed up all the way to the wall. That was Bē's collar, and she was one of the people that took him away in that white van. Took him away dead. She had come around the table and was closer to him. Mās was in a corner, shrinking away. He could run off, up the stairs, but he couldn't leave Bē's paws. He looked down at the chain, wondering how he could get it. She followed his gaze and then turned away suddenly, holding her mouth. She slowly looked back and then turned back to him.

'You do know B!'

Mās was watching her, ready to run away if she came after him. She was breathing hard and looking off in a strange direction. She turned around quickly and started grabbing at the necklace. She was taking it! He barked at her, stepping forward, but afraid to get too close. Her head turned and something came out of her mouth. She turned back and then stood up, shaking. The necklace was in her hands, two bloody paws dangling from it. Mās stared at it, wondering if he could jump up and grab it. She knelt down and extended her hand out to him. He snatched the chain and backed away, burying his nose into Bē's paws.

'I know him too. He's my friend too.'

He looked up at the girl. She was squatting on the red, gooey floor, her bloody hands held out at her sides, crying uncontrollably. Mās understood she was sad, but could not understand why. Maybe she knew that big beast, maybe she was his friend. But she didn't seem angry with Mās. He was angry and scared and confused, he had the chain and he

didn't even notice she was reaching for him until she had him by the neck. He struggled but she held tight and then released and he saw her holding the rope. She tossed it aside and reached out for him again. He was in a corner and couldn't move. He didn't want her to take his collar, like she took Bē's, but he couldn't drop the chain. She rubbed something at his neck and started crying again.

'You *do* know B. I can't believe it. I just can't believe it.' She looked at the tags again and said, 'I'll call you Ęm. Alright?'

Mās was shaking. It didn't seem like she was going to hurt him, but what if she took him in the white van? Maybe he'd see Bē. Maybe he was wrong, maybe he was still alive. There was nothing left for Mās. He had to try. He stepped towards the girl with the blue hair, nuzzling her knee. She petted him gently, picking things out of his fur.

'Let's get you out of here, Ęm. I can't let anyone take you. I'll keep you safe.' She picked him up and Mās did not resist. 'I'll take you to Bē. Not tonight, but soon. I promise.' She carried him out of the room, facing them both away from the ravaged beast, Mās feeling sick with pride, his jaw quivering with pain as he held desperately onto the recovered memorials.

*Rainbow's end*



## Chapter 17

### Take Off

Here we go again. Green and blue, hills and sky, cool wind and warm sun. Bē didn't care. He'd been here plenty before, he knew what there was to do, to see, to expect. Sure, it might be a little different every time but he had other things on his mind than worrying about some new little challenge. They had taken him away again, to a different place, a dark place, full of strangers and strange feelings. He had seen Fyüg, finally, and then that morning Īvôr (the terrible) and Dē had put him in the white van, and he had fallen asleep and never saw them again. He barely saw anyone again. It was light now (there go the colors), yet once he left here it would be back to the shadow place, where the people he didn't recognize barely came by, where everything was strange — the smells and sounds and tastes and feel of his body — it seemed like he was floating inside of himself, someplace where everything was muted, indistinct. He sensed something like hurt in his last leg, but it was far away and unimportant, and although moving it was odd because he was held up too high to touch the ground, running it through the air felt familiar, as if it was something he'd experienced before and forgotten.

The colors pulsed in the sky, becoming more intense as they approached the horizon. They pulled him out of his thoughts, pulled him towards them. Bē didn't move, however. He fought the temptation, he turned back to his memories, his worries. The new place was awful, he dreaded going back. Was that where they took her? It was worse than he ever could have imagined. He wished to stay here, even if it was mostly the same and there was nobody around. It was like that on the other side, too, and at least here things didn't feel so weird. The smells, the sounds — it was normal. The hurt was gone, far away like a fading dream. He wasn't sure that he really liked it here, but he liked it better

than not here.

Or, better than the not here right now. The previous place was bad, but at least there were people to see. Kāt and Kēth, Dē or even Sīndē. They weren't his favorites but he didn't realize then how completely lonely he could get. Here there was nothing. Why did he end up here? Where was Fyüg? He'd seen her, heard her new voice, and then she was gone again. Why didn't she stay?

Bē sighed. The colors were humming. He could taste them, something familiar, something enticing. He noticed that the tree was gone. He looked around — not next to the colors, not anywhere. He lay down, trying to tube. It was almost impossible to do in here. He used to settle so quickly and now anytime he got close it was like something buzzed inside of him, forcing him to attention. Tubing was hard on the outside too, because everything felt so wrong, because he couldn't get comfortable. It would be so nice if there was something else here, somebody or anything to take his mind off of the isolation.

There it was there again, stronger. It was bizarre — Bē never had a very good sense of smell, yet this was unmistakable. He didn't even know *what* it was, he couldn't remember what smelled like that, but it was definitely one of his favorites. He swallowed and licked at his lips. It was almost certainly coming from the colors, down where they met the hills. He stared at the spot intensely, the delicious odor getting stronger. It had been so long since he ate. He never felt hungry yet he couldn't remember the last time he got a meal or even a snack. That was another reason to hate the new place. No food, no water. Just an occasionally pressure in his belly, as if he was full though he'd not swallowed a morsel.

He could stand it no longer and got up to follow the scent. His legs wobbled, they weren't working properly, however he didn't care. He was focused on the horizon, stumbling, staggering, getting closer to the treats that he had never reached.

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Bē was zooming. Tearing across the landscape, digging his paws into the earth, dragging the world, pulling the colors towards him. He didn't remember his body ever feeling so good, so in sync, so whole. His legs moved as if one, turning round and round, galloping faster and faster, thump-thump, thump-thump. There were no odd lots among them, none of them felt numb or out of step, they all felt the same —

the grass, the air, the ground. He did some skips, hopping on one back foot, then the other. He pushed himself harder, his mouth wide, gulping the air, eyes squinting against the surging wind.

When he had been in here before, something was always off: he would slip or trip or fall, one leg would antagonize the others, a sprint would transform into a saunter. But this time, without delay or effort, everything flowed. He felt it before he even started, and had taken off before the colors appeared. He was already barreling along when the ribbon showed itself, way off to one side, and he cut a quick turn, and then another, back and forth and back in decaying overcorrections, zig-zagging, quickly settling on a new direction towards the falling colors and their delicious smell. It was great and incredible fun. It seemed that he was getting closer to the end, closer than he'd ever been, but he did not care. It just felt amazing to be running, zooming, flying. His movements and muscles felt so natural, his body and mind converging to a state of harmony that was perfect. It was something he could do forever, that he would never forget, that he could not stop.

He was out of control and it was fantastic.

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The world was changing. It had been like this before, but Bē had almost forgotten. As he ran across the hills towards the horizon, the grass turned yellow and the hills flattened then rose up again as dunes, then sun blazed and sand burned his feet. There were trees that grew taller and denser until the sky was barely visible and he lost sight of the colored stripe. He bobbed and weaved, avoiding trunks, smelling the rich earth and scents organic and unfamiliar. The woods thinned and he was running up a mountain, slipping on hard rock and ice, falling chest deep into scrunching, cold snow. It was uncomfortable and he thought of turning back but the ribbon was ahead of him, behind the mountain, so he kept going, pushing over the crest and down the backside, descending into a verdant depression patchworked with wildflowers. He found a creek and followed it into a village with cobbled roads and small buildings but nobody about. Bē stopped briefly to look into the windows but everything was dim and empty. He powered on, running through streets that turned to asphalt as the buildings became sharper and harder and taller, obscuring his view like a limbless forest. There were no cars or people, just a blank shell, and Bē continued, moving towards the stripe, the bands of color bigger and closer than ever before. He turned and looked down an alley as he passed and thought of Mās.

Bē stopped.

Mās. How he missed Mās. He stared down the bare alley, remembering their experiences on the streets. It had seemed so tough and miserable, yet now evoked pleasant feelings, a quaint memory of a time when Bē did not yet know how much worse it could be. He sighed faintly, thinking about his friend. He could almost see the little guy, imagined his tiny black form emerging from the shadows in front of him. He could hear his voice, no-nonsense, smart and snappy. Bē heard him make a joke, something about his short legs and ground body. He couldn't remember it right, but Mās said it perfect. The little guy was laughing, cackling at himself. Bē joined in. Hehehehe—

There was something warm against the side of his head. He turned to look. The colors were flaming, burning in the sky, pulsating out beyond the edge of the city. Bē could smell the food — hot, delicious, waiting. He took off, racing down the narrow valley of skyscrapers towards the bewitching goal. His rhythm increased, his tongue lolled. He put his head down and when he looked up the buildings were gone and he was in a deep fissure and slowly the path turned up and the chasm shrunk in height until he was on top of a wide, flat mesa. Far ahead of him the colors were touching the ground, kicking up dust and smoke that glowed purple and green and blue and orange. Just off to the side was a silhouette — the tree, long disappeared but now present again. Had it been there the whole time? Was it the source of the wondrous smell? He ran for them both, closer, closer.

The sound began to hum in his ears. *The* sound. The tree's sound. He recognized it now — her voice, her new voice. He had only heard it once, but there was no mistake. She was there, the treats were there. If he could only make it in time. He put his head down again and pumped his body, willing his feet to move faster, dig harder. He looked up and the horizon was blank, no colors, no tree. Bē tilted his head back and saw them rising in the sky, stripes and shadow, lifting away from him, higher and faster until one side met the other and with a great flash the sky went white and then was blue and clouds and nothing else.

Exasperated, Bē lay down, turning away from the spot and any horizon, breathing hard, staring at his feet, his beautiful, perfect paws lying in the lush grass.

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He was strolling through a creek, the water pulling at his feet, cool and clear. It was refreshing and unusual — Bē had never been in wa-

ter here before. He sniffed it, tempted to lap at it but having no thirst at all, in fact feeling an *antithirst*: the clear, rushing liquid was almost repellent to him, or at least his mouth. He stood tall and continued to walk downstream, splashing, kicking, enjoying himself. It was warm and cloudless. He had been here — not in the water but in this place — for quite a long time, long enough that he believed he might never return to that other dark place, that he might stay here forever. He was not sure when he had come upon this creek, or how he ended up in it, but it was lovely. He wished he had someone to share it with, though. It was beautiful and calm but lonely as always. His mind wandered to Fyüg and Mās and Mr. Krüzēn, even to Kāt and Kēth and Dē. He remembered Tōrō with his big balls and thought about how nice it must be to have a pair like that. With a deep sigh, he dreamed about eating again and drinking, and he gazed into the stream with longing, his reflection rippling chaotically on the surface.

Suddenly his swirling image was framed by vivid colors, colors which shrank into a thin line weaving down the length of the creek. It looked not like a reflection, but as if it was *in* the water. Bē looked up — the sky was clear. He looked back down, swiping at the glowing stripe below the surface. His paw moved through it, catching nothing, neither disturbing it nor its image. He crouched down, trying to lay on it and grab it with his front feet. He felt a dog smile spread on his face. He was enjoying this game.

Everything began to shake. Bē tried to stand but the ground was too unstable. The shaking became more intense, the surface of the water clouding with vibrational sprinklings. Bē felt something grab him, pulling him towards the ground. He tried to push back and through the turbid ferment saw the colored strip wrapping around his legs, yanking on them. The ribbon twisted out of the water, around his body and back legs and face. He struggled against it but it was too strong, pressing him down, against and then underneath the water. The creek had only been up to his ankles but now he was completely inside of it, dragged further and further down, away from the air. The water was heavy, like weights over his whole self, crushing his tube. He couldn't breathe. He began to panic, thrashing around, barking and calling out, the sounds trapped within bubbles that grew and floated away. What was happening? Was he dying? He was so scared.

The colored strip loosened from around Bē's neck and floated up by his snout. Unexpectedly, it shot into his mouth and he could feel the thing traveling down his throat. He reflexively tried to grab at it but

couldn't because he was all bound up. His neck constricted and he was choking and so scared and then he felt something breach and he could breathe. Deep, wonderful breaths of air filled his lungs. He was still underwater, still unable to move, still crushed by the incredible pressure. And though it took great effort, he could breathe. The stripes were in him and he could breathe. He was strangely calm, a great relaxation displacing his terror.

He was not sure how long he was down under the water. He remained as if tubing, still and sedate, wide-eyed, time passing indeterminately. At some point, the pressure lessened and he began to lift, rising up through the liquid, breathing becoming easier the higher he went. Bē breached the creek's surface still wrapped like a multicolored mummy, floating above the ground and slowly turning in the air. The strip pulled out of his throat and loosed from his body, slipping off him and ascending into the sky. Bē gently came back down to the ground, landing paw-first on the rolling field of grass. There was no creek to be seen. A gentle breeze flowed across his body and he noticed that he was already warm and dry. He looked up to see the colors stretching across the sky, assuming their normal position, arced from one horizon to the other. Bē had no desire to chase for its end, instead wanting only to rest. He lay down in the pleasant grass, closing his eyes, inhaling and exhaling deeply, not sighs but assured breaths.

## Chapter 18

### Orbiting Bodies

Mās sat in the corner, watching the door, waiting. It was getting dark outside, where was she? He had been waiting all day. Now his belly hurt and every few minutes he was on the verge. He felt another wave and started pacing, walking deliberately back and forth, focusing on his footsteps, trying not to think of his filled bowels. Püpə had tried to get him to go out this morning, why hadn't he taken her up on it? He'd been grumpy and ornery, wanting to just lay in his warm spot rather than deal with the cold. Why should he have to conform to her morning schedule, he thought? He didn't need to go then, and she'd be back at midday, she always was.

Except today. She hadn't come back, and now Mās was paying for his obstinance. Things began to settle down and he went back to the corner to wait, panting and anxious, staring at the door, willing it to open. C'mon! He tapped his back foot, as if he could pump the stuff back in. He felt like he was crowning, and he took a deep breath to keep himself from panicking or accidentally losing focus and loosing himself. There was a pressure and he started to cramp. Was it gas? Could he trust it? There was no way to hold this back. He gingerly went over to a pile of clothes, hoping that if he had an accident, he could at least cover it up. Maybe Püpə wouldn't see it. He relaxed ever so slightly, managing his muscles carefully to avoid an accidental urination. He was shaking with the effort. Here it came — oh please, let it not be a mess.

A hot stream of air came out, and Mās breathed out with relief. He felt a different texture and puckered up hard, realizing that he had almost let something go, something bad, something which might cause Püpə to kick him out.

*Rule xiv: farts don't clear the den, but shit does*

He needed to pace again. Up and down, closer to the door. If it would just open he could run out and do his thing in the area right across the way. His spot was so close, it was right *there*. His body felt like it was twisting, torquing him into unnatural shapes. Pain shot at strange locations all over his insides. Watching the door, back and forth. Ugh. He hoped she hadn't left for good. He had been expecting it, that's what always happened. Bē and Mr. Krüzēn and Flōps and so many others. They never lasted. He was doomed to drive everyone away, to be alone, to have no den. This wasn't even really a den. But how unfair to get locked in—

The door clicked, the knob began to turn. Mās waited breathlessly, his tail flapping madly. Suddenly he had to go *right now*. Was this actually perfect timing or did his body initiate proceedings knowing that permission was about to be granted? Whatever it was, this door better open faster or he was going to make a mess, right when he had almost made it through. Perfect timing indeed. The door cracked and Pūpə started talking.

'Hey Ēm, sorry—'

Mās didn't wait. He ran past her legs out the door and across to the small grass patch (actually more of a dirt patch with hints of grass) in front of the parking lot. He squatted and let forth with piss and shit all at once, everything flowing out of his body in a release whose ferocity (combined with a lessening mass) seemed to lift him off the ground like a soil rocket. He'd obviously been holding it in too long and too much tried to come out at once, leading to his relief being mixed with a deep pain as jet flows backed up against nozzles whose maximum dilation unfortunately matched his diminutive size. The result was an evacuation that lasted far longer than he expected, long enough for the discomfort to subside and leave him hovering above his own waste in zenlike satisfaction.

