

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 11 Number 2

Page 1 – AS SEEN ON SPIRIT TV by Sadie Leewood. Sadie writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror short stories. She is currently working on a sci-fi novel. Some of her recent work can be found in *Altered Worlds: An Altered Reality Anthology*. When not writing or working her day job as a freelance web developer, she enjoys gardening, absurd bumper stickers, and befriending street cats. You can find her on Bluesky (@sadieleewood.com) or her website (sadieleewood.com).

Page 16 – UNKNOWABLE by C. J. Short. The author writes, “I’m a guy in his mid-30s with a wife and kid that are my world and in my free time I like to spend some time writing if possible.

Page 18 – CHARLIE’S LAST STAND by Kimberly B. Hayes. Born and raised in New Orleans, La, Kim currently lives and works in Chicago, IL. She works for the Chicago Cubs. Her story “A Queen Anne Treasure” was named honorable mention in Third Wednesday’s flash fiction contest. “My Mother’s Dark Side” was named the winner of Adelaid’s essay contest for 2025 and nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her work has appeared in *Confetti*, *The Southern Quill*, *Suddenly and without Warning*, and *Bull*, among others. Kim reads nonfiction for *Hippocampus Magazine*.

Page 19 – LEJOS DEL MUNDANAL RUIDO (Translates into: Far from the maddening crowd) by A.G. Jiménez. Dr. Jiménez is a Venezuela-born-and-raised writer currently living in upstate New York. By day, she is a biology professor and scientist at Colgate University. She has published ~80 scientific publications in academic journals. She holds a doctorate in Marine Biology from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. This short story is her debut publication in fiction.

Page 31 – BAD ANGELS by Jasmin Leigh. Ms Leigh is a contemporary author of works focused on what it means to be human. Shining a spotlight on all the love, grief, and raw moments most people turn a blind eye to. When she isn’t writing, she’s usually browsing for more books to add to her slowly growing pile. Jasmin is currently in the process of having her first book of poetry published. She’s been published in *The B’K Magazine*, *The Bitter Melon Review*, *Nowhere Girl Collective*, *paloma magazine*, and *Kinpaurak*. Some of her work can be found at <https://murmurousdaydreams.substack.com/>



“AS SEEN ON SPIRIT TV”

by SADIE LEEWOOD

Little Charlie's sweat had soaked his bedclothes. He tried to breathe but the hot air felt too thick to fit into his nostrils or mouth.

“Tell them!” his uncle shouted beside Charlie. “It's almost over!”

He *would* tell them if he could just inhale enough air to speak.

“Now!” the doctor yelled from the foot of the bed, watching the heart monitor attached to Charlie.

Charlie wished he could close his eyes and sleep, but he knew if this failed they would have to do it again once he regained his strength. He opened his mouth wide and sucked in as much of the viscous air as he could. Raising his head he saw the other screen in the room, on the dresser against the wall: the spirit television. Two purple lines swirled in and around his body. He could see how frail he looked.

“I hate you!” he screamed hoarsely, coughing at the end. He took another difficult breath. “You're not my mom and dad anymore! Go away!”

“Good, good! Now finish like I told you!” His uncle was squeezing his hand, staring at the television with watery eyes.

Another thick inhale. “I'm glad you're dead! I never want to see you again! I hope you rot in hell!”

Charlie dropped his head onto the pillow and tried to take another breath, but now the air was solid. Through the wall of air, he heard a beeping from the machine and saw the doctor

run to his side and push a needle into his arm. The room faded away.

#

Charles Brink unfolded from his car wearing a black suit over a black shirt. A deep purple tie split him down the middle. He looked like either an Infestation Specialist or an undertaker. He wore a stern face under stiffly styled dark hair and wore wire-rimmed glasses that, given the right light, reminded one of a dead bird's unblinking gaze.

Ascending the path of a ranch-style suburban house, Charles carried a black case that could easily fit a human head inside comfortably. Once invited inside, he placed the case on a coffee table and opened it, unzipping it from one side to the other, pulling the two halves apart like a bowling bag. Inside was a long video gun, its muzzle a reversed funnel shape like a short knight's lance. There was a tiny screen near the trigger, and the back end was attached by a coiled wire to a larger flat video screen in the center of the split bag.