When he had finished Mās tiptoed his way around the mess and almost ran into Pūpə's legs. He stopped, feeling a bit shameful for leaving a stink (and almost leaving some turds) in her clothes.

'Sorry, guy,' she said, leaning down to scoop the Mās-size pile of dung into a plastic bag, 'I forgot that you didn't get to go this morning.'

She sounded apologetic, at least. She took the tied-off bag over to a garbage can and upon returning she knelt down and reached out to pet him. Before she could make contact, Mās slipped past her into the building. That close call had caused him to lose focus and he almost slipped up. And she sure was persistent. It was turning out to be more work than he expected to keep her at a distance, to avoid building a bond.

If he allowed that to happen he would only setting himself up for more heartbreak. He thought that she would get the hint after a while but she never stopped trying to pet him and sit near him and attempt to bring him to bed. He could have run away, but it was too nice to get regular food and have someplace warm to sleep. Plus, he wasn't sure if the big beast situation would mean trouble if he was out on the streets. If only she would leave him alone. They would be separated someday anyway, she might as well get used to it.

Mās didn't completely cut her off from any contact. It felt good to get a scratch every once in a while, and he knew that giving her absolutely nothing would increase his chances of getting kicked out. Their breakup was inevitable but there was no reason to accelerate it. Püpə seemed nice enough and to deny even the slightest hope of companionship was just asking for an early exit. She knew about Bē, maybe there was something he could learn from her. So he tolerated a few pat-pats here and there (mostly while he was held captive eating food) and generally stuck around — often at a distance, sometimes at her feet as long as there wasn't any touchy-feely stuff — while she prattled on. She sure could talk, and her tone was all over the place — solemn, sad, silly, worried, insecure, happy. She flew through her emotions in a way that was kind of fascinating and often overwhelming. If Bē really did know Püpə, Mās wondered how he reacted to her, as he was notorious for running away and hiding whenever Mr. Krüzēn had some ladyfriend over for any serious conversation. Whatever it was Püpə was talking about, Mās was glad he couldn't understand it, for it was surely so scattered that it'd drive him nuts. The way things stood, he could just pretend to be there for her and have her provide for him. He only needed to be careful not to allow for any deeper commitment.

She certainly was different from Pōst, who basically just ignored him the whole time. He set up a cage to sleep in (now here at Püpə's), gave him food and water, and let him out to go to the bathroom. He essentially said nothing to Mās, and the dog's only real human interaction during that time was every few days when Püpə (who Pōst sometimes called Fyü) came over. It was actually pretty nice, especially at that time, since after the incident with Tōrō and the pack he was happy to not be bothered much, to spend multiple days letting everything process out of his system. He passed most of his time laying with the remnants of his dear friend.

Püpə was rambling on, preparing food for the both of them, sounding spirited and disgusted.

‘—and there’s somebody there all the time now ’cause they’re working extra hard for this experiment so I can’t go back there. I’ll find some way to get you back together—’

Mās walked over to his cage, waiting for mealtime. Püpə was in the kitchen, around a corner where she couldn’t see him. He went to the back and nuzzled Bē’s paws, smelling the fur. He picked up the collar in his mouth and shook it, listening its jangle mix with his own. He imagined Bē reconstituting from the paws, filling the collar, licking him, tubing with that endless stare. He felt so close. So close.

‘All right, Ęm, dinnertime.’

Mās rushed out of the cage, meeting Püpə as she came into the room. Patiently waiting for her to put his food down, he was less bothered than usual with the fact that she’d be rubbing on him, for he was still lost in the memories and dreams of a *real* friend.

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Ivor: Congrats everyone!

As you've heard, the flight was successful.

P is now local with L.

Time to begin next phase of work.

Sponsors here looking forward to progress.

Where do we stand?

Cindy: Scene and projection development needs

adjustment for Og environment

Not sure how much will be handled by interface

Keith? Fred?

Keith: Initial shifts overcompensated

Fred: Preliminary results indicate that

only minor adjustments will be needed

Keith: But things have settled down

and we're close to equilibrium

Fred: The mind quickly adjusts to match its reality

so long as that reality is

Keith: It is unclear if learned reactions

are still consistent

Fred: Close enough to previous experiences

Keith: Though

Ivor: So can we step up training?

Fred: Yes

Keith: Need to watch for anomalies

Ivor: Kate, what is status of DB?

Kate: Coming along. We cleared main area to give it space. Fugue's programs are working pretty well. It is tough having her program for something she can't even see.

Ivor: There is nothing we can do about that.  
Is DB ready for physical link?

Kate: Oh no, needs more testing. We have virtualized proxy finished which can be used for training. It remains to be seen if the physical DoppelBot will be useful since it is 2x the real thing and communication will have windows and noticeable delay.

Ivor: We'll need to use it at least once.  
The group out here don't want to see their donation go to waste.

Kate: We'll figure something out. The big size is the biggest problem.  
Especially in earth gravity.

Ivor: We're lucky we even got it. It should have gone up but budget cuts meant they had to rebuild it smaller. Us using it means that they won't have to eat cost.

Cindy: Maybe with that \$\$ we're saving them they could fund us a real programmer.

Ivor: In due time. Let's get a full contract first.  
What about antenna?

Cindy: Projection finished based on supplied specs  
Same with communication plug

Ivor: Only antenna matters for now.  
How about physical?

Kate: We only need the virtual copy for now.  
I can print out a rendered section but I'm not sure how it needs to be sized or weighted.

Keith: Exactness is not required. Algorithms will be able to compensate. You could probably use a toilet paper tube though something sturdier would be better.

Fred: Yall better not cause a TP shortage trying to get this right. Long hours and high pressure are ok but if I have to work around a bunch of dirty butts I'm out.

Cindy: Yet he fails to hold the same standard when he up in the club.

Fred: hiss

Ivor: Alright, that's enough.  
Are we on track to do the actual swap?

Fred: We ran out of time on the ground to finish training but it may turn out to be a benefit because we will complete the synaptic training in the actual environment.

Keith: The launch showed the system has good adaptability towards success in unpredictable situations.

Kate: I wish we could show Fugue a bit more. It would help if she could see the DoppelBot. I also don't think it's fair that she still thinks Phreeto is here in the building.

Ivor: But are we on track?

Keith: Sure

Ivor: I'm back next week.  
I'll be expecting progress.

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Keith: Cin, the paw projections seem to be working great, even weightless.

Cindy: Thanks  
Being able to scan that rear foot sure helped a lot  
Little tweaks after that  
A live model is always best

Keith: The pedog mesh is settling down and we need stability to go to the next phase.  
I want to make sure you aren't going to be making any more changes.

Cindy: Not unless someone needs me to

Keith: Excellent. Then hopefully you can help me out with another problem.  
The incentives are working well but we have not been able to pinpoint what they

are mapping to. Thought it was a place  
but the brain maps were deceptive.  
If our pot of gold is not  
correct or inadequate we could have a revolt.

Cindy: What can i do

Keith: We need you to make some projection ideas  
that we can test his response to.  
I think it actually might be type of food.  
Need to ask Kate what she gave him. Dee too.  
Maybe Fugue.

Cindy: Fugue hates me

Keith: You can get someone else ask her.  
Dee or Fred. We need the ideas and then you  
to build them out. Need to get this right  
but don't have much time.

Cindy: I will get on it

Keith: Thanks. Be sure not to let anything out  
about the dog to Fugue. Just tell her to  
wait for Ivor.  
Tell her he'll be happy if she helps us.

Cindy: Well im not going to talk to her

Keith: Just tell whoever you get to talk to her.

Cindy: Maybe you talk to her

Keith: Not going to happen.

~~~~~

Dee: Hi Fred

Fred: Hey babe

Ivor: Fred

Fred: Hiya bossman

Ivor: After the antenna's fixed we're going to go  
go ahead with the direct connection.  
We won't have to worry about antenna problems  
or comm delays/windows.

Fred: ok

Ivor: You ready to start up the merge experiment?

Fred: Not so fast boss. What's the rush?  
I'll need to establish Luvah's baselines  
first. Things may have changed a lot over  
the past few years.

Ivor: We've been getting dumps this whole time.  
Can't you use those?

Fred: Those dumps are just status. Life support,  
system health. No useful data, at least for  
me. Other than knowing she's still alive, the  
last few years have been a waste.  
You know this.

Ivor: Sure, sure, I remember. I'm trying to figure  
out how to speed things along. I'm worried  
about it dying up there. The original antenna  
was crap because we expected to lose the dog  
long ago.  
We're on borrowed time already.

Fred: Well, there's a lot of work to do, and I'm  
already doing what I can to prepare.  
We can't rush this or we'll just fuck them  
both up.

Dee: Just to be clear Fred, we're not asking you to  
do anything rash. Only to understand that this  
is an important part of the mission. Especially  
because the legal gap provided by them being  
local and off earth.

Fred: The sponsors know about all of this?

Ivor: Don't worry about them. Legally, we're fine  
to proceed.

Fred: Is legal the problem? I thought PR was.  
Fear that someone would find out about Todd.

Ivor: We'll have more flexibility up there.

Fred: I don't really understand. But if you're ok  
with it, I'm excited to move forward.  
This is an big opportunity.  
But I don't want you to come back and blame  
me for screwing the company again.

Dee: We're not going to blame you for anything.  
Anyway, you haven't done anything yet.  
We want you to be ready for the next possible  
steps. That's all.

Fred: ok

Ivor: Thanks Fred. We need you. This is important.

~~~~~

Dee: Hi Fred

Fred: Dee

Dee: Don't let Ivor worry you. He's pushing hard for this merge but whatever you do will be fine.

Fred: I don't think he understands all that goes into it. I haven't even had time to talk to Fugue about this. Everything running up there is going to be Izzy's stuff and he's gone. Fugue doesn't know any of that old setup.

Dee: Is that going to be a problem?

Fred: Shouldn't be. The system is similar, just older. But it won't be drag and drop, and I can't just sit down with her to go over the differences. I've got the modified spec ready, but she's too busy with all the other crap people need done.

Dee: Well, the antenna is the priority task.

Fred: Sure, but then Ivor's going to blame me for not being ready when he's setting these priorities. On top of that Fugue's constantly asking about the dog. I won't be surprised if she goes on strike soon.

Dee: Yes, the situation is unfortunate. We can't do anything until we get a contract. We'll get rid of her then and get real programmers. In the meantime we're stuck.

Fred: As long as Ivor's expectations are reasonable.

Dee: Of course.

Now, help me to understand the limits, so that I can help frame things for Ivor. If you get Fugue's time, how long to be ready for a connection?

Fred: If she actually focuses? Maybe a couple days. It shouldn't be hard, even for her.

Dee: And if the connections are working, how long before we can try a merge?

Fred: That's hard to say. Could be weeks, could be months.

Dee: And if we couldn't wait?

Fred: I don't follow.

Dee: Say the antennas go bad like the old one.  
Or Luvah's life support system starts failing?

Fred: If you don't have any other plans for Phreeto,  
why not try the merge?

Dee: Would that risk turning him into a Todd?

Fred: With high probability. However, there is a  
chance it may work. Depends on how far along  
we are. Better to risk it than be stuck with  
another useless Luvah.

This assumes that the sponsor won't raise any  
concerns.

Dee: You don't need to worry about that.

Fred: Can I get that in writing? haha

Dee: Always a comedian.

~~~~~

Ivor: Ok everyone, I want to thank you for all the  
hard work you've put in. We've made amazing  
progress in a very short time. I've got to  
update the sponsor tomorrow morning and want  
to make sure there are no last minute wrinkles.

Cindy: Everything fine here  
Has been for a while  
Not sure that a decision has been made on  
the gold  
the goal

Keith: Yes, we've got a few options. The real  
question is between licking and crunching. I  
don't think we can go wrong with either.

Ivor: Why not do both?

Keith: That would be too obvious.

Ivor: No problems besides that?

Keith: Nope. The system is dialed in with Cin and  
Kate's work. Obviously the PoC with the  
DoppelBot went well, so I'm confident.

Ivor: Yes, they loved that. Anything to add, Kate?

Kate: Only that I still think we should do a dry  
run before the real thing.

Ivor: That's what the virtualization's for.

Kate: Sure. But virtual testing of the augmentation engine analogue control is safe.  
And so far Phreeto's done great when we've gone physical.  
I just get nervous trying things for real.

Fred: Maybe we should have doubled our payload.  
Brought up a stack of antennas to  
"try things"  
until we were sure they were just right.

Kate: Seriously?

Fred: Spending your life with your legs crossed is no fun. At some point you just gotta do it  
"for real"

Kate: Screw you

Ivor: You can stop Fred. She has a legitimate concern. But unfortunately there's not much we can do now. Fred, do you have anything constructive to add?

Ivor: Fred?

Fred: I guess not. You know what I'm working on.  
Maybe you can tell me.

Ivor: Alright. Sounds like everything is on track.  
Keep on your toes. I have a feeling this may be happening very soon.  
Dee will keep you updated.  
Thanks all.

Cindy: Thanks

Keith: Bye

Kate: Thanks

Fred: Your welcome

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Like always, M was sitting in the corner, not watching her, looking incredibly bored. Pupa wondered why he was so aloof. He'd only tolerate her touching him when he was busy doing something else, like eating or sleeping. The rest of the time he would sit someplace away from her — not hiding, just away. He didn't seem upset with her, after that first night he never growled and rarely barked, and he never tried to run away. He

clearly wanted to stay with her but seemed to have no interest in interacting or cuddling. He reminded her of an asshole cat. He was the same size — smaller, even — and treated her like she was a convenient source of room and board and worth little else. His attitude was distressing and keeping him around was almost worse than if she had no pet at all. He just emphasized her loneliness and feelings of inadequacy, like a snarky imaginary friend whose vague existence was predicated on reinforcing your own pathetic flaws.

She knew he must have been through a lot and wanted to respect his space. She also had a not insignificant worry that if she pushed him, if she tried to force more companionship, he might turn on her. She had seen what he was capable of. Yes, he was not with a pack, and yes, he was minuscule, but she still retained a fearful reserve. How she wished he would just come and sit with her, though. Be a friend. She'd been through a lot too. And they both missed B. It was frustrating and sad that they could provide each other solace and instead he would avoid her, refuse to commiserate, be miserable while she was right here ready to offer and accept comfort.

Every night Pupa cried herself to sleep. She was terribly lonely, not really keeping up with school, overwhelmed with work, tired all the time. She felt worthless and insignificant, ready to leave PhRI. She didn't care about the contract anymore, she didn't need the job. The support money that had been going to Gordolph was being sent to her now. She had her own apartment (furnished), bought her own food, paid her own bills. The pittance that she got for being in HS had no meaningful impact on her ability to live. She wasn't going to be sent back to the girls home. In fact, both that place and Gordolph had been skimming her support money from the beginning. In addition to not knowing about this, she also found out that since she turned thirteen she was allowed to live on her own. The HS program actually encouraged it, as it was claimed to promote independence and success, especially for those in challenging home environments. Of course, almost none of the program members had the means to live alone, however Pupa's trust provided her with more than enough. It would be nearly depleted when she turned eighteen, but she had plenty of time to figure something out by then. There was no way she could imagine making it another three months, let alone the years she had remaining.

The only reason she was sticking it out at PhRI was for B. And for M. She was going to find a way to get B out of there and reunite them. M might be depressed, but she saw the way he obsessed over the paws

and collar. She knew he missed his old pal. She knew his mood would completely change when she brought B home. They would all be happy together. Pupa had no idea what she was going to do once she got him free or how they would hide. He only had one leg and who knew what coming out of his head, but once she had him she could spend all her time taking care of him, giving him (and M) a good life. Everyone at PhRI — especially Ivor — had done enough to screw up B's life and she wasn't about to let them ruin the rest of it for some fucked up experiment. She was done with them and once she got the dog she'd never go back.

All she had to do was get some time alone in the building. The problem was that lately, with the big mysterious experiment, it had been staffed around the clock. Ivor still hadn't taken her back to see B again, saying that everyone really needed the dog to focus and that once they met their next big milestone he'd let her visit. She didn't trust him — he seemed to just be putting her off and was conveniently away on “business trips” most of the time — yet still held out hope that he might give her a sanctioned visit. Whether that happened or not, she was ready to sneak back and escape with him if she could only find some time when the building was empty.

BANG–BANG

Someone was knocking at the door. M had broken from his moping and was staring towards the sound, his ears perked up like radars, eyes wide and black. Pupa wasn't expecting anyone — other than Post, nobody should know that she lived here. She cautiously walked to the door and looked through the peephole. A man was leaning against the trunk of the tree growing out of M's bathroom spot. The way he was tilted back and the distorting lens made him look grossly disproportioned, like some sort of stretched cartoon with a distended belly and teensy little head and feet. He was wearing a dark suit and tie, and his fedora adorned head was looking off to the side disinterestedly. He was far enough away that she wasn't worried about him being able to grab at her. She cracked the door enough to put her face through.

‘Hello?’

Moving just his head, the man looked at her and raised his brows. ‘Vanessa?’

‘I'm sorry, do I know you?’

‘Rudolpho's niece?’

Pupa shook her head. ‘My uncle's dead. I can't help you.’

She had barely begun to close the door when the man was at the opening, in her face, his foot jammed in the gap. How had he moved so

quick? Shocked by his sudden closeness, she stepped back reflexively, allowing him to push his way in. She started to cry out but he was up in her face again, pressing a finger against her lips, silencing her with a long shush.

‘No need to make a scene,’ he said with a wink, ‘I’m not here to hurt you. I’m just looking for my money.’

Pupa was shaking, frightened into silence. The man’s speed and the fact that he was *in here with her* made her feel deeply vulnerable, yet his demeanor was anything but threatening. He motioned for her to take a seat on the couch and went back to close the door before sitting in a chair opposite her. He was older, like a grandparent, and seemed incredibly relaxed. He took off his hat and tossed it on the coffee table. He turned away from her and smiled, clucking his tongue and snapping his fingers. To her surprise, M came strolling up and started sniffing his hand. He reached down to pick him up or pet him and Pupa found herself turning protective.

‘M! Get away from him!’ The dog looked back and forth between her and the man, took a few reverse steps, and then went back to the corner.

‘Cute pup.’

Pupa eyed him suspiciously. ‘What do you want? I don’t have any money.’

He looked around her apartment deliberately. ‘Sure you don’t. But you will.’

‘Who are you? A friend of my uncle’s?’

‘More of a business associate. My name’s Gideon Veritasti. But most of my friends call me Deon. You can call me Deon.’

He was a stranger, a strange man in her apartment. But something about his manner put her at ease. She fought at her inclination to let down her guard.

‘I don’t know anything about my uncle’s business. I told you, he’s dead.’

Deon smiled and chuckled. ‘Oh, I know. Men don’t die like that every day. Quite a stroke of luck. For you, and for me.’

‘I don’t understand.’

Deon reached in his breast pocket and pulled out a cigarette. Pupa began to tell him smoking wasn’t allowed but he interjected. ‘Don’t worry, I don’t light up. Quit a long time ago but I still like the feel of it between my lips. Just can’t break the habit.’ He put it in his mouth and leaned forward. ‘Did Rudolpho ever talk to you about insurance?’

Pupa shook her head. The man matched her movements, though his

seemed incredulous rather than uncertain.

‘I figured so. It explains why you haven’t made a claim. That man — I could never figure him out.’

Pupa still had no clue what he was talking about and said as much. Deon rubbed his hands together and sat back, rolling the cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other.

‘Your uncle was in, um, financial difficulties. My understanding was that he brought you in because you had a funding stream which he could utilize.’ — Pupa found it annoying that some old rando knew about this, probably before she did — ‘Well, he needed to find a way to exit his situation before he, shall we say, got too far underwater. I offered him an opportunity: take a large insurance policy out, one that he couldn’t afford, I’d pay the premiums, and in the event of a loss, we’d split the proceeds. The agreement was that he would find a way to wreck his store, then we could cash in.’

‘I still don’t understand what this has to do with me. And his store wasn’t really wrecked.’

‘Ah, I’m getting to that. As is standard in these arrangements, we take out life insurance on our associates. Provides a hedge for us in case something, eh, should go sideways. As a form of insulation, we have the associate — in this case, your uncle — choose a friend or family member — in this case, you — as the beneficiary. Since Rudolpho died, you stand to inherit millions, of which fifty percent is mine. That’s why I’m here. I’ve come to collect.’

Pupa was in shock. ‘Millions?’

‘Typically the policy isn’t so large. But we had an indemnity clause added that was tied to the business side which trebled the award if the loss was due to an animal. The idea was that, with all those strays running around the neighborhood and Rudolpho picking them up for that brain shop, maybe he could find a way to have a dog cause some major damage. To make the agent happy, we let him upsell us and add it to the life policy as well. Actuarially probably a smart bet, being in the city and all. I’ll be honest, it’s a bet I didn’t expect to be on the right side of.’

Pupa was still confused. She couldn’t get him his money because she didn’t have it. And she didn’t know anything about this insurance, so how was she supposed to get it? ‘I still don’t understand what I can do.’

‘All you got to do is collect, kid.’ Deon reached inside of his coat and pulled out a folded stack of paper. ‘I got all the information right here. I can explain everything you need to do. How to transfer the money. Everything.’

Something about his preparation made Pupa feel defensive again. Suspicious, she asked him ‘How do I know that *you* were the one making the payments? What’s stopping me from just keeping all the money for myself?’

The man grinned again. ‘You’re quick, kid. *I* didn’t make the actual payments, I paid your uncle, and he paid the premiums. There’s a couple canceled checks in there for the exact amount — you can match it up with that sheet there — that’s for the last two months.’

‘These checks aren’t from you. They’re from “Son Ice Co.”’

‘If you want, look in Rudolpho’s bank statements. It’ll all line up. As for the money,’ his face lost any hint of amusement, ‘if I don’t get my cut, I’ll start collecting interest. First a toe, then a foot, then a hand. Catch my drift? And I’ll still expect the principal.’

Pupa felt lightheaded and cold. She stared at the policy blankly. The man had just threatened her. She wanted nothing to do with this.

‘Listen kid. I can tell you’re getting freaked out. There’s nothing to worry about. You get the money, give me my half, and we’re done.’

‘I’m going to get in trouble for this.’

‘I told you, there’s nothing to worry about. It’s all legal. I’ve done this plenty of times.’

‘Are you going to just come after me later for the rest of the money?’ Pupa was still feeling panicked about the whole situation.

‘I’m a businessman. I wouldn’t be staying in business very long if I pulled shady crap like that. Plus, you fulfill your end of the deal, and you get a bonus: protection from your new uncle — uncle Deon. I’ll keep any scuzzbags from coming down on you. People don’t fuck around with Veritasti around here. Think about it kid, you’re about to become very rich and gain a very powerful friend. It’s your lucky day.’

‘I don’t—I don’t know. It seems dangerous.’ She couldn’t even comprehend the money. Everything felt too sketchy.

‘It’s a piece of cake kid. Let me walk you through it. First thing to note is that video of your uncle’s death, that’s the—’

‘You’ve seen the video? How’d you get that?’

‘I’ve got my sources.’ He gave her a wink. ‘That video’s proof for your claim. It’s like gold. I’ve also noticed that one of the, uh, perpetrators looks pretty familiar.’ Deon looked across the room. ‘It’d be a shame if the authorities were given an anonymous tip...’

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Over the hills, through the grass, under the sun, towards the colors. It

was the same thing all the time now, but Bē never felt bored, or tired, or distracted. He could keep going and going and going. It was his favorite thing to do: feel his legs working, run after the horizon, get closer every time. He'd almost made it the last few go-arounds, and this time he was pushing even harder. Focusing, making certain his movements and his body and his senses all aligned towards the goal.

The landscape flew by. The wind pressed against his face. The scent filled his head. There was no major shift in scenery anymore, the changes were smaller, more subtle, but they made things more exciting. A rock outcropping that he would have to run around. A large crack to jump across. The ribbon would seem to shift position and he'd have to change direction to track it. Sometimes he saw the tree, but not this time. Not for the last few times. Bē didn't mind — the tree was interesting, he wanted to see Fyüg, he missed her. But the colors were different: he was compelled to go after them, he *had* to see where they ended, he lived for this, this was what he was meant to do.

He came into a spread of stones, dodging, weaving, leaping. His path sloped down and as he descended he switched between looking at the ground and the horizon. The colors were moving off center and he adjusted to follow sideways down the hill, canting his body to match the odd angle. Things flattened out and then rolled and pitched. Bē found himself trying to simultaneously follow the contours and stay fixed on his goal.

He topped a large hill and saw it. He'd seen it before, but never like this. He was on a circular berm which stretched around far in the distance before returning. Below him was a wide, bowl-shaped depression filled with rows of concentric circles. At the center were the colors, the ribbon descending from high in the sky into the bullseye in a writhing, electric, flaming chromatic roil. The smell and taste filled the air. He began to salivate uncontrollably. He was close. It was right there. He was going to reach it before it disappeared again.

Bē flew down the steep ledge into the crater. As he came upon the outer rim of the circles, he could see they were high walls, dingy and bland. From up top he hadn't recognized them but down here he knew he'd seen them before. He knew what to do. He found the entrance and ran inside. The walls were too tall and too smooth to climb, but they formed a path that would lead to the center. He ran through them, a narrow valley following a constant curve, winding him closer, closer. If he looked up he could see the colors arcing off into the sky, whipping past him and away from sight and then back around again. The curve

got tighter and the air began to fill with color. It smelled and tasted, the walls rippling with reds and greens, blues and oranges.

He was coming to a dead end. What was this? A trick? No, just a U-turn, a change in direction. And he was running again, spiraling faster and faster, leaning in to the ever-tightening turn, the air growing more vibrant, so intense that he couldn't even see the walls anymore, or sense any direction, or hear his feet pounding against the earth. He was floating in a haze of color, the smell and odor and flavor and sound and feel on his body were all the same. Although he couldn't see and couldn't tell if his legs were moving he knew he was running around the circle, tighter and tighter, so fast he was all the way on his side to keep from falling in.

And then it was over. Bē was in the center, lying on his side, lying on the colors which surrounded him, a bubble of overwhelming stimulation. His ears buzzed. His skin prickled. Everything was spinning. A huge glowing mass sat before him, pulsing, reaching right to his nose. It was flaming orange, almost pink — captivating, comforting, delicious. Panting and exhausted, he began to lick. Salt, delicious salt, orange salt, an endless rock. It was incredibly familiar yet like nothing he'd had before. It tasted so good. He did not want to stop, he could not stop. He kept licking, licking, lapping at the salt, feeling the orange fill his mouth, lost the ecstasy that he'd finally found.

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'It's gonna happen, hon. You did good. Y'all did good.'

Ivor was smiling so broadly he seemed unable to talk. As if showing all those teeth was impolite, he tried to close his mouth but failed, and instead shook his head and looked down at his desk in disbelief. His elation was infectious and Dee found herself grinning broadly, happy less for the accomplishment (though that was certainly something to be pleased about) than seeing Ivor actually enjoying himself and not racked by stress, worry, fear, anger, doubt. Everyone had worked very hard for this, made many sacrifices, but Ivor in particular had been overburdened by the pressures of the uncertain experiment, organizational difficulties, technical constraints, and the consequences of failure. If they were not separated by the desk she'd go over and give him a squeeze — he deserved it and it was her preferred way of sharing joy — but she didn't want to make things awkward and besides, she knew how to hug with her eyes, and right now she was embracing him to her fullest. So

much so that she was pretty sure it was why he couldn't maintain eye contact. Good, let him feel embarrassed — a little positive emotion directed his way would do him good.

When he finally got his face under control, he looked up at her and said, 'We're finally going to get that contract. It's like a dream.' He shook his head again and looked down at his squeezing, interlocked hands. Dee couldn't quite tell but thought he might be holding back tears. His eyes were dry, however, when he looked up again. 'For a while there I seriously thought we were doomed. It's incredible.'

'I'm proud of you. You should be too. It was quite a pivot at the last minute. Sometimes when things seem to be going sideways they find a way of straightening themselves out.' She gave him a knowing look. 'A little hard work helps out too, of course.'

'Things are finally turning our way.' He stared at her with confident, almost devious, eyes. 'Imagine what the contract will be like after we do the merge.'