The couple that lived in the house were Mark and Debra-*not De-bo-rah*, she reminded him-Mackintosh. Debra's plump body was splayed on the couch, her legs encased in thick, full-length casts. Debra's sister Alicia had died in a car accident two months before. Debra had been driving.

“I was in the hospital for weeks, recovering. I lost my spleen, broke my ribs and both legs.” Debra clutched Mark's hands in hers as she spoke. “I slept through days of operations.”

Mark nodded emphatically. “I was scared I

would lose her.”

Charles sat primly on the recliner catty-corner to them, writing notes in a small black book.

“After I got home, I was in a wheelchair for another month. I was constantly in pain, no matter what they gave me. And when they took the casts off, they found out my legs hadn’t healed at all.”

“The doctor said it was like no time had passed since the accident,” Mark chimed in.

Debra knocked on one of her legs. “These new casts have iron filament running through them, and a layer of salt packed all over. The last X-Rays looked like they’re finally healing, but my bruises are still fresh, and my ribs are sore...she’s not letting me heal.”

“Your sister?” Charles asked.

Shifting in her seat, Debra pointed to the spirit television. “I know what that will show. She’s been attached to me since the accident.”

“Did she die instantly in the crash?”

Her eyes widened. “No. They said it was after paramedics arrived. She was nearly sliced in half. They said her condition was ‘not conducive to life’ and they had to-”

“I don’t need to know anything further.” Charles stood and picked up the video gun. “You will feel a sensation, like the vibrations at a loud concert, moving through you.” He aimed the tapered end of the gun at her chest and pressed the trigger. Debra winced.

On the tiny screen on the back end of the gun, Charles could see Debra from the waist up. She was tinted green, just like the couch behind her. A wavering white-blue tendril ran the length of her spine and coiled inside her head—her spirit, right where it should be. But entwined with it, pulsating in and through it, was another tendril—longer, thicker, and lavender in hue.

“Oh my god-” Mark slapped a hand over his mouth as he witnessed the same scene on the larger viewscreen on the table. Debra watched quietly,

her mouth slightly ajar, nodding slowly.

Charles powered the gun off and returned it to the case. “What discouragement work have you tried already?”

“Lots of letters,” Debra said. “In spirit ink on charcoal paper, like it said online.”

“And no change?”

“No. The pain stayed the same.”

Charles sat back in the chair. “What did the letters say?”

Debra hesitated. “I don’t remember exactly. But a lot of stuff about how she should leave me alone now, move on. How she was hurting me and there was no way she could come back.”

Charles narrowed his eyes. “Is that *all* the internet instructed you to say?”

Debra looked down and shook her head.

Mark shifted forward. “It said the nastiest things! All these videos about developing a ‘pure hatred.’ It was sick! How is she supposed to do that to her sister?”

Deep in the chair, Charles laughed—a single, dry, unfriendly chuckle. “Your sister—as you knew her—is dead. Whatever made her *her* is gone. She’s not what’s hurting you.

“What is inside you is not a soul, or a spirit, or a life. It’s a bug. A leech. A tapeworm. Do you love a tapeworm? Can you not bring yourself to insult a tapeworm?” He paused, realizing he was moving past the evaluation he was scheduled for, and that this was turning into an extermination.

She looked at her husband, then back at Charles. “I don’t love tapeworms, no.”

Charles smiled. Extermination it was, then. “Good. Then you need to tell the tapeworm inside you to *fucking leave*.”

“Okay.”

“Do you have more spirit ink?”

Mark jumped up to get the paper and pen from another room. Charles directed him to also get something to write on. He found a hardback book, and handed everything to Debra.

"Do I...do I still address it to Alicia?"

"Yes. The worm stole her name."

Debra started writing.

"Say it aloud as you write," Charles prompted. "It doubles the effect."

Hesitantly, she spoke as she wrote on the thin, black paper.

"Dear Alicia,

You purple fucking tapeworm, get out of my body now! I don't want you here. I never wanted you here. You are destroying my life. You are not my sister. You are a parasite."

She stopped writing and looked to Charles.

He gestured to the paper. "Do you hate the tapeworm? Where should the tapeworm go? Be descriptive."

"I hate you, every inch of you. I hope you slither off in a corner and dry up like an earthworm on a hot sunny day. I will never even think about you again!"

"Good. Very good."

"Do I need to sign it?"

Charles nodded.

"Sincerely, Debra," she wrote and spoke.

Charles waved an arm. "Mark, you're going to want to move away from her now, just in case." Mark complied, sliding to the edge of the couch farthest from his wife.

"Debra, as you eat the letter, you're going to want to keep thinking about what you just wrote. Elaborate on it. Picture the tapeworm leaving your body, crawling into the corner to dry up. Anything that feels appropriate after what it's done to you."

Debra chewed on a corner of the letter. The delicate paper, designed to be easily digested, was swallowed in less than a minute. Charles picked up the spirit gun again and aimed it at her chest. On both view screens, the purple thread could be seen quickly spiraling around Debra's blue tendril.

"We're close now, Debra. It knows we're

evicting it, but it needs a final push. Now this is going to be harder, because remember, this thing inside you *thinks* it's your sister. You know better, but you need to talk to it like it is your sister—but with all that hate from the letter. Make it want to leave any way you can."

As she spoke, Charles balanced the gun on top of the screen, aimed at Debra. He walked to Mark and whispered, "Which side of her ribs were damaged?" Mark pointed to her right side. Charles walked over to Debra. "Speak up! Make her hear you."

"You fucking bitch, Alicia! I hate you! I've always hated you! If your stupid ass hadn't been so drunk I wouldn't have had to drive you and this wouldn't even have happened! You always ruin things! Selfish, whiny bitch!"

Charles placed his three fingers low on Debra's torso, pressing in and up. Debra screamed. "Don't stop talking!" He didn't let up on her side as he glanced at the now more rapid movements of the purple tendril on the screen.

Her voice thick with pain, she continued, "Get the fuck out! You're always up in my shit! Visiting when I don't want you to, asking for favors, freeloading. I wish you were never even *born*!" She emphasized her last words with a rising scream.

All three living people in the room watched the spirit television screen as the purple tendril, agitated and vibrating quickly, unraveled itself from Debra's blue tendril. It seemed to be rising, moving up above Debra's body. Charles backed away from Debra and reclaimed the gun, tracking the tendril as it rose.

"It's going up! To heaven!" Debra exclaimed, sweat dripping down her face.

Charles sighed, knowing what was coming. When the purple string was free of Debra, the threads began to thin, then break apart. In a few seconds, it had crumbled into glowing purple dust and then disappeared completely.

Debra's eyes widened, then her head fell into her hands as she began to sob.

Charles packed his equipment quietly and Mark walked him to the door. Mark asked, "Was that really just a tapeworm? Or was that actually--"

Through his lenses, Charles's eyes met Mark's and held them for several seconds. Then he walked outside without a word.

#

Charles noticed that Christina's eyes appeared to glow an ethereal green when she was particularly pissed at him. He enjoyed watching them, and the pulsing veins beside them, whenever he found himself in the Manager's office. His legs were neatly together at the knees, his hands demurely on his lap. A statue of a good student listening to a teacher—if the student was nearing forty.

"You fucking *jabbed her broken ribs*? Do you understand how insane that is?"

He raised his hand, holding it just in front of his shoulder. She closed her eyes, sighed, and waved at him.

"In my defense, it was very effective."

"Yes, we all know what works. What *you* seem to forget is that Second-level Actions require that Second-level Waivers be signed. It was an *evaluation*, goddamnit."

Charles knew all this. The problem was, he was there at the Mackintoshes', and he could solve the problem in minutes. Waivers took days. "I knew the process wouldn't succeed without that small touch of pain. I could sense her waver-ing." His glasses were slipping; he fought the urge to fix them.

Christina let her head fall onto her forefingers and thumbs, her elbow on the desk in front of her. "Charles. I am so sick of having this same conversation with you." She looked up, her lip twitching now.

He hadn't seen that before. He sat up straighter.

"I will speak to the Mackintoshes again and tell them you have been disciplined. If they demand a refund, it will come out of your pay directly. For god's sake, you didn't even have them sign the *basic* waiver for the evaluation. You better hope we don't get sued."

Well, that *was* a mistake. His sense of self-righteousness evaporated.

"I know you're talented. You understand these situations like no one else—but we have rules. And those rules, as tedious as they are, need to be followed. If they're not followed, We. Don't. Get. Paid. Is that understood?"