'I thought we decided to pause on that. The link has only just been established and Fred may need months to get everything ready.' Ivor knew these problems. 'The time to push on the contract is now. If we wait we may lose our leverage, especially if it doesn't work.'

'We're not going to wait.'

'What are you talking about?'

'We'll just see what Fred can do in the next couple weeks and then go for it. Have you seen Luvah's vitals? I don't think it's going to make it very long.'

He was going to bungle that poor dog's brain. 'What's the point? If you don't give him time to properly set up it's almost certain to fail.'

'I don't think it's certain to fail. After all, Fred's on board. And besides, there really is no downside. We already had a major success with the DoppelBot. If the merge doesn't take, we just don't talk about it. But if it does — that's an even bigger deal than controlling robots. Transferring knowledge? Melding minds? A contract that came out of that would be life-changing.'

He was right. The rewards could be huge. Connecting the brains to have one directly learn from another would be revolutionary. But they never actually got it to work. The sympathetic signals required for the sender to synchronize with the receiver always caused unrecoverable disruptions. Fred thought he had a way to make the transition happen without irreparable damage, by making the process more gradual and improving the algorithm tuning. However, to rush in was likely to just

repeat problems they knew to avoid. It was probably cruel too, though that wouldn't really matter to Ivor. Dee decided to keep pushing on the contract.

'Don't forget Todd — he almost broke us. I think you might be setting up another disaster. Why ruin a good opportunity by getting greedy? Plus, Keith said the autonomy might be cascading. That maybe just as rich an area of research.'

'We all create our own little realities. There is nothing particularly revolutionary about a dog inventing its own way of perceiving the world.'

'But he's remapping the inputs that he trained on to fit his own worldview. Keith says the connection between the physical and virtual has become almost irrelevant. "The goals we set become unconscious inevitabilities." Phreeto's not just inventing his own reality, he's becoming our tool along with it.'

'Which is what we've done all along. This is merely moving further down the continuum. Now, merging two separate realities? That's a fundamental shift. What's got into you, anyway, Dee? I thought you were on board with this?'

She was, at least theoretically, but now that the main experiment had worked, that the contract was a certainty, she was nervous about taking another big risk. Despite Ivor's insistence on the lack of drawbacks, creating a crazed dog up there seemed like a PR nightmare, and she told him as much.

'Dee, you of all people should recognize the potential story we have here.' Looking up, he moved his hands in a giant arc above his head. "'Brave dog makes ultimate sacrifice for science." We are giving it a final opportunity for greatness. It won't be a tragedy, it'll be an inspiration.' Turning solemn, he said with gravity, 'The dog will be a martyr.'

Unable to help herself, Dee burst out laughing. 'Jesus, Ivor. Do you even know what that means?'

Miffed at his argument falling flat, Ivor glowered. 'Whatever. My point is that it may look just as bad to have them sitting up there doing nothing, just waiting to die. Instead, we can provide them meaning. Plus, a large motivation for this trip, for sending it local, was to continue the original research. The sponsor will be annoyed if we miss out on this because we were busy twiddling our thumbs and let Luvah die. We're lucky to be where we are: two related animals which means two sympathetic minds, skills that can be tested, no legal restrictions. If we let this slip they will *never* give us another chance.'

His logic was sound but he had lost perspective. ‘Goodness, you think this is the last big break you’ll have? You hit a triple. Don’t try to turn it into a home run and get thrown out.’

‘What if they hold up the contract? What if we needed to do this?’

Now he was completely making up shit. Dee knew she had lost, and that fighting him would not be helpful. The best she could do was to put aside her misgivings and, as always, just support him.

‘Alright hon,’ Dee surrendered, ‘but please do me a favor and wait as long as you can. Let’s try to give these dogs a chance.’

## Chapter 19

### Lost Dog

‘Hey there, what’s the big news?’ Post was sitting with his legs on the counter, reading a comic book with a head ripped in half on the cover and an indecipherable title written in stylized, tree-branch font.

‘You won’t fucking believe this. I’m so—’ Pupa lost it and burst into tears. She had spent half the day ruminating and getting worked up and now that she was finally able to talk about it her emotions flew out and overwhelmed everything else. She stood there looking at Post, arms flailing at her sides, trying to talk but only emitting sobs. He tossed his reading material aside and hopped over the counter, grabbing her shoulders with both hands and leaning down to look into her eyes.

‘Hey, it’s alright. Don’t try and talk, just let it out.’ He pulled her to him and patted her on the back. She wanted to return the embrace but felt silly and embarrassed, afraid of making the whole situation more awkward. So she just stood there, weirdly straight, worried about being foolish while she continued to bawl her eyes out.

‘Why don’t you go back to the Alcove and I’ll lock up.’ Now she was making him close up early which made her feel extra inconvenient. She shook her head but he seemed to understand, talking to her as he went to the door. ‘I wasn’t going to be open much longer anyway. I’m going to meet my friends Toby and Ex so they can show me some of their latest work. You can come along if you want — I’ll call you my “creative partner.”’ The prospect of meeting some strangers would normally be daunting but tonight was unthinkable. The suggestion shocked her out of her state and Pupa found herself overwhelmed with the thought of having to decline without sounding excessively rude. Post saved her the trouble, again seeming to recognize her thoughts. ‘Don’t worry about it, you don’t have to go. I can tell you about it later. They described it as

diptychs of the same scene, each painted separately by the two of them under different mind alterants. They are certainly a pair. I guess if it is any good you'll see it in here anyway. Come on, sit down, tell me what's on your mind.'

Post's diversion had helped to temper her upset and, wiping her eyes with her palms, she found herself capable of articulating words again. She took a deep breath and braced herself.

'B is gone.'

Post looked slightly confused. 'Gone? What do you mean? I thought you told me he wasn't dead.'

'No, not dead. Or, I'm pretty sure he isn't. But you're not going to believe where he is.'

'What, he's not at the lab anymore? I thought there was a big experiment.'

'There is. Only it's not here. It's in space.'

'What do you mean? Like outer space?'

He said it like a joke but she nodded her head and pointed up. 'Mmmhmm. He's up there.'

'Get the fuck out,' Post said incredulously. 'Is this some sort of joke? I don't get it.'

'It's real. I've seen video. He's, like, in a little spaceship.'

'Fu— Pupa, are you okay? It sounds like someone's playing a trick on you. I don't—'

'It's not a trick. Nobody told me anything. Nobody knows I've seen anything. He's gone. Really gone.'

Since Pupa wasn't living at PhRI anymore, it was difficult for her to monitor when or if the rest area was unoccupied. She wrote a monitoring program that summarized changes in the sesame database, but that only gave her entrance times, not exits. She made a habit of coming by late in the evening or early in the morning, checking the parking lot to see if it was empty. There was always somebody there — Fred or Keith or, especially, Dee. A month ago, as pressure grew about the experiment, she became increasingly frustrated and desperate. Thinking that if she was around during the late hours she might get a chance, she tried shifted her working time so that she would work all night and leave midmorning to rest. Not only was that difficult to maintain, she never once found the building empty, and almost immediately staff began to complain that she wasn't available for consultation. She had tried working overnight on the weekends, but her body couldn't adjust and the ensuing oversleeping and drowsy haze led to more complaints and

a serious conversation with Dee. If she could get away with it she would never sleep, just grind away at work and then patiently wait for a chance alone to take B. However, her body was fighting her — not only did she have to sleep, but lately it seemed like she couldn't get enough. Even when she didn't work through the night she wanted to sleep in. She was constantly lethargic and uninterested in anything that required being awake for. The thought of getting up to deal with another day of work and school only made her feel more exhausted. Only the thought of freeing B, of seeing him again, gave her the motivation to struggle through another day.

And so she fell back in line, working normal hours, irregularly riding out to the parking lot in the dark to check, losing any hope that she would be free of the routine any time soon. She was trapped and miserable. If only she had known. All this time wasted, worrying, dreaming about something that didn't exist. Trying to contact B, letting him know that she was still around, that they would be reunited again. What a lie. What a complete waste.

In the last week her request queue changed — priorities shifted, the workload decreased. Something had changed — perhaps the experiment was going to happen, or had been modified. It was now clear that it had already happened, but somehow Pupa didn't recognize the signals. The change in mood about the lab. The drop in face-to-face meetings. When she came by last night to check the parking situation she was barely even thinking about what she was doing, automatically riding past the lot and about to head home when she realized that it was empty. Empty! This was her chance. It'd been so long since this was a possibility that she'd nearly forgotten about her plans. She gathered herself and headed in, quickly initiating her access program so she could go into the rest area.

When she entered things were completely different from what she had seen before. The lights were dimmed but not completely out, giving her pause as to whether the place was truly deserted. In the main area the tables and chairs were stacked and piled off in a corner, and in their place was a giant monitor and a large, shiny, human-esque robot on a wheeled platform. The irregularly-sized blob that counted as a head had a large concave depression from which were poking lenses and tubes and antennas. Pupa immediately knew this had to be the DP that she was programming for, and many of the opaque requests that were made — primarily by Kate — began to make sense. She would later discover that there was a smaller DP that was “local” with B.

She barely paid any attention to the DP, though, instead being more focused on rescuing B. Still worried that somebody might be around, Pupa moved quickly but as quietly as possible, fixated on getting to the room around the corner. When she got there she noticed the tag on the door was the same (though now she could read it clearly). She opened the door confidently, prepared to run over and disconnect B and run out from there forever. When she turned on the light, though, the room was bare. Absolutely everything had been pulled out except for the built-in shelving. Pupa ran in and opened everything up, looking for a clue. Panicked, she assumed he must have been moved. But she was afraid of disturbing another dog, as that was — supposedly, at least — how Ivor had found out about her previous intrusion. She went up and down the hall, checking the nameplates, looking for “B” or “Phreeto” or anything that might have been a possibility. Nothing seemed likely.

At this point she realized she would just have to risk it. Starting at far end of the hallway loop, she went to each door, turning on the light briefly to see what was inside. There were offices (many empty), meeting rooms with whiteboards containing meaningless scribbles and partially visible remnants, a computer room with racks of machines that blasted her with a persistent roar and a rush of cold air, and a storage room stocked with office supplies, electronics, and a pallet of dog food. And a few rooms had dogs. Fewer than she expected — only five — but none of them were B. She only flashed the lights briefly, hoping that it wouldn't disturb them enough to spur an investigation, but it was clear in the flash that they weren't what she was looking for. Some of the names on the doors were familiar from passing reference by the staff, but she had never associated them with the animals. There was Spud, of course, but also Keybo, Gryff, Penny, and Clyde. Just like B, they were all wired up in the head, but none of their colors matched his: white and yellow and rust and grey. The shapes were wrong too.

Pupa wondered what happened to the rest of the dogs. She had seen dozens come through since she'd been here. Gordolph himself had supplied more than five. They must have moved them away, or they died. She suddenly became worried that B was dead, that he'd died and nobody wanted to tell her. She thought maybe there was a record someplace, something that would tell her what happened to him. On a whim she went to Cindy's office and turned on her computer. Sure enough, it wasn't password-protected (the ditz probably assumed the double-door security was sufficient). Pupa started digging around, which is how she discovered the truth.

At first she couldn't believe it, it seemed impossible. But there were documents and pictures and videos. Videos of B wearing a puffy, charcoal-colored space suit (looking totally fucking cool), being moved onto a rocket, a launch, him floating about in a modified VR harness. The whole time wearing a headset, his eyes and ears covered, a braid of wires attached to his skull. Ribbon-like cables ran out of each foot of his spacesuit, a thick tube was connected to his belly, and he was wearing something that looked like a diaper made from a trashbag with vacuum hoses attached to it. There was a video of the DP unscrewing a big satellite dish, and then screwing it back in. There was another dog — Luvah appeared to be her name — which was floating in a capsule similar to B's. She was wearing a headset that had far fewer wires coming out of it, and beneath that her snout and whiskers were reminiscent of B. However, she was only wearing the diaper-thing, not a space suit or harness, and as she floated freely her long legs gently moved like she was ambling lazily through water.

Deep into the night Pupa read, slowly building up an understanding of the experiments, what had happened, and what was planned. She found a printer and printed a single picture of Bē, then left well before daybreak to avoid getting caught. For the first time in weeks, she did not feel fatigued or demotivated, but was energized trying to process what she had discovered. Over the course of the day she began to feel increasingly disturbed, not only by B's fate, but also by her part in it. She had programmed the systems that allowed him to be part of the experiments. She had allowed herself to be duped into believing that he was still here, and that she would see him soon. She had brought him to PhRI in the first place. She was disappointed and hurt and sad, but most of all, the more she thought about it, she was angry. Angry at herself, to be sure, but livid at PhRI and in particular Ivor. What was wrong with them? Why couldn't they at least tell her? Did they really hate her that much?

Ivor came in the lab that morning (luckily no business travel) and eventually Pupa got the nerve to confront him. She requested a meeting which he was able to oblige a few hours later. She asked him to close the door and cut right to it.

'I want to see B. Now.'

'Now Fugue, I've told you, when the experiments are through you'll be allowed to see it. Right now it can't be distracted.'

'I don't think he's here.'

Ivor took too long to reply. 'I don't know why you'd say that.'

'Prove to me that he's here. In the lab.'

'You know I can't do that. You just have to trust me.'

'I don't think he's here.' She was getting more forceful, pushing him to admit the truth.

Unused to her giving such an attitude, he pushed back. 'You need to relax. Who told you it wasn't here?'

'Nobody. I can just tell.'

He continued to press. 'Who told you?'

'I told you, nobody. Nobody told me *shit*.'

'Listen you little kid, you better cool it. Are you trying to screw up your life? I can have the contract terminated right now if I want. You'll have no future. You want to end up like Rodolpho? Dying poor and pathetic? And don't forget that you're still begging to see that dog. As far as you're concerned, if that contract's gone, that dog's gone.'

Pupa didn't know what to say. Ivor had no idea about the insurance situation. She didn't need him or PhRI anymore. Heck, she'd been ready to leave them before that. But, even knowing that B was in space or wherever, she didn't want to sever her ties to him. Not yet. Maybe she could still help him.

Ivor started talking again, softer. He sounded contrite, though Pupa didn't trust his sincerity. 'Fugue, I'm sorry about what I just said. That was unfair. But you do need to think about your future. I know it can be hard to understand. You're young, it doesn't seem fair to have to wait. But for now, you need to be patient. Help us finish these experiments. The sooner they're done, the sooner you'll get to see Ph—, you'll get to see that dog.'

Pupa stared at him, trying to understand how he could lie to her face like that. She would find a way to make him hurt, hurt like she did, hurt like he deserved. But to do that she would have to play along, couldn't let herself get ejected too soon. She looked down and forced a sense of shame into her voice. Underneath it all was a spite that she suppressed with all her fury.

'I'm sorry, Ivor. You're right, I'm just not thinking. I'm just frustrated, I guess.' She looked up into his eyes, forcing him to bear witness as she switched to the truth, her tears completely authentic. 'I really love that dog. He's all I've got.'

Pupa was crying again as she finished explaining to Post. 'So then he *winks* at me like we had some sort of special bond, like that whole conversation had been something cute, and leaves. Bastard.'

Post was still skeptical. 'This is crazy. Are you sure this is real? I'll be honest, it sounds like you might be pranking me. It's really out there.'

'You don't believe me? Check this out.' Pupa pulled out the picture she had printed, showing B hovering and flailing around weightless.

'You know, I have to admit, he looks pretty fucking cool. But, you know, they can do almost anything with computers these days.'

'It's real. If I could have a camera in my phone I'd take pictures. You *have* to trust me.' She was leaning towards him insistently.

He looked at her with a gleam. 'Hey, hey — I believe you. You know, Pupa, this is really crazy stuff. You've got to find a way to get some more pictures. Write this up. This is better than a movie. If you don't do it I'm going to.'

'Don't you dare.'

'Whoah, what's the problem? You can't not talk about this. Are you afraid they're going to get rid of you? You don't need their money, you've got plenty to live on.'

She stared at him in shock. How did he know? She hadn't said anything about the insurance to Post, worried about getting him involved, about making trouble.

Post, reading her confusion, continued: 'You told me before you were ready to leave. You don't need the job to pay your bills. You were going to take B and split. If he's not there, why stay? Who are you trying to protect?'

She realized he was talking about her support payments. Nonetheless, his callousness was aggravating. 'I'm protecting B. He needs my help. He isn't some cool idea to sell. I've done enough to hurt him.' She wiped her aching eyes. She hoped it wasn't a mistake telling him about this. 'I need your help Post. I've got some ideas about what I want to do, but I don't know about B. Or that other dog, Luvah. I don't know what I can do for them.'

'I don't know what I can do to help. I don't even really understand what is going on.'

'But you're *creative*. You know how to make people interested in things, how to make them feel good. Even if they're looking at messed up stuff. I need ideas about how to make B happy.'

Post looked at her modestly. 'Pupa, I don't really know a thing about dogs. Look at M. I barely knew what to do with him.'

'I'm not talking about taking care of him. I'm talking about making him feel right,' she tapped on her forehead, 'up here. Anyway, I don't know much about dogs either. But from everything I've seen they're not much different from us. Pretend he was a person, what would you do?'

'I-I'm not sure.' He looked at her earnestly. 'You know that dog. I don't know why you don't trust yourself more. I keep telling you, you're just as creative as I am. All that programming and algorithms that you've told me about, it's clear that you're not just following instructions. And what about your name? A little over a year and you came up with something new. I haven't been able to find anything for myself in over a decade.'

While she *had* changed her name, it was not so much out of creative inspiration as it was to signal a break. She was ready to leave the crap life she'd been living, ready to transform and get out. It was a reminder to herself that she was on the verge, that she wouldn't let her current situation trap her. Every time she heard someone from PhRI refer to her as Fugue it made her cringe inside, it reinforced to her that they were dealing with someone that didn't exist anymore. She knew too much, she had grown into something they couldn't understand. She'd decided on the switch the night she'd last seen B, the night when Gordolph was killed, the night when everything had to change. Plus, it was a better fit. Not only signaling transition but also representing better than Fugue how she felt about herself: a grubby worm mutating into a gross insect. She even pronounced it (only to herself, of course) in a way that emphasized her self-repulsiveness. Hopefully she wouldn't have it for very long, but for now it was a more accurate representation of herself.

'You don't need a new name because Post is perfect.'

'It just sounds that way because you've always known me as that. Everyone from my childhood thinks that "Mike" is the perfect name. There was another time in my life when I was known as "Pinchay." Didn't sound stupid then. Anyway, I'm not sure that I can help you.' He pulled back his sleeve and looked at his watch, a big hunk of metal with glowing red lights that made his wrist appear to be pulsating. 'But why do you need to do anything anyway? Maybe the dogs are perfectly happy up there. The experiment is done, so maybe it'll just be like Laverne—'

'Luvah.'

'Like Luvah was before. What makes you think she wasn't happy. What if you screw things up worse?'

'It won't be worse. They're going to do another experiment. Remember that dog Todd I've told you about, the creepy one?'

'The dog that wears the headgear and stares at the wall all day?'

'They're going to do that to B.'

'Why would they do that? That doesn't make any sense. Spend a bunch of money to send him up there and scramble his brain?'

‘The experiment isn’t supposed to scramble his brain, but there’s a good chance it will. Cindy had a whole bunch of message log transcripts in her files. They talked about this “merge” experiment, something involving the dogs communicating with their minds.’

‘That sounds kind of cool. This would really—’

‘Post! It’s not cool. It’s fucked up. Whatever happened to Todd got them in trouble, and by doing it up there in space they think they’ll be safe. Because they expect it’ll probably end the same. There’s no way I’m going to let them turn B into a Todd. I already have a plan to destroy the antennas, to cut them off from being able to communicate with B or Luvah.’ She wanted to come up with a way to deal with the lab too, to pay back Ivor, to make it so that he couldn’t do this again. But doing so might be explicitly criminal, and she didn’t want Post involved.

‘That won’t kill them? What about life support?’

‘It runs independently. That’s how Luvah lasted all these years with her antenna broken. But I can’t just leave them up there by themselves. If there was a way to move between the pods they could be together, but that’s not possible.’

‘You can’t just bring them back to Earth?’

‘If they go out of orbit they’ll burn up.’

‘Pupa, don’t take this the wrong way — and I do need to leave here soon — but maybe that’s the answer. Put them out of their misery.’

She was deeply offended. ‘No way. Then I’d be just as bad as all those PhRI assholes.’

‘I’m not sure what to tell you,’ said Post, ‘What about M? He’s in a similar situation now, no? B’s not coming back.’ Pupa put her face in her hands at the mention of that little dog. She was just failing every damn thing in her life. Post squeezed her knee, ‘Listen, maybe you can try some things out for M, see what works, and see if you can adapt that for B and the other one.’

Pupa remembered something she’d thought about while at the lab. ‘Cindy had a full scan of B on her computer, so they must have a scanner back in the rest area and used it before they sent him away. Maybe I could scan M. It wouldn’t be perfect, but maybe—’ She trailed off, unsure about getting M involved with the lab.

‘You know how to use the scanner?’

‘Sure, Cindy taught me.’

‘Maybe it’s time for bring your pet to work day.’

## Chapter 20

### Fetch

Bē watched the horizon, waiting for something interesting to happen. The air was still, the grass the same as always, the sky and the clouds and the sun too. He could run — he loved running, and enjoying the beautiful, bright, normal day — but instead he just waited. When things got like this, it almost always meant there was a change coming. He would really have preferred to just lay down and tube, waiting mindlessly for whatever it was that was going to be different or exciting to get him up and about. But he couldn't tube, he couldn't relax. He was always on alert, waiting for the next thing, something inside urging him to not lose focus, to remain vigilant, lest he miss out on a that which could not be missed.

It was exhausting and tedious. Even though he found everything endlessly fascinating, and although being prepared for and then living these vital experiences felt incredibly rewarding, the constant stimulation was beginning to become dull. He would be driven to complete tasks, search out new locations, achieve goals, however someplace deep inside him he was feeling less and less fulfilled, an unsatisfaction that had started to spread into his awareness. He was sure he could not stop whatever it was he continued to be compelled to do, but he was starting to wonder if he really cared about it anymore.

He took a deep breath and sighed. It was a terrifically nice day, as nice as any of the others he'd been through here. Bē felt wistful for the times when he would just enjoy himself, when running and feeling his legs, when tasting the perfect air and warming himself in the sun, when knowing that some new thing would come which might be good or bad but living right now was just fine, when all these things were enough and plenty. His thoughts meandered, returning to a common

question: why was there nobody else here? He was sure it would be so much better if another dog or person was around, even someone new. He thought of his old friends, Mās and Mr. Krüzēn and Tôrō and Fyüg, and of others, sometimes even including the bad people like Īvôr or The Górdölf. It didn't matter how evil they might have been, Bē was certain that their presence would be preferable to being stuck here by himself, where loneliness was causing him to lose any passion or interest in anything. It was so pleasant here that even the worst people would surely become wonderful, and the best would make everything exquisite.

Recently he'd been experiencing something that almost felt like another was with him. There was nobody about, but there was a feeling — an emotion or some indefinable state of mind — originating in place he could not identify which evoked memories and sensations that were at once long forgotten and intensely familiar. It was like a voice he could not place, or a smell he could not locate, or a comfort he could not quite duplicate. And most of all it felt like it was near — someone that he knew but who was an intangible, unidentifiable dream. This other was a contradiction, an entity that existed within and without him, at once soothing and frightening, promising relief from his isolation and confirming his distress.

But it was not here now. Just nothing. Bē was neither scared nor happy, only bored. So incredibly bored. He looked up at the sky apathetically, wondering if he would see the colors. They rarely came anymore, and when they did they barely lasted, disappearing before he had much of a chance to chase them. Perhaps night would come before anything else, allowing him to sleep, an occasion which, while nowhere near as gratifying as a good tube, would nonetheless be a welcome escape from this dreariness.

In his periphery, something caught his eye. He snapped his head to look and was confronted with the tree, closer than ever before, nearly right upon him. It loomed tall and massive, its leaves rustling in a breeze that had picked up without him noticing. Its crown was almost perfectly round, reaching nearly to the ground, creating an inviting pocket of shade. Bē stepped forward, and at the same moment the green leaves turned a vibrant blue, an electric color that stood apart from the azure sky with a mesmerizing, radiating glow. He knew that color, knew it even before the leaves began to speak, their gusty whisper transforming into the soft voice of Fyüg, speaking in her new way, strange and nearly wordless, yet clear and unmistakable. Her tone was still difficult to make out, but it seemed pleading, perhaps encouraging.

Bē took another step towards the tree and in a sudden jerk it pulled away. Another step and another jerk, farther this time. He started to run, tossing in a little back skip as he took off after the receding blue giant, following its path across the pastoral landscape. Faster he ran, soon achieving stasis, neither gaining nor losing the swiftly moving tree whose trunk and branches bent and shook as it zig-zagged in front of him. Fyüg's voice still called out, surrounding and pulling him towards her, seemingly begging him to not fall behind. As he charged ahead, he saw the leaves ripple with all of the colors of the ribbon, definitely not in the sky but in the tree, an iridescent flicker which almost instantly returned to the familiar blue, blazing and humming, perpetually out of reach.

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Ivor rushed to Fugue's office. Sure enough it was dark. Shit. The rational side of him wanted to check the remainder of this side, to see if she was in a different room — perhaps her modified supply closet, maybe she was in with Todd. But he knew he wouldn't find her anywhere over here. She was on the other side.

He'd come by to check on things after noticing the monitors indicated a higher than normal computer load. There had been spikes over the past few weeks and such things were typical, usually the result of Fred or Keith running some overnight tests, Kate performing an idle-time data collect, or Cindy pushing a render batch. He had long stopped checking up on everyone, having plenty of other work to do himself and knowing that they were all pushing hard to make the deadlines and didn't need him bugging them with useless shoulder surfing. Tonight was different, though. The compute intensities seemed more sustained and, more importantly, they were going ahead with the merge in a couple days (Luvah appeared to be declining) so there should not have been any major last minute updates or experiments which might throw unexpected disruptions into their plans. When he first saw the increased loads, he assumed that someone on the team had found something of concern and was scrambling to fix it without letting him know. This was not the time for him to be blindsided — even if it was fixed without issue he needed to be appraised of the status of everything as they approached this important experiment. His nervous curiosity had turned to semi-relief when he saw the empty parking lot, and then to panic upon seeing Fugue's bike. Ivor hoped it was just a coincidence, that she was doing some late

night coding while one of the team ran something misleadingly busy. The sinking feeling in his gut belied his optimism.

He raced for the security doors, scanning his card and entering his passcode (5454) and rushing in. The main area looked odd, somewhat empty, but that is not what caught his attention. It was the giant screen with two side-by-side pictures of Phreeto and Luvah, frozen, floating at odd angles, and below them and off to the side, a shock of rainbow, stooped over at the console, pounding away wildly on the keyboard. It took him over a second to realize that it was Fugue, her hair freshly dyed but still wearing the same dumpy, olive colored sweater that she had lately taken to wearing as some sort of unflattering uniform.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ He was yelling but she didn’t respond, as if she was unaware of his presence. ‘Fugue! *Get away from there.*’ Ivor was livid. How did she get in here? What was she doing? He moved towards her, ready to pull her from the console. It was over, they didn’t need her anymore. He wasn’t going to let her screw things up. Not now.

Fugue moved her head and put her hand up. Ivor stopped, not sure what was happening. She looked up at the screen and pressed her palm onto Phreeto’s face. Ivor started towards her again, telling her emphatically to stop whatever she was doing. She pulled her hand away and slammed it down on the keyboard. The big screen went blank. The monitor in front of her flashed and then turned off. He was almost upon her when she spun around, cheeks wet, eyes red and swollen, lips pulled back and showing her teeth in what he would best describe as a snarl.

Ivor stopped again, just a few feet away, looking down at her sad, annoying face. Her hair was wild and distracting. He repeated himself, slowly, allowing his anger to drip out of every word. ‘What the fuck are you doing in here?’

Without looking she pointed back at the blank screen. ‘What was that?’, she said, with unmistakable enmity. He started to respond that it didn’t matter, that she didn’t belong here, but she cut him off. ‘You *lied* to me. You told me he was here. You told me I would see him again.’ Tears were running into her mouth and spraying out again as she spat out her words. ‘You’re a shit. A horrible fucking shit.’

Ivor felt like slapping her. The little ungrateful brat. But he needed to keep himself under control, to find out why she was in here. He clenched his fist and said, with difficult reserve, ‘What were you doing? Just now. Why are you in here?’

Fugue stared at him, almost as if challenging him to look away. After a while she replied back derisively, ‘I was seeing B. One last time. Just

like you promised.'

'Do you realize what kind of damage you might do to it? That is a delicate experiment.'

'Damage? Me? I didn't put that crap in his head. I didn't send him off into space. To be alone, forever. You and this whole place are the ones doing the damage.'

'You were just as much a part of it as anyone.' He wanted to provoke her. Maybe she'd let something slip. At the very least she might quit acting so righteous. 'Where do you think all that shit that's running in its head came from?'

'Screw you,' she said, 'if I had known what was going on I would have made sure that none of it worked. I would never have let you take B. I would have let you find somebody else to be your code bitch.' She stood up, moving sideways to get around him. Ivor grabbed her sweatshirt arm and pulled her back.

'Where do you think you're going? You're going to stay right here and explain what you did.'

Fugue shook her arm, but Ivor held tight, jerking her back in front of him.

'I'm not telling you *shit*. I'm leaving. I quit.'

'Not with this you're not.' Ivor grabbed the badge hanging around her neck and yanked it, expecting it to break away. Instead, it pulled Fugue forward and she stumbled onto her hands and knees, Ivor still holding the badge, lanyard pulled taught around her neck. 'Take it off,' he said, pulling on it with contempt. He thought of kicking her, or spitting on her, or pulling out that freakish rainbow tangle, but she got free of the lanyard and scooted away, stumbling awkwardly to her feet and shuffling back, facing him the whole time. He called after her, raging, 'You loser. You'll end up less than your uncle. Your life never meant shit. You're a zero, a big fat zero.' She was already out the exit, though, and he was left yelling at a blank door.

Furious and afraid that she might try to steal something from the other side of the building, Ivor ran after her, scrambling through the double doors and looking for any sign of her. He ran to the front and saw that her bike was gone. Angrily, he stuck his key in the lock and engaged the entrance door's security bolt, kicking the frame in frustration. He looked at her badge in his hand and threw it away in disgust, returning to the rest area.

He went over to the terminal that Fugue had been at to see if he could figure out what she had done. She had shut it down so he turned it on,

waiting for it to boot up. He should have known better than to hire a washed up high schooler for real work. He could have probably done a better job than she did, and that little punk had ended up being nothing but trouble. Why did he keep calling her little? Short, yes, but not little. How does someone that age get like that? Not on the wage they were paying her. Must be nice to have a support fund to feed your whims. And what was the deal with that hair? That couldn't be cheap either. Ivor wondered how she got it to lay diagonally across her head like that. Whatever the technique, she surely spent a bunch of money to make herself look stupid. Wouldn't have been the first time. She sure had a knack for making herself look crummy. Like her outfits. They were a cross between 1970s budget camper and acid-washed indigo dump. Her complete lack of respect for her appearance pissed him off further. She was one of those people who were just doomed to be unfit.

What was taking so long with this computer? Ivor checked the power cord and then the connection to the monitor. He reset the box and waited. That little—that pudge didn't know how good she could have had it. Sure, she wasn't going to see that dog. Sometimes life is just hard like that. But they were going to cut her loose with a good recommendation. PhRI was getting a full contract, a rec from them would be worth a lot. She wouldn't have to be stuck in this HS crap anymore, he was ready to set her free. But she had to go screw it all up just so she could get a look at that gimp. She had messed it up more than anyone by trying to hide that leg wound. God, she could be so stupid. It was amazing how the mind could warp reality so that screwed-up shit became normal, normal life screwed-up. For some people what they wanted to see was what they saw, no sense of the truth right in front of their face.

What was wrong with this computer? Fugue had probably fouled something up. She could make a mess out of things just walking by them. Ivor decided to go to his office, to see if he could trace what she did from there. As he got up he looked at the big screen and thought about the two dogs. How much did Fugue actually know? She'd better not talk, at least not before the experiment was through. They might have to speed up the timetable, to avoid her creating any problems. Once it was done it was done, but they didn't need any hassle before they started. And why did she have Luvah's picture up there? Why would she need anything with that old dog. As he walked down to his office he thought about how much he hated that both those dogs' names. Phreeto and Luvah? It was like a Kreuzen curse. The old man had called her G\_\_\_, which was

just awful, and then they'd almost named her Laika 2.0, which was even worse. Fred starts calling her Luvah as a joke and then it sticks. Why couldn't they just use normal names, like Todd? Too bad the best name in the house is with a foghead that they couldn't get rid of.

Ivor clicked on the light to his office and leaned over to turn on his computer when there was a giant crash. It was around the other end of the hallway, like metal scraping, hammering, twisting. It sounded awful. Without a thought, he ignored his computer and ran towards the racket to see what was happening.