He tried to answer, but his voice was weak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Yes—I will follow procedure in future."

"Good. And to show me you understand, I want you to consult with Eric. He needs some help, and you need to actually answer his questions from now on."

Charles felt his face contort before catching himself. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. You can go."

He stood and turned toward the door.

"And Charles? If you pull this shit again, you're done."

He nodded and continued out the door.

#

Still processing his reprimand, he returned to his cubicle. Had he gone too far this time? Results were results, but he didn't intend to endanger his job. And forgetting the initial Evaluation Waiver was worse than a rookie mistake—it could mean losing his exterminator's license.

As he unwound the cable from his case to plug it in to charge, Charles heard the floor creak behind him. He ignored the sound and turned his chair to face the computer screen. The background of his desktop was the default blue ombre it was installed with, just as the felt walls of his cubicle were uninterrupted gray. He had worked for Haines Extermination for fifteen years, but his

desk space appeared newly issued.

The floor creaked again, followed by a throat clearing. Charles opened his employee portal on the screen to examine his next assignment.

“Brink?” The voice was soft enough that Charles could continue to feign deafness. He had three appointments scheduled for tomorrow: one infestation evaluation and two exterminations.

He could feel the presence behind him take a step into his cubicle. Another, louder, “Brink?” and Charles was forced by the unfortunate protocol of polite society to acknowledge the young man standing behind him. He turned his chair slowly around, looking blithely up at Eric. “Did you need something?”

“I need your *magic*,” Eric said, his shoulders emphasizing the last word. “You’re unbelievable. What was that? Half an hour from eval to extermination?” He laid his arm on the edge of the cubicle.

Charles remembered Christina’s words and did his best to keep the seething tone out of his voice as he said, “Actually, it was fifteen minutes. *Did you need something?*”

Eric peered over his shoulder, then ducked his head down conspiratorially. “I have an extermination tomorrow, and I know it’s going to fail. The guy is not ready to tell his dead wife to fuck off. It’s a waste of time, and I know they’re just gonna hand it to you when I crash and burn.”

Charles quietly stared at Eric.

“I was wondering if you could, like, give me some ideas for this guy? Like, tips to make it work the first time?”

Charles lifted his arm to check his watch. Four-forty-five. He could waste fifteen minutes coaching Eric, even if he was annoying. “Tell me his story.”

Suddenly animated, Eric nodded and threw up a single finger, then left the cubicle, returning shortly, dragging his chair behind him. Dropping hard into the chair, he began, “This guy’s wife-

“Does this ‘guy’ have a name? The wife?”

“Uh, yeah. Guy’s Joseph. Wife was Irene.”

“If you don’t care to use names, then you’re not doing your job. We’re like priests giving eulogies. Respect and propriety are everything.”

Eric sat back. “Damn. I never thought of it like that.” He closed his eyes for a long moment, as if putting the idea away into storage, then opened them again. “Joseph’s wife—Irene—was in her early sixties. They were both healthy, so they hadn’t taken any dying classes or anything yet. So Joe—I mean Joseph—he wakes up and she’s passed, right in the bed next to him. Aneurysm.” He looked down and shook his head. “You know, hearing this kind of thing always makes me wonder if we shouldn’t all be taking dying classes from, like, *childhood*.”

Charles said nothing, waiting for Eric to continue.

“So anyway, Joseph is *devastated*, and after the funeral he starts feeling like shit. Like, it was a slow burn, it was happening, but after two months he realized it wasn’t just depression or something. Stiffness in his limbs, stomach pains, and then these headaches that kept getting worse. He called them ‘suicide headaches’ because it’s like a spike going through your brain.”

“And you assessed him?”

Eric nodded. “She’s there on the TV, dancing around his tendril.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I have to tell you, I’m not used to the kind of grief I saw on his face when he saw it. Usually people are relieved to find out there’s a solution to their problems. But this guy was *crushed*. As if she betrayed him or something.”

Charles, as always, kept his personal feelings to himself. Instead, he asked, “What is your planned approach?”

Sitting back in the chair with a hop that sent it rolling several inches backward, Eric excitedly said, “Well, I think spirit paper isn’t going to be the easiest option for him. Writing is so much

harder than just saying shit.”