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The ribbon appeared unexpectedly, not from the sky but the ground. A deep well of colors bursting from the dirt straight up through the air, neither curving nor following the landscape, just pouring forth towards a vertical, infinite vanishing point. The tree stood behind it, swaying, dimming, coaxing him not towards it but downwards, to the impossible brilliance that disappeared into a below, a mystery he could not ignore.

Bē leapt forward, into the intersection point, digging and tearing at the ground. The colors began to pull away and fade as he dug deeper and deeper, going down until he hit something, scraping around to loose it from the earth. It was a mass, neither large nor small, of indeterminate shape, grey and rough, bright and smooth, impenetrable yet fractured. There was a soft sound within it, something familiar, something necessary. Bē pulled on the heap, dragging it out of the hole, thrashing it around. His head whipped, his jaws clenched, he pulled at it with his paws, dug at it with his teeth. He had to open it, to remove its treasures.

Suddenly he felt the need to take it someplace else, someplace that would be better for destruction. He ran off, following no lead but his instincts. The tree remained in front, but it was following him, leading a path that he was defining. As he ran he clamped down on the bulk, crushing it, occasionally swinging it around. The wind was howling now, the clouds turning darker. Bē was running, zooming uncontrollably, and then he stopped. This was the right place. It was little different than any other. A field, grass, hills. But this was where he needed to be. He tore into the thing again, gaining greater purchase, pulling at newly formed fissures, burrowing deeper, harder, through its outer shell towards the irresistible sanctum.

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Stumbling backward, Ivor tried to consider his options: run into a nearby room, or just run away. His mind was frozen — either from shock or panic — unable to make a decision. He continued to backpedal, nearly falling, slamming into the wall, facing the beast, waiting dumbly to confirm it was coming for him.

The DoppelBot took a sharp 90° turn, and headed towards an office. Kate's office. Now knowing that he wasn't being stalked, Ivor's fear subsided slightly and he tried to make sense out of what he was seeing. Why was it doing this? What was controlling it? What were those noises from before? A mechanical appendage reached out and grabbed the handle, jiggling it up and down then violently throwing open the door. It quickly drove inside and there was a large smash followed by another and another. The DoppelBot exited the office and moved rapidly across the hall, entering Fred's with similar ferocity. Ivor shuffled towards it, wary but more concerned with what this thing was doing to the lab. A horrendous din hammered at his ears. Ivor was almost to Kate's office when the DoppelBot emerged, made another quick turn and paused, its sensor panel staring right at him. He backed against the wall, absurdly hoping that it didn't see him, hoping it would pass him by. It rolled down next to him, turned away, and thrashed its way into Keith's office. Ivor watched dumbfounded as the robot punched through a monitor, a brief flash followed by a wisp of smoke that trailed behind the destroyed screen as it was flung onto the ground. Without hesitation the next monitor was similarly busted, then two furious poundings from a hinged mallet caused a laptop to explode into shards of plastic and electronics. The robot backed up slightly and two tubes extended downwards, pulled back, and pumped up and down, smashing a workstation onto the desk, demolishing both (along with an unlucky keyboard and anti-fatigue mouse) into a heap of deformed metal and ruined computer.

As the DoppelBot finished ravaging Keith's stuff, Ivor backed away, glancing down the hall, realizing the next room across the way was Spud. *Shit!* It was bad enough that this thing was tearing everything up, but if it hurt a dog, that could be a publicity nightmare. He could lock the door — he patted his pants and jacket, feeling for his keys. Where were they? Just as he remembered leaving them in his office there was a terrible silence and then a high pitched whirring. He thought about stepping in and blocking Spud's door. No, no reason to risk getting hurt. Let it have the dog and he might be able to lock the others while the DoppelBot was distracted.

It wheeled out into the hall but did not cross all the way across, turn-

ing instead and zipping down the hall away from Ivor. Down it went, past multiple rooms, rooms with dogs, empty rooms, straight back to the corner where it jiggered an entrance into one of the conference rooms. Ivor watched in shock, just barely able see it laying into a computer in the far side of the room. Computers, it was going for the computers.

*Fugue.* It had to be her. She had set this thing up to wreck things, but skip the animals. That bitch. He felt a fury rise inside him again, imagined yanking out that dumb fucking hair. What was wrong with her?

He pushed the thought aside. Right now he needed to deal with the DoppelBot. How could he stop it? There was probably a power switch somewhere, but he didn't know where, and he wasn't about to get close enough to find out. He needed to get on the network, to see what she did. He sprinted down the hall — down around the corner, barely peeking into the conference room where an oversized video screen was being torn from a wall, past rooms for which he fleetingly tried to inventory the presence of electronics, through the entrance to his office. Ivor locked his door behind him and leapt into his seat. The lock screen was different than normal — a generic view of green hills and blue sky. He entered his password. ACCESS DENIED He tried again, and again was refused. He took a deep breath and typed slowly, deliberately. p-h-r-i-g-u-y-#-1 Still ACCESS DENIED . The password box disabled and turned grey. He gritted his teeth and yelled out, banging his fist on the desk.

Ivor didn't know what to do. The crashing, though slightly muffled, made it impossible to concentrate. He looked around, grasping for ideas, and saw his phone. Who could he call? Not the cops, there was nothing they could do and having them back here would just be a mess. Dee. She'd be able to help. He scrambled around for his phone list and dialed her number. It rang, seemingly endlessly it rang, Ivor begging her to pick up, the noise from outside the door getting closer, where was she? It switched to voice mail and Ivor slammed the receiver down in frustration and immediately regretted it. Argh! He should have left a recording, let her know what was going on. He could call someone else — maybe Kate, she would know how to turn it off. But what if she didn't pick up either? He didn't want to waste any time.

Inspiration struck: he could sent them a group message. Someone was sure to come. He pulled out his phone. The cellblock! He couldn't do anything on this side. Ivor looked at the door, the banging had stopped. He waited, then heard a racket coming from across the way, in Dee's

office. He ran out, closing the locked door behind him, intentionally ignoring whatever chaos was happening in front of him. He cut a tight turn towards the security door and managed to lose his footing, falling to the floor, slamming hard onto his side. His hip spiking with pain, he limp-crawled out through the doors to the other side. Laying on his back, trying to catch his breath and ignore the throbbing ache radiating from where he landed, he sent a quick message to the staff:

PhRI: Dopple gone crazy  
wrecking lab  
help

Laying his head back, Ivor looked at the front door of the building and remembered that he'd locked it. Nobody would be able to get in. He reached into his pocket. *Shit!* He'd left his keys in his office. Using the emergency exits would alarm and call in emergency services, which he didn't want — at least not right now. He was going to have to go back and get his keys. He stood up, crying out at the fire tearing at his hip, badging himself back into the rest area.

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He'd been running and thrashing and snapping and running again. Getting closer every time, but this was it. Bē was sure of it. He could feel it, just out of reach, moving around in front of him as he nosed after it. There was a sound — unusual, just barely perceptible, but something that he almost knew. He dug in with greater ferocity, began to go *inside*, was almost completely surrounded by the shapeless, textured thing. He bit down at it and pushed with his paws, enjoying the pressure they exerted, feeling the strength surge up through his shoulders and neck. Something began to give and he pressed and pulled harder, sinking further, shaking with the effort, angry but not mad, unable to stop.

With a great tear the barrier ripped open and he was in. He grabbed the prize with his mouth and again it seemed that he knew what it was, but couldn't place it. It was dark and cramped, so he stretched out, shook himself, holding onto the treasure and trying to throw the surrounding matter out and away. A bubble formed around him, he sensed the mass lifting off of him as it turned transparent and then evaporated. He was left standing in the field, breathing hard with satisfaction and glory. He put down the object and stepped back.

*It was his collar.*

The feel in his mouth. The sound. The smell. It all made sense now. Why hadn't he remembered? It didn't matter now. He ran around it excitedly, nuzzling at it, trying to lift it over his face. He flicked his head and it tossed up, stopping mid-air, swinging a few feet in front of him, as if it was being worn by another, invisible dog. Bē walked forward and the collar approached at the same pace, closer until it was right at his nose and he reached in to sniff it but it kept moving in until it was around his neck. It cinched tight and at first he thought he was being choked, almost like it was being yanked by something. However he had just forgotten what it was like to wear it, and after a minute he felt fine, in fact he felt glorious. It was fantastic to have the tags bouncing against his chest, their tingling ringing in his ears. He was as happy as he'd ever remembered.

There was a flash and Bē looked up. The tree was in front of him, as it had been the whole time, but now it had no color, or rather it was a silhouette within all colors. Pulling his focus back, he realized there was a giant, semi-transparent cylinder in between him and the tree, its surface striped with the colors, massively round and extending up forever into the sky. It was rippling and crackling, its ribbons turning and twisting in slow, hypnotic waves. He could tell that it did not end at ground level, but continued on, through the grass and into to the dirt. He could not see where it stopped but he knew it was not deep, and that there was another treasure there. Bē zoomed ahead, running into the circle, the colors surrounding him, prickling at his fur. An energy ran from the air through the collar into his body and out of his paws, their white tips aglow with colors he'd never known. He was at the center of the cylinder, and he began to pull at the ground, attempting to dig out the new secret. The ground wasn't dirt or grass, though, it moved together, like a fabric, like a blanket laid across the surface. He yanked and scratched and bit at it, but it would not open. He needed to get beneath it, he needed to find its edge. He moved away from the center, head down, eyes alert, sniffing and scraping at the ground, searching for a way to get under.

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Ivor limped into the rest area to see the DoppelBot struggling at his office entrance, shaking the locked handle up and down in a blur but unable to open the door. He wondered if there was a way to distract it, to get it to move on to something else so that he could get his keys. *His keys.* Shit! How was he going to unlock his door with his keys inside?

How could he have been so stupid? Frustrated and nervous about the marauder, he was about to relent and go back to the other side — maybe he could break a window or accept having to use an emergency exit — when the DoppelBot flicked out its hammer and with one strike pounded off the handle and bashed the door which flew open with a sharp crack and a spray of splinters.

The robot disappeared into his office and Ivor stumbled over, hoping that perhaps his keys had fallen and that he could pick them up and escape without being injured. When he got to the entrance not only were they nowhere to be seen but the room was already in tatters. His bookshelves had been pulled down and a whirlwind of papers and trinkets were flying around, the DoppelBot almost hidden by the swirling mess. His desk was upended, landing with a crash that was followed by a horrible crunching noise as something (Ivor thought it was his computer, but it might have been an air purifier) was being laid into with his oversized executive chair. He felt violated and exposed — in the other rooms it had only gone for the computers but here it was destroying *everything*. How was that fair? He seethed, wanting to just go up and just break that stupid thing apart. It was irritating to be so helpless and he imagined dragging Fugue back here to witness what she'd done and then throwing her into the wreckage to be broken up herself. But all he could do was stand there stupidly, watching a spinning arm obliterate a machine-reproduced Magritte, old textbooks get shredded into a confetti of senseless equations and fragmented ideas, a tabletop metal sculpture of Anubis bent into an unnatural form. He searched for his keys again but within the tumult found it impossible.

Then Ivor remembered — there was an extra set of office keys in the server room, a room that was badge-secured. That was deep at the end of the hall's spiral, away from any exits, but all he could think about was unlocking the front door, regaining the freedom which he'd inadvertently cut himself off from. He took off, leaving the thunderous annihilation of his possessions behind him, heading deeper into the building, grasping at the wall for support but no longer feeling any pain, anesthetized by adrenaline and a newfound agency.

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Bē had found a lip and was pawing at it aggressively, trying to pull it back. The surface was moving but there was no gap between the two grounds — he could tell they were not one, but he could not separate

them. He followed the edge, scratching and biting as he moved along it, frustrated at the apparent seamless seam. He came upon a corner and dug at it madly, spinning and searching for a weakness. His tooth caught something and he clamped down hard and lifted, hearing a faint rip which became louder as he increased his effort, rending a tear in the fabric as the ground folded back over on itself.

Without hesitation he leapt into the divide, struggling to pull his round body through the small gap. Once under, Bē scratched and writhed his way through the darkness, following an instinctual zig-zag path, thrashing in equal parts excitement and claustrophobic panic, fighting to keep moving and avoid his tube being crushed by the earth above him. Any sense of direction or time vanished as he pressed and squeezed and rolled and reversed until he was sure he'd completely lost his way but kept going, led by an intuition and fever that propelled him somewhere inside that endless black cave.

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Even from halfway down the hall Ivor knew he wouldn't need his badge to get into the server room. The door was leaning out into the hall, hanging precariously on one of its hinges. It was a heavy door, thick and dense, used to dampen the roar of cooling equipment that now poured out of the doorway in high-pitched and low-pitched screams of desperation. As he approached, stumbling, he worried that the keys had gotten damaged or, even worse, flung someplace unknown, forcing him on a hunting mission.

When he got up to the entrance a loud blast of cold air poured across his face and through squinted eyes he saw the keys hanging from a hook on the far wall. He felt a moment of relief before realizing that the path back to it was filled with racks of computers that had been smashed and bent and toppled into an unstable and dangerous pile. Even though he'd seen multiple examples of the DoppelBot's destruction, the sheer power and fury evident in the rubble before him was shocking. Ivor scanned the room and noticed a single untouched rack off to his right, a monolith standing alone amidst a debris field. It was the central control, holding the computers that ran the internal network, primary data storage, and master processing nodes. Even with everything else wrecked, it alone would be able to run the lab's basic systems. It being left unscathed had to be intentional.

The path to the rack was clear and Ivor's first instinct was to just unplug everything, supposing that doing so would cause the DoppelBot

to shut down. However, as he stepped into the room he was second guessing himself, wondering if the robot was running autonomously. He limped over towards the rack, crossing a jet of icy air that was being thrown out by an air conditioning unit on the opposite side of the room. Its rushing noise along with the incessant whirring of the fans from the undamaged computers echoed across the bare walls in a deafening clamor. At the rack, Ivor searched across the blinking lights and metal chassis, finding it difficult to locate the power buttons that he wasn't even sure he wanted to use. Up at the top, taped onto a screen on a swivel support, was a yellow piece of paper with carefully printed bold writing:

**nimda Fr33Y|Mind&RestW1llFallow**

The administrator username and password — would that still work? He might still be able to stop whatever Fugue did. Ivor pulled out the keyboard tray and carefully typed in the credentials, focusing on his fingers to make sure he got everything right. <Enter> The machine logged into a prompt. Success! His mind spun, trying to think where to start. Then he saw a shadow peek in on the dull glare of the screen and realized there was another whine amid the cacophony, something he knew, something he'd just heard. He whipped around right as the DoppelBot reached through him at the remaining computers. His head was crushed against the rack, his skull buckling under the pressure, the sound of tearing metal shrieking in his ears as his body was wrenched away and his spine stretched until it could hold no longer.

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He'd found it. Bē had no idea where it came from but it was in his mouth and that was it. He'd been tearing around in the dark, feeling an increasing sense of panic and urgency when suddenly he'd snagged it though he continued to thrash around for a while before realizing it. All he had to do now was get out. He looked around for a way to escape — a light or a smell or an intuition — but it was just empty blackness. He pushed his nose up to see if he could find a hole in the surface but there was nothing above him, just space. Instead of the pressure he felt release, and then he was standing on nothing, floating, unsure if he was moving or not. He could see nothing, not even his own paws. It was completely silent, there was no odor, his skin and fur had no feeling, he couldn't tell if he was able to control his body or was breathing or anything.

Then, all four of his feet felt something and what had seemed just then to be upside down was rightside up and it was light and he was back in the field and the grass was green and the sky blue though the sun was going down. Way off in the distance, almost at the horizon, he could see the tree, still glowing blue but with hints of iridescence. Bē opened his mouth and put down the treasure and stepped back to look at it. He already knew what it was, but it was fantastic to see it laying in the grass, freed from its strange prison by his devoted work. His mouth opened in a big smile and he bounded around, uttering spontaneous whines of anticipation. One end of the color-striped leash snaked across the ground, following his chaotic movements, rising up and attaching to his collar. The other end lifted into the air as if held by an invisible hand and began to lead him off on a walk across the field.

At first they were headed straight in the direction of the tree and Bē, knowing the destination, pulled on the leash, trying to get there faster. But the increased pace was not to be allowed and, after getting choked and yanked a few times, he modestly slowed down and fell into line. At some point they began to veer away from the tree, and although Bē was concerned he knew he had no need to fight, instead trusting the lead to walk him on the necessary path.