“You think so? Are you speaking for him or for you?”

“I...I guess I just assumed it was like that for everyone. I hate writing. You have to do two steps instead of one.”

Charles tried not to flinch at this odd logic. “The paper is more than writing. The paper is a *disassociation*. We can write things and they don’t have to be true. I can write ‘I hate Eric’ and not feel like I’m hurting you, because I just wrote it on paper. And then if I ate the paper, no one but me would have seen it. The thought is gone. But if I said ‘I hate you’ to you, you’d probably remember I said it forever.” He held back a smile at the droop in Eric’s face. “Do you always avoid charcoal paper?”

“I use it. I just usually recommend it when it’s people less close to the dead. So, not very often, I guess.”

“Then you’re handicapping yourself from the get-go. Spirit paper is almost always your best start.” Charles checked his watch again.

“OK. I’ll do that. But what if that’s not enough?”

“Then you get the voice denouncement going. But you need to coach Joseph. He needs to believe it isn’t Irene he’s expelling—it’s something else. You have to decide what would work best for him. A parasite. A disease. A demon, if he’s religious.” While still speaking, Charles turned his chair around and shut down his computer. He stood, stepping to the hook that held his jacket.

Eric, not taking the hint, sat thoughtfully in his rolling chair in the entrance to Charles’s cubicle. “What about pain?”

“Pain is a Second-level Activity. You won’t have authorization for that.” Charles sidestepped the chair and walked into the hallway. “What you need to hope for is that Joseph gets one of his headaches before you show up.” Charles walked past the reception desk and out the door of

Haines Extermination without a word, wave, or nod to anyone that worked there. He crossed the threshold at five o’clock exactly.

#

Charles felt defeated by his day. Making sloppy mistakes was especially discouraging. He deserved a treat. As soon as he arrived home at his small one-bedroom apartment in the almost-nice part of town, he started two pots of water on the stove. Blue flames licked the pots, one large and one small, as he opened his cupboard to peruse the boxes within.

On the lowest shelf were the various blue-boxed mac-and-cheese options. Most were classic tubes, but some had vague shapes of animals or vehicles. He chose the box with cartoon characters on it. They weren’t exactly the same ones from his childhood, but the loud yellow character’s shape tasted the same as any cartoon turtle had in the 90’s.

The middle shelf was the real fun. An array of color and flavor presented itself. What would he enjoy tonight? The classics were always delicious: strawberry, orange, lime. Exotic new flavors could be fun. Mango? Pineapple? No, today was a day for raspberry Jell-O. Mom’s favorite.

The small pot boiled first. Emptying the white powder into a Pyrex bowl, he could smell that perfect, fake fruity flavoring. He carefully poured the steaming water into the bowl and watched it turn the powder a vibrant ruby red. When he was little, his mother would call him into the kitchen to see the change. A magical transformation every time.

He finished preparing the Jell-O and left it in the fridge to set, then enjoyed his orange pasta and equally orange baby carrots sitting on the couch in front of the TV. But as the night wore on, even his favorite police procedural program could not keep his mind off the dressing-down he had received in Christina’s office. He had done the right thing, he knew. That fat woman—Deb-

ra—would still be inhabited by her dead sister, decaying, if he had not pushed things like he had. Waiting for a Second-level Auth meant more days of suffering. But he had screwed up, and that needed to never happen again.

The idea of leaving Haines Extermination and going independent had crossed his mind many times, especially when he disagreed with company policies. He was their best specialist by far. In his dream scenario, he would set his own prices, policies, hours. It would be wildly successful, naturally. But *getting* the clients—calling them, talking to them, making appointments—that was a waste of his time and talents. Infested people wouldn't just show up conveniently at his door, and that's where the fantasy always died.

Deflated, he switched off the TV. As he shuffled toward the bedroom, a muffled sound came through the wall beyond the flat-screen television. A soft murmur. Tiptoeing, he quietly approached the second screen in the room and twisted the dial. The gun attached to the unit was much larger than his modern portable work version, resembling a satellite dish more than a ray gun. It was positioned to point at the wall. On the CRT screen of the thirty-plus-year-old spirit television, a pair of tendrils wriggled around each other.

Charles, work dilemma now out of mind, returned to the couch to observe his neighbors doing what couples are wont to do. He unzipped his slacks and leaned back. Less than thirty seconds had passed before Charles noticed that the tendrils were vertical instead of horizontal. Then he realized that only one was blue.

He had been observing the rather active marital life of his middle-aged neighbors, Brandon and Gina Conway, for years now. His first generation spirit television could see their tendrils through the wall, but not their bodies. It was weaker than his portable work unit, but also didn't give off feedback, meaning he could observe without detection. Charles had imagined

many scenarios using his neighbors' tendrils' contortions as inspiration.

And now, it appeared that one of them was dead and infesting the other. A shitty end to a shitty day. He zipped up his fly and turned off the spirit television. The moaning sound continued. He placed his ear up to the wall. Was someone *crying*? Well, that's what people who lose their spouses do, right? Charles flicked the lights and went to bed.

#

She was at the end of the hallway. Gina. Coming up the stairs with a newspaper, her salt-and-pepper hair in a messy ponytail. He would have to pass by her. Should he say something?

"Good morning, Mrs. Conway."

She stopped and looked up at him. "Hello," she said hesitantly. "Do I know you?"

"I-uh—" *I have listened to and essentially watched you and your husband fuck for four years now.* "I'm your next door neighbor. Two-oh-eight."

"Ah. Well. Good morning." She moved down the hallway past him.

"I'm sorry about your husband," Charles called after her.

She stopped and turned back. "What did you say?"

"Your husband. I'm sorry for your loss." It had been a bad idea. Starting a conversation was always a bad idea.

"My husband is making me breakfast right now. What the hell are you talking about?" Her eyes narrowed, and she tightened her grip on the newspaper in a threatening manner.

He backed away from her. Apparently her husband was not dead. *Good to know.* "I'm so sorry, ma'am. I must have gotten some bad information from another neighbor. Must be someone else's husband. Sorry!" He turned and sprinted to the stairs.

He ran all the way to his car and jumped in-

side, watching the main doors of the building in case she came after him, ready to swat him. *Never get involved*, he reminded himself. That's always the best way. Why did he go and say anything? When his heartbeat slowed to a normal rate, he started the car and drove to the office.

#

Months went by, and Charles managed to avoid seeing Gina Conway in the hallway again, though he did hear her crying many times through his living-room wall. A few times he dared to flip on the spirit television, and always saw the same thing. The blue and purple tendrils, intertwined, as she stood or sat in the bedroom. Well, he assumed it was their bedroom. They had had a lot of sex in the room, regardless.

There was no sex lately. Just Gina's crying and, occasionally, fights with her husband. Whatever happened that led to Gina being infested was probably why they fought, but Charles couldn't make out enough words to understand.

It was a confounding situation. Here he was, in possession of knowledge that he shouldn't have—but did—and it could help his neighbor. He could even personally help her remove the infestation. But no one could detect an infestation without a spirit television, so he would have to tell her he used it on her without her permission or knowledge. Yet another great way to lose his exterminator's license.

Could he say he turned on the old unit to see if it still worked and it *just happened* to be pointed at the wall? Was that plausible? But then, he wasn't even supposed to have the old spirit television anyway—it was unlicensed. He did his best to ignore his neighbors' situation, finding his 'inspiration' in proper online porn when necessary, though it was much less satisfying when it wasn't actively happening a wall away.

#

After his admonishment at work, Charles was a model employee, making customers wait after

an evaluation rather than solving their problems on the same call. He'd assumed this would cause profits to plummet, that his quick-and-dirty approach would be missed and customers would look elsewhere for their extermination needs. What he had failed to take into account was the lack of repeat clients.

The people who have experienced or witnessed an extermination—the explosive exertion of hate followed by empty guilt—tended to do what was necessary to avoid ever experiencing it again. It was what dying classes were for, after all: don't suffer the embarrassment of infestation, or—even worse—dying and infesting someone else. Just click the ad for *Heaven Can't Wait* and take an online class. So easy and fun, only six Saturdays. And at the low, low price of \$1,495, what are you waiting for?

He may have saved Debra Mackintosh's life in fifteen minutes from door to door, but today he had to remind tired, achy Jerome Peckinah that this appointment was merely an evaluation. It was a crime against both humanity and customer service.