He wasn't sure how it happened. He was walking along through the grass, looking up at the descending sun, when there was a small rise and the leash pulled him to a stop. He looked down and was standing on a giant, light-colored mound, roughly six-sided, slightly dusty. Bē tried to step off but no matter how he moved he was standing on top of it. He sniffed at it and then licked it. He knew what it was, *exactly* what it was. It was huge, but there was no doubt it was one of those crunch treats that Mr. Krüzěn would eat. 'Here's a half shell for you,' he'd say, splitting it in two, giving the other piece to Mās. Warm memories and an unexpected hunger engulfed him, and without a second thought he stuck his snout down and bit into it, breaking through the hard shell and filling his mouth with crackling deliciousness. Hastily, he ate without pause, ravenous, violent, wild. It was just as dry and salty as he remembered, however his mouth water was enough and he never felt thirsty or choked and somehow, even though it was many times his size, he never felt full and was able to continue to chow down until the entire thing (which included both halves — what a lucky guy!) had gone down his gullet. He sniffed around licking up the last few crumbs and the minute he snagged the final one on his tongue the multicolored leash led him away, not exactly in the direction of the tree (which seemed to

have turned many colors now rather than just blue) but still vaguely heading towards it.

Then sun fell below the horizon and in that direction the sky turned a brilliant pinkish-orange. Bē was staring up at it, thinking it kind of looked tasty, and then a large black shadow split right down its middle which he almost ran into. He looked down and saw that it was a fat, brown-colored rod sticking up out of the ground, gnarled and twisted and hard. He sniffed at it and immediately remembered the treat that he'd long forgotten. *Pizzle*. He looked around, making sure nobody was around, then bit at it, stressing his jaws to dig into the resistant leather, pulling and snapping, his spit flowing and softening the texture into a gooey, stinky rope of delectability. As he chewed, the rod began to bend, wrapping itself around his nose and neck and body, squeezing him in a comforting embrace. Bē fell onto his side, gnashing and licking and swallowing, at once savoring and ferociously tearing, completely overcome with pleasure. More and more of the treat was consumed but there was still a long ways to go, and as the sky darkened the tree slowly approached from afar, directly in his line of sight, radiating its colors expectantly. Bē paused, growling at the presence, glaring and baring his teeth, wanting nobody and nothing else near him. When he was sure the tree was keeping its distance he continued his gnawing, knowing he'd eventually return to its welcoming branches but that there was plenty of time, that he still had much to get through.

## Chapter 21

### Settle Down

She sat in the warmly lit cave, watching him and enjoying his company. He looked back at her, seemingly content. Occasionally he would sigh or yawn, or get up and pace around a little before spinning slowly and plopping down comfortably in a new position. He always ended up facing her, eyes open, never seeming to sleep. This was something she remembered from when he was young, a behavior that many found irritating as nobody like to feel they are under constant observation. She knew he didn't mean anything bad by it, that it was just the way that he was, though at times she too had found it annoying and unsettling. But not now. She was happy to have him watching her, refusing to look away, being present, finally. So much time had been lost, this unexpected reunion was something to be enjoyed, not wasted on petty gripes about the personalities that define us.

She only wished he would come closer and lay by her. It was wonderful to see him again, looking exactly the same except all grown up, but now that he was here she longed for his touch, to feel his warmth, to have him cuddle into her lap again as she dozed. Lately she had been sleeping often, drifting in and out, finding it hard to stay awake for any extended period. When she had first seen him she thought she was dreaming, and not just because of his sudden appearance but the location as well. How she ended up in the tiny cave she did not know. For so long she had been in the grey room, alone in that featureless box where nothing happened, where everything was lit but there were no shadows, where she had expected to be trapped forever. Then one day she was in this little den, with a fire crackling behind her casting dark, flickering outlines of her unmoving body on the floor and walls. She couldn't get up anymore and she was finding it harder to breathe, yet whenever she woke in here

it felt good and right, a comfortable place to rest especially compared to that drab and cold room.

And, of course, he was here — her son. My son. It could have been any of her children, but she was glad it was him. He was the only one she had not seen get big, something she did not realize she cared about until he reappeared. They had a horrible separation which she worked to forget, in the process losing much of her memories of him, accepting the fact that he, just like everything else, was gone. He wasn't gone, though, he was here, the joy of her gaze, looking strong and healthy, bringing back feelings that his mother had not felt for a long, long time.

He yawned and let out a little whine. That was as much sound as she ever heard from him. She wished he would speak to her, but perhaps too much time had passed, perhaps there was nothing to say. She wasn't even certain she could speak herself. Waiting in that blank cell she had started talking to herself but eventually stopped, finding it easier to just accept the dullness of her existence than try to make something out of nothing. Her memories became abstract fragments, transformed from specific recollections to emotional content. Time ceased to be experienced. She forgot names, including her own. Before he arrived, she would have expected to remember him only as an idea or a feeling, that his physical form, the way he moved and acted, the evidence of his presence, that these things she had once known were lost forever.

Yet she *did* remember him, not in spirit but as an actual being, something that had coexisted with her before and now had returned. Here, in this cave, where so little was happening, she had made a profound transformation. Her son had rediscovered in her a sense of continuity for her life, a confirmation not only that it was not an illusion but also that she mattered, that she cared. She watched her son watching her, loving, treasuring her life again. Her eyes were heavy and she felt herself drifting, entranced by the orange glow and the unsteady shadows. He sighed deeply and she felt his breath waft over her for the first time. She inhaled and recognized his smell, unchanged from when he was little. She held it in as long as she could, feeling him within, warming her, until her lungs finally released and she slipped into eternal darkness.

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Pupa lay on her couch, staring at the ceiling, unsure what she was supposed to be doing with herself. Nothing had changed. The sky was just as bright as always, the world kept plugging along, she was just as

boring and friendless. And M was sitting over in the corner, ignoring her. She didn't understand how she could feel just as awful after as she did before, but she did. She actually felt worse. At least before she had a task, a goal she was working towards — now, she had nothing. She desperately wanted to do something, something interesting, something she could get excited about, but everything she could think of was just dumb or stupid or boring. She wished she could be like Post or one of his artist friends. They were so creative and smart, always coming up with fun little adventures or cool projects, able to talk endlessly about the most fascinating subjects. Lately Post had been asking her to hang out with him when he went out. He wanted her to help him in the store and said this was a way for her to get more knowledgeable about the product and the scene, but she felt he was actually just taking pity on her, trying to make her feel involved when in reality she was an interloper. She generally declined his offers, but the few times she went along the end result was her feeling even worse about herself. Everyone — especially Post — was very nice to her, but she would spend the whole time intimidated and out of her depth, barely able to follow the conversation, having nothing to offer except proof that she didn't belong. When she did talk (usually when asked a direct question, though a few times she had made the mistake of offering something unprompted) it was a disaster, a spew of idiocy that would either force an awkward pause until somebody found a way to ignore her comments and move on, or stir up feigned interest which quickly dissipated when her follow-on remarks showed her insights to be either a fluke or born out of ignorance.

Post wanted her to tag along with him tonight to attend a showing of an artist who had a few things for sale at *The Forgotten Basement*. Pupa had seen her a couple of times and she was, of course, absolutely stunning and totally fierce. She had developed some technique to fuse and reshape bones and used that to construct humanoid skeletons out of animal remains. The show tonight was a bunch of quasi-children made out of livestock that she called *Animal Farm*. It was probably going to be amazing and Pupa had no desire to go, knowing that it would only make her feel more inadequate and worthless, reinforcing the infinitude of the gap between what she wanted to be and what she actually was. Plus, the last thing anyone at the show wanted to see was some silent, unshapely weirdo creeping around, killing their vibe.

Maybe she should just go and buy one of her pieces. A lot of people enjoy the company of someone who spends money. But she knew she couldn't fool herself. She would be the same pitiful girl who only now

had friends because she'd paid for them. She thought of Gideon's silly business card hanging on her fridge, with the big gold-lettered ΔΕΩΠ and the hand-written "private line" on the back. Having all this money and giving a bunch to him had bought her some sort of "access" that she didn't care about or need. She hadn't earned anything and all it did was make her self-conscious, afraid to tell anyone — including Post — for fear that this would become her defining attribute. Pupa was certainly not upset at getting the payout, but she was already starting to feel that it was more a burden than the source of freedom that she had anticipated.

She looked over at M. He was curled up in his cage, snuggling on B's paws and collar. She felt so sorry for him. It was obvious that he missed B, but she had no way of telling him that he was gone, that she had fucked up and let him get away. She should have gone back that first night she got M, gone back and taken B away when she had the chance. Instead she puttered around like a trusting moron and let them lead her along until it was too late. She'd tried to give M some comfort by showing him a projection of B with the headset, an effort complicated by the fact that his head was so small and she had to jury rig things to get the equipment to fit. And, of course, he hated it, freaking out and yipping awfully until she removed it. He'd run back to his box and didn't bother coming out for dinner that night. Just like with B, she had completely blown it. It was as if her purpose on this planet was to make everything that she cared about more miserable. If she had never been around, all of this would have been avoided. M wouldn't be brokenhearted, stuck in this apartment. Gordolf wouldn't have had the money to stay open and would have been forced to close years ago, meaning B would never have gotten caught by him and cut up and taken to PhRI. Without her PhRI might not have existed the way it did.

PhRI. She had no remorse about it being gone, but she wondered what kind of suffering and torture she had facilitated by working for them so long. If somebody else had been there in her place, they surely would have had more sense to know what was *really* going on, or to at least ask or dig around. She just went along, doing what she was told, her foolishness and stupidity allowing her to be complicit in their abominable experiments. How many dogs were killed or had their minds wrecked because of *her* code? What kind of person did that make her? How could she expect anyone to have any respect for her? She hadn't even told Post most of what she'd done. She told herself it was to protect him in case there was any legal issues, but the truth was she was ashamed and afraid, unwilling to risk losing her only friend lest he dis-

cover her wretchedness.

And by now she was sure she had no legal concerns. The video that Gideon had seen was just the one she'd originally given to the police, that edited out her encounter with M. Any imagined culpability was erased forever. And not long ago Dee had come by the apartment wanting to talk. Up to that point there had been nobody — no police or insurance investigators or detectives — not a single person asking any questions. Ever since the day after, when Kate had called her tearfully to tell her that Ivor had died in a mysterious accident at the lab, she had expected to be confronted, to be told that they had evidence of her guilt. She had tried to set things up so that any direct connection with her was destroyed, but when Ivor had surprised her she was forced to initiate the plan without all the testing completed. She had hoped to have a couple more cycles to verify the sequence and confirm she hadn't missed anything. And say one final goodbye to B. Pupa began to tear up thinking about how she'd screwed that up too, being forced to sign off to a static image, never letting B (or Luvah) know that they still had a friend down here. She was planning on sending up the silly projection of her from B's first times in, a way to do a last farewell during which she could watch his reaction. Instead, her last memory of him was just a frozen picture and he probably never understood that she had not abandoned him.

She had been so mad at Ivor when he showed up that she wanted to make him hurt — not necessarily in a physical sense, but something just as bad. She wanted him to see all his work, his horrid, despicable work, destroyed in front of him. If he had not come in she would have been fine with him just coming upon the aftermath, but being interrupted and having him treat her like shit made her want him to *see* it. She should have warned him, somehow, but she was spiteful and because of that something happened and he was killed. Even after talking with Dee she wasn't sure exactly what occurred. She had come by not to discuss the incident, or to accuse Pupa, but rather to see what Pupa's plans were. Was she going to stay with HS? Would she stay in town? Pupa wasn't going to tell her about the insurance money, but she explained that she would be taking some time off and made up some bull about trying to get an equivalency diploma. Then Dee brought up the subject of references.

'Hon, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but one of the reasons I came over here was to make sure you didn't make the mistake of using PhRI as a reference. After the accident it doesn't have much of a reputation and it wouldn't be beneficial for you to highlight that you

worked there. Especially given that you were the *sole* software developer and software was the primary cause of the, um, mishap.'

Pupa was speechless. Was she liable for his death? She tried to act like she was being thoughtful about what had just been said, but her heart was blasting in her chest and she could feel sweat begin to prickle all over her body. Dee smiled, putting on that warm charm that even now, after all Pupa knew and what had just been told to her, was disarmingly comforting. Dee put a hand on Pupa's knee and she wondered if the older woman could feel the blood pounding through her veins.

'I can see you're getting a little upset,' Dee said, calmly. 'Don't. Nothing's going to happen. PhRI's over. We're all moving on. We just need to be sure you're moving on too.' She took Pupa's hand in both of hers. Pupa felt the urge to pull it back and wipe it on her shirt, to hide her guilty perspiration. 'You're a good kid, Vanessa. None of us want to see you have any negative consequences from this. The best way to ensure that happens is to separate yourself from the whole situation. Forget that PhRI ever existed.'

Pupa nodded, looking into Dee's face. She knew that everyone at PhRI despised her, and that whatever line she was being fed right now was crap. They wouldn't worry about her, so they must be worried about themselves. Whatever the reason, she was happy to oblige. PhRI was gone and she didn't want to think about it anymore anyway. If that meant she was off the hook, all the better.

Dee seemed pleased with her response. She continued, 'There's one more thing I need to ask. You don't have any leftover equipment from the lab, do you? We need to collect everything so that we can destroy it.'

Pupa had the laptop and headset she'd brought home for M, and when he'd flipped out she stuffed it in a closet. She didn't need it anymore but, despite what Dee was saying, she worried that they would try to pin a theft charge (or worse) on her. Or that maybe there was something on there to connect her with Ivor's death. She shook her head. 'Nothing. I never brought anything home.'

'Not even your badge, huh?'

Pupa felt the blood drain from her face. Ivor had taken it from her that night.

Dee grinned smoothly, throwing a kindly wink. 'I told you, no need worry about it, just as long as you move on. You know, honey, you got real talent, it'd be a shame to see you waste it. Now, come here and say goodbye.' Pupa got up and gave her a stiff hug. 'You take care of yourself, you hear? This whole situation is very unfortunate but you're lucky it

happened when you were so young. You've got your whole life ahead of you.'

As she turned to go Pupa wanted to ask her about B but knew she couldn't, not without exposing herself. She tried something more generic: 'What about the dogs?' Dee stared at her without speaking, not like she was formulating an answer but as if she were investigating Pupa, searching for secrets. 'I mean, did the dogs in the lab get hurt along with Ivor?'

Dee looked past Pupa at M's cage and said dryly, 'The dogs are fine. You just forget about them, and everything else too.' Turning back to Pupa she said, 'Including me,' and with a wistful smile left the apartment.

So she had no way of knowing whether or not her plan had succeeded, if the final steps had happened. PhRI was gone, but they had partnered with other companies for the satellites, so control could be handed off. The end programs should have initiated whether or not the antennas were removed, but if they were not, somebody would surely remove the scenes she had created. And if Dee was being truthful and they were really trying to remove all traces of PhRI, then they would probably send the satellites back to Earth, burning up the evidence along the way.

The whole situation was distressing. It was impossible to know how things turned out. She had tried her best and hoped that it had ended well, but all she had was faith. There was no way to ever know the truth. At nights, after crying herself to sleep, she would often dream of the scenes she had constructed, the projections and adventures, things intended to make B happy and stimulated and loved. In her dreams she was B, running through the fields, finding the prizes, not alone. She had no idea how B would actually experience it, with the implants and the AI, but in her vision it was pure pleasure, and for a few fleeting seconds after she woke she would feel deep hope, a belief that she had done right. Sometimes she would even be Luvah, a dog she did not know, whose interface was limited, a lonely dog given a last little bit of companionship. Those dreams were wonderful too, making her feel warm and purposeful, the way you do after performing a good deed for a stranger.

If only she could sleep forever. It was so much nicer than the real world. Pupa wiped her eyes on her sleeve and looked around the room. It was dingy and rundown. She didn't know why she was still here. She had plenty of money, she could buy her own place if she liked, yet she had no motivation to leave. This was where she belonged. There

was going to be no magical transformation — she could move, buy new things, do whatever she wanted, but she would still be the same person. The same dumpy, ugly, stupid loser. You can't buy friends. Changing your name doesn't make you any different. Maybe she would go back to Vanessa. Hearing Dee call her that had actually felt pretty natural. Pupa was a hopeless aspiration anyway.

She took a deep breath, trying not to break down. Even considering changing her name back was making her feel worse, like she was giving up. She kicked at the arm of the couch in frustration. Why couldn't anything go right for her? Was she not allowed to be happy? Gideon had told her she was lucky, that she had it made. She had a couple million in the bank. If she was so lucky, then why did she feel so horrible? Instead of all this money she wished she had a reason to feel good about herself. What was wrong with her? Pupa looked over at M again, blurred with tears, watching him lick B's paws. Maybe she should find him a new home. Clearly he didn't like her. If she kept him around, selfishly waiting for him to fill the hole he wasn't meant to fit, she was just going to screw up his life too. She would find him a new owner and leave, go away, disappear.

Her phone buzzed. She reached over and picked it up.

Post: Hi P  
You sure you don't want to go?  
It's going to be an osteoblast!

Pupa: Im not feeling it tonight  
Sorry

Post: Karn will be sad  
She likes you

Pupa: Im sure  
Tell her next time

Post: There will be people there  
who would get a kick out of  
hearing your crazy story

Good god. The last thing she wanted to talk about was her messed-up life. Post kept pushing on her about how interesting it was except he never seemed to understand that for her it was just tragedy. She didn't want one of his art buddies turning it into some movie or comic book or limited-edition figurine. Post told her the best art came from real life but she couldn't allow this. It would be devastating. Trash. There was no way she was going tonight.

Post: Want me to pick you up?

Pupa: No  
Ill see you tomorrow

Post: You're really coming to work?  
No skipping?

Pupa: Promise

Post: You better be there  
I'll have some of Karns  
pieces from tonite

Pupa: I promise

Post: You better not flake  
Or you'll miss some pictures of  
vertebro  
cowboy  
mandibull  
sweet child o' spine  
shortcrib  
metacarpgirl  
and billyum goat, the bone kid

Pupa: Wow I cant wait

Post: Just trying to be a little  
humerus  
See you tomarrow

Pupa turned her phone off. They both knew she wasn't going to get up and go in. It was just an excuse to skip out of tonight. She'd only made it to two shifts and none in the past week. Post really wanted her to work at the *Basement* but he didn't understand how deeply unmotivated she was. She really liked him, she loved the store, but having to go to work and deal with people and be responsible was just loathsome to her right now. And it wasn't just the insurance money (which, of course, Post didn't know about), it was also that she was afraid to show Post how little she actually cared. Six months ago it would have been her dream job and now it felt like an obligation that she only wanted to escape from. Pupa felt ashamed, having no rational reason for being this way and thus no way to explain it. Post probably thought she was trying to blow him off or being needlessly moody. Pretty soon he was likely just going to give up on her and he had every right to.

She began to sob, her arms hanging listlessly at her side, heaving uncontrollably, tears and snot pouring down her face. She cried out

into the darkening room, despairing and lonely, repulsed and humiliated and unhappy with herself, begging for sleep to take her away. She was exhausted and sick of crying but unable to relax enough to rest. Her head hurt, her eyes stung, her soul screamed as she wailed out at nobody to come and bring her peace.

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Püpə was watching him. Just laying there, unmoving, staring. Mās stared back, wondering what her deal was. She spent tons of time over there, doing nothing, mumbling to herself, rolling around like she was uncomfortable. If it was that bad why didn't she go to her bed? At first he thought she might be sick, except he'd seen humans get ill before and she wasn't wrapping herself up in blankets or coughing or puking into a trashcan. Mr. Krüzēn had acted like this, but for shorter periods and always while zoning out in front of the television. Püpə didn't even have a big one like Mr. Krüzēn and Mās only saw her use her portable one in rare spurts. In a lot of ways she reminded him of Bē when he was tubing — seemingly aware yet totally checked out at the same time. Though he did often catch her sleeping, snoring loudly, her eyes closed. If there was one thing he didn't miss about Bē it was his creepy, ever-present stare.

He was actually happy that she wasn't going off to bed. He was getting used to having her not leave him alone every night. Especially now that she barely spoke to him anymore and had stopped trying to pet him, even when he was eating. Mās had been waiting for their inevitable separation, girding himself for the day when she would be gone from his life just like everyone else, and hadn't expected her to respond with a similar level of detachment. Just living in the same space with barely any interaction was making him feel incredibly, unexpectedly lonely. He wished she would just come on over and give him a nice pat-pat, or a good neck rub. Every day when she fed him he'd turn his body in her direction and look at her expectantly, practically begging her give him one of those massages that he used to find so irritating. Whereas before he was afraid of getting too attached, now he found himself longing for a connection, any connection. But she basically just ignored him, giving him food and letting him out to potty and otherwise hanging out in her own bubble. Pōst had given him more attention than she did now, and sometimes Mās wondered if there was a way to get sent back to him.

Perhaps he should just run away. The regular meals and safe shelter were great, but his loneliness was beginning to wear on him. He wasn't

sure if they would take him back, but he'd really love to see Flóps and the gang — or perhaps Tôrō — again, even just once. But there was always time for that. Right now, his main reason for sticking around was Püpə's magic crown. One day — this was when she was still pushing to bond with him — she had pulled out this strange black thing that looked a little like a harness but fitted over his head. It was uncomfortable and kept slipping off but she did something with a towel and a leash to make it secure. Once it was on he couldn't see or hear anything and he tried picking at the straps to pull it off until he felt Püpə gently grab his legs and hold him down.

Then the magic happened. He was outside, in a big field with a clear sky and bright sun. And most amazing, Bē was there, right in front of him. Lying in the grass. Staring at him with those big, always-open eyes, ears perked up, head resting on his paws. He called out to him — 'Dō! Dō! Brä!' — but he didn't respond, just sat there in a full tube. Excitedly, Mās started jumping towards him and around him but anytime he got close Bē slid away somehow, maintaining a separation. Mās continued to holler for him and then, unexpectedly, Bē stood up, did a strange stretch (Mās always knew him to do a front-legs-first-then-back thing which finished with some stiff kicking, but this was more of a back arch, like he was a cat), circled a few times, and then plopped back down, facing right at him again. Mās had begun to realize this was not real, but he still cried for his friend, 'Brä! Dō! Bē!', hoping that he would show a response, wishing to hear his voice one more time. It was then that Püpə removed the crown and Mās ran off to his cage, trying to understand what had just happened.

In the cage, Mās buried his nose into the paws, sniffing and licking, closing his eyes and imagining he was touching Bē again, that the rest of his friend was right there. With his face pressed into those feet, in their coarse fur and comforting odor, he realized that whatever he'd just experienced had no smell or sensation of touch. It was some sort of trick, like a dream without sleeping, or a memory from outside. Yet it was amazing. It brought back vivid memories — of going on walks with Mr. Krüzēn, of living on the streets together, even of the first *Den Rule* he had to teach him, when he was making a big fuss about having to share his dog bed with Mās, fighting against being moved from his impossibly inconvenient and space-consuming position.

*Rule iii: push and shove all you want, but no biting!*

Mās had sat in his cage the rest of the day, uninterested in eating or any-

thing else, reminiscing about Bē, feeling closer to him than he had since they were separated.

He knew it wasn't real, yet he desperately wanted to wear the crown again. He didn't like the place he'd gone to — the ultra-blue sky and impossibly green grass were maudlin and fake — but Bē's company would make it easy to ignore the annoying surroundings. However, after that day, he never saw it again. He didn't know what Pūpə had done with it or how he could get her to bring it back out. He tried to hint by snuggling with the paws and collar, making a point to show her how much he missed him. Perhaps if he waited long enough she would give him another chance. It was definitely worth waiting for.

But it wasn't easy. Pūpə had begun disengaging soon after he wore the magic crown and, combined with his revitalized yet unfulfilled connection with Bē, his loneliness was becoming oppressive. He looked at her. She was yelling and flailing around, digging her feet into the couch, clearly upset. He was still afraid of attachment, reluctant to expose himself to more heartbreak. However, it made no sense for them to be miserable in here together. Maybe he would get lucky and they wouldn't have to separate, especially given that she had the crown. The enticing thought of a forever relationship began to prickle at his mind. At the very least he'd been left alone many times before and knew he could handle it. It was horrible, but so was laying here, wallowing in solitude, refusing friendship for fear of an uncertain misfortune.

Mās stood up. He looked at the paws and collar, considered taking them up to her in a blatant appeal for the magic crown. He didn't want to risk being disappointed right now, though. He wasn't sure she would accept him but he was even less sure she'd let him see Bē again. Yet he did not *need* to see him, Bē *already* lived on, in his paws and collar, wherever the magic crown was, in memories. As long as Mās existed, so did his friend.

So he left them, walking out of the cage and over to the couch. Pūpə was shaking slightly and making loud, agonized noises, her arm off to the side, hand resting on the ground. He walked over and sniffed at her fingers, nuzzling up against them. She stopped crying out and he looked up at the silence to see her staring at him, her face red and swollen, her eyes sad and unsure. Feeling nervous but hopeful, Mās pressed against her hand again.

'Oh Ęm.'

She picked him up and smothered him, burying her face into his little body and burying him somewhere between her and the couch. He

couldn't move and it was hard to breath though also warm and comfortable. He felt her breath on his face, pulsing and moist, and he managed to wrangle his head around enough so that he could lick at her, enjoy her scent, taste the salty water and glop on her face. She squeezed harder and he licked faster, enraptured by the long-delayed moment of shared affection, relieved that she felt as he did and overjoyed to be touching another. He hoped that soon he'd be able to see Bē again, to put on the crown and have another virtual meeting with his best buddy, but for now, getting crushed and smothered by Püpə, feeling the embrace of a new friend, that was going to be just fine.

*Rule xv: it takes but one friend to have a den*

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The sun rose up from behind the horizon, but he was already awake. The sky had been lightening, a hazy purple hinting at the coming day, but now it turned its full blue as the bright disc breached the hill line. The gloom of night was replaced with the clarity of the day, the world lighting up all around him. With it came the views and smells and sensations — endless grass, the slight breeze, the sun's warmth. Bē took a deep breath and tasted the air. Even though he couldn't see it, it was everywhere, in front and behind and above and beyond and inside. No matter where he went it would be there. Where would he go today? He didn't know. He'd just have to wait and see what he chose.

Bē leaned back and looked up at the tree. He was laying at its base and as he brought his head near its trunk the colors filled his vision, turning everything into bands of blue and green and orange and red. Fyüg's voice whispered to him, falling from the blowing leaves, its tone and words a mystery, nonetheless a deeply comforting presence. He stretched back, rubbing his neck against the rough bark. A branch reached out and began to scratch his belly, right where he itched, right where he needed. It pulled back and he snapped his mouth, tapping it lightly with an outstretched paw. The branch stopped its retreat and went back to its deep, relaxing massage.

With all of Bē's movement there was a stirring, and he felt something slip out from behind him. He looked over to see Mās stand up, yawning and shaking his little body. The chihuahua turned to him with a slightly irritated expression, his black body tinged with yellow from the colors.

'Seriously Dō? Don't you ever sleep in? It would have been nice to get a few more hours of rest before you started rolling all over me.'

‘Sorry,’ Bē said, sheepishly. He lay back again, letting the branch get under his chin. ‘Next time I’ll tell the sun to wait a little longer to come up.’

‘Very funny.’

‘Maybe you shouldn’t stay up so late.’

‘You know that I went to bed the same time as you. I think you just haven’t learned to sleep. You might try closing your eyes once in a while, it’s pretty nice.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Mās had been busting his chops about always being awake since when they lived with Mr. Krüzēn. He slept plenty — why was it his fault that Mās never saw it? The real problem was that Mās slept too much. He needed to learn how to relax during the day. Someday Bē would teach him to tube, if he’d slow down and take the time to listen.

‘Well, since I’m up,’ Mās walked over to look in Bē’s face, stepping all over his body and legs as if he didn’t realize he was there, ‘I might as well go get the crew. Why don’t you get up and help me?’ Mās began to tap Bē’s paw rapidly, signaling some kind of urgency.

‘No, I’m okay. I want to rest for a while longer.’

‘So you get up, and get me up, but now you won’t get up.’

‘What’s the rush? Just come over here and lay down. I promise I’ll sit still and let you sleep some more.’

‘You’re incorrigible, Brä.’ Mās turned and looked out over the landscape. ‘If you want to just sit there and be lazy, be my guest. I’m going to get things started.’

Without looking back, Mās trotted off, acting like he was performing some important duty. Whatever. He was the one who wanted to sleep in. He wouldn’t be setting such a fine example if Bē hadn’t rolled him out of his beauty rest. Bē shifted back to his belly and watched his friend disappear over a hill. Then he flopped back over, taking a long stare at his generous balls, feeling satisfied with himself before settling into a side tube to wait for Mās’ return.

After some time (maybe it was a little, maybe it was a lot — the sun was higher but he didn’t remember where it was before) Mās returned, cresting the hill as a black speck in a field of green. Soon, there was another speck, then another, and another. Dozens of little dots came pouring down the slope, running past Mās, filling the meadow like a mass of ants spreading out from the nest. Bē pulled out of his tube, panting and smiling, excited to see all the little ones. This might have been his favorite part of the day, seeing them all running around, playing and

having a good time without a care in the world. As they came closer he could start to make them out, although he could distinguish them by the way they moved far before their physical details were clear. There were two types: one group was miniature versions of Mās, and the other tiny Bē's. The adults' size difference was not reflected in them, as they all were a bit smaller than Bē's head. They charged around, some playing with each other — li'l Bēs and li'l Māses all mixing up together — others were off running by themselves, and a few were stopped and resting, acting contemplative. Though the resters were not just Bēs, Bē liked to think they were all proto-tubers and tried to keep tabs on the ones he thought might be most receptive to his knowledge.

None of them could talk yet, and none of them had names, but eventually that would happen. Bē had the same thought yesterday, thinking that today might be the day the tykes started speaking, or when he and Mās would choose names so they could tell them apart. However, he already had a feeling that this was not going to be the day for first words, and he didn't really have the energy to individualize them. Maybe tomorrow.

Mās came up to the tree and sat down in the shade, laying his head on Bē's side. 'I love those fellas,' he said, 'seeing them always makes me feel young again.' He snuggled against Bē and Bē rolled to his side, wrapping his front paws around Mās and pulling him close. 'They're really lucky to have us. Most dogs aren't so fortunate.'

'We're lucky to have them,' said Bē, pulling his friend tighter, licking his face.

'Stop it, silly, you're hitting my eyes.' Mās shifted around so that he was lying on top of Bē, his chin resting on the bigger dog's head. 'So what do you want to do today?'

'Same thing as yesterday, I guess. It's the same thing all the time.'

'Maybe that's just life.'

Bē agreed wordlessly, knowing that Mās understood. They lay there for a while, the warm sun rising in the sky, the little versions zooming around with seeming boundless energy. Bē settled into a tube, watching without thinking, Mās' tiny body helping to press him down. Then Mās was next to him — he hadn't noticed him get down. He had a snarky look in his eye.

'Hey potaDō: your legs are so short I was beginning to think that you had a ground body. Better suck it up, Tübər!'

It was an old joke but a favorite. Mās had cracked himself up and was laughing ferociously. Bē couldn't help but join in, his whole tube shaking

with the giggles. He liked it when Mās played the comedian, almost as much as when he dropped a little knowledge with his dogmas.

‘Well,’ said the chihuahua, ‘I gotta take a piss. If you want to laze around all day, that’s on you. But if you’re not careful, your guys are going to fall behind. I’m gonna go teach these kids something.’

Mās ran down into the field, far out until he was in the center of the swarming mass, then turned around to look at Bē. He was so far away that Bē could barely see what he was doing, and he had to concentrate to not lose focus of which dog in the throng was the grownup. There was a slight shift and he saw Mās’ leg lift, then all of the Māses stopped and lifted their little legs too. The Bēs continued to scamper around, to all appearances ignorant of their peers standing at attention.

Bē sighed. This was not the first time he’d seen this. Mās was right, he needed to teach his charges. They had so much energy, though, he just wasn’t up to it. Maybe tomorrow. He stood up and walked over to the tree, lying back and softly crying out and rubbing his belly with his front paws. A branch came down again, moving all across his underside. Fyüg’s voice hummed down over him, wrapping him in its resonance. The branch moved from one spot to the next, touching all of his favorite places. Then, unexpectedly, it tried someplace different. It wasn’t something he was used to and he writhed with surprise, but the branch kept digging in and he eventually relaxed, enjoying the rubbage, pleased to have found a new spot to add to the others.

He rolled towards the trunk, moving his entire body into the colors, feeling them engulf him. With his head back his eyes looked out at the multicolored upside-down world and it felt alright. He’d get up soon, go out to see everyone, but for now he wanted to rest a little longer. Bē felt pleased and unworried, for he had the whole day ahead of him, or maybe tomorrow.

*So far away,  
so far away*