Trudging up the stairs to his apartment after a wholly unfulfilling day, he caught sight of Gina. It had been almost three months since his awkward run-in with her. He fully intended to continue his streak of not interacting with her, but something about her was off. She stood in front of her apartment, looking at a set of keys in her hands. As she looked at each key, she nodded, and switched to the next. There were only four keys, and she kept examining each of them: looking, nodding, switching. She was looping.

Some infestations affected the brain. They could manipulate a victim's memory, or concept of time, or both. When it was both, a person could loop for days if something didn't break them out of the pattern. Looping was a late-stage symptom; Gina's body was succumbing to the infestation.

Reluctantly, Charles approached her, slowly placing a hand over the keys but not touching them. It was just enough of a barrier to stop her from seeing the keys. After a few moments, she stopped nodding and her eyes followed his arm up to his face. She stepped back, eyes wide.

"Hi. I saw you were having trouble with your keys. Can I be of assistance?"

She looked down at her hands, surprised to see the keys. "Uh...I think I'm good. Thanks." She chose a key, inserted it into the door, and turned the knob.

"You are very welcome," he said and turned away, thankful she hadn't yelled at him or accused him of being a creep.

"Would you like to come over for dinner?"

He stopped and looked back. "Dinner?"

She brushed her hair out of her face. He noticed this close to her that the white hairs grew mostly over her eyes. She'd look like the bride of Frankenstein if she continued to let it gray naturally. He decided not to say that to her.

"Yeah, dinner. I was going to make spaghetti. And it's more fun to cook with someone to talk to. And drink with."

Before he could think, his automatic response to just about every invitation came out of his mouth, "Thank you for the offer but I—"

"Unless you've got a hot date, you should join me. We can even watch *Ghost Cop* later. I've heard it through the walls—I know you like it. And it's the season finale."

He didn't move.

She waved at him. "Go on, put your stuff away and then come over. I'll open the merlot."

Seven minutes later, he was inside her apartment. It was furnished warmly, painted in yellow and adobe, and much less empty than his plain white rooms. There was so much stuff everywhere: flowers in a vase, framed pictures of abstract art on the walls, and more bowls, candles, and marble-filled glass jars than he had ever seen

in one place.

"Your home is lovely," he said. "I brought dessert."

She held the bowl of lemon Jell-O up to the light and jiggled it, watching the contents wobble and settle again. "I can't remember the last time I had Jell-O. What a lovely surprise." As promised, she offered him a glass full of merlot while stirring a large enameled pot of diced tomatoes and onions. "It's my ex-husband's family's recipe, but I make it better."

"Ex-husband?"

"He moved out a few weeks ago. Not divorced officially, but it's definitely happening."

"I'm so sorry—"

She turned, pointing the wooden spoon at his nose. "You said that before. You offered me sympathy for my husband."

He stared at the spoon and took a sip, unable to come up with a coherent response.

"What's weird is, that was right when it all started. When we started fighting." She turned back to the sauce. "It's like you knew. Are you psychic?"

Was that a rhetorical question? She looked at him. "Uh, no, no I'm not. I just got some incorrect information, that's all."

"Well, you were totally right. He's gone, and I'm making his sauce, but my way." She picked up the wine bottle and let several glugs splash into the pot. "Lots of wine. The alcohol brings out special flavors in the tomatoes. Absolutely necessary." She added more wine to her own glass, then to his, emptying the bottle. "There's more, don't worry."

Charles sipped every now and then, not sure what to do. She ignored or didn't notice his discomfort. "I invited you over because I appreciate what you did out in the hall. I've been having some...episodes lately."

"Is everything okay?"

"No. But it will be. And...I'm starting to get

scared of what it'll be like, which I didn't expect." She put down the spoon and took a stock pot from a cabinet, handing it to him. "Can you fill that with water for the pasta?"

He obliged, watching her taste the sauce. She was talking as if she was planning to let the infestation happen. But she didn't have to die. He could help her. Should he say something or let it go? After all, he didn't know her. At least, not in any way she would appreciate.

As they sat to eat, she instructed him to lay a pat of butter on top of the pile of spaghetti and sauce. "It takes the sauce to the next level. Brandon could never have it that way, he just piled it with parmesan cheese. Idiot." Her words had become more forceful as they worked their way through the second bottle. "So I hear you're an Exterminator?"

"Yes, uh...Infestation Specialist, actually."

She nodded, chewing. "You get people to 'give up the ghost' then?"

"Indeed. We instruct infested individuals on how to eject their parasites."

"Parasites?"

"Yes. This pasta really is delicious. Um, we call them parasites because they survive by weakening the person they inhabit."

"Even if they're loved ones? Family?" Her eyes were trained on him.

"The way we work...we do talk about the other spirit as if it's a parasite. But yes, it's a remnant of a person."

"So you lie to people?"

"We...yes." He aimed his eyes down at his food.

"You tell them it's not their husband or child or friend. You tell them it's a dirty parasite?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"To save them."

They finished their meal in silence, clinks of fork on plate and sips of wine the only sounds.

He wasn't used to justifying his profession, but he wanted her to understand. As she stood with her empty plate, he spoke. "If we knew what they were, those remnants, we would probably try something else. But all we know is they're not the same as us—not after death—and they hurt people. I've helped a lot of people, saved them from chronic pain and diseases that their infestation wouldn't allow them to heal from. The infested shouldn't have to suffer."

She put her plate in the sink and said, "Neither should the dead."

Charles chewed the last of his pasta, now feeling trapped in the home of someone who took issue with his day job. Why was socializing always so complicated? Should he excuse himself to avoid the awkward air between them now? Or did protocol dictate he remain to watch *Ghost Cop* in the shadow of her angry disapproval?

By the time he rose from his chair, he was feeling unbearably uncomfortable. "I think I'll just..."

"You coming? It's about to start," she called from the living room, her tone back to cheerful drunkenness.

He looked toward the front door, then back into the living room. She sat on the couch, using a remote to find the right channel, wine sloshing in her other hand. If she wasn't actually upset with him...and he still had a full glass of wine...

With a swift movement, he grabbed his glass and strode into the living room to join her.

#

"I love you."

"I know. But this can never be. We can never be."

Belinda, tears running down her eyes—yet not smearing her thick mascara—tilted her head up, moving closer to him. Ezekiel—A.K.A Ghost Cop—kept his head turned away from her, his brown fedora casting a shadow across his eyes. Then, slowly, with an anguished look, he leaned

back in her direction, letting his lips meet hers. He pressed in as she rose up until it was a rich, full kiss. Behind them, the full moon, much larger than in life, hovered over the foggy cemetery in which they embraced. As they pulled apart, Ezekiel whispered, "I love you too, Belinda. But that's all we can have."

"One kiss?"

He nodded, leafless trees showing through his semi-transparent head. "One kiss. At least, until the next full moon on All Souls Day, twenty years from now."

Belinda took a step back, her eyes wild, and reached into her purse. "No! I won't wait any longer. We can be together—" She pulled a handgun from her bag. "—we can be together right now. Forever!" She put the gun to her temple and pulled the trigger just as Ezekiel dove for her arm.

Ezekiel cradled her body on top of his own grave as the credits rolled, her head lolling to the side, a single tear travelling down his pale cheek.

A snort erupted beside Charles on the couch. "Okay, okay, I love this show—I do! But that was the cheesiest thing I have ever seen."

Charles had been quite taken with the scene, despite the many inconsistencies with reality. But then, it was about a ghost who was a working cop, so that was to be expected. "I liked it," he said.

Gina's smile faded. "I didn't mean to say it wasn't good, I just mean, the way they ended the season, on that kind of cliffhanger...so *unfair*, am I right?"

"I agree with that. And leaving the kiss until the last moment. I've been...*people* have been waiting for that for four seasons now."

Gina nodded seriously. "I've been 'shipping them since the beginning. That moment was amazing. I'm sorry for saying it was cheesy. I mean, that's half the charm." She looked at the screen, where a toilet cleaner commercial was playing. "Brandon hated this show. He always made fun of it when he saw me watching it. I was

talking to you like I would to him—making fun of it before he could." She looked back at Charles. "I'm sorry. I'm a little drunk, I think."

"It's okay. It's excellent to meet another *Ghost Cop* fan." He stood up.

She stood as well, wavering a bit before she cleared the couch. "Hey, you're not leaving already, are you?"

"Yes, I think that would be best, I have—"

She stretched onto her tiptoes and kissed him on the lips. It was soft and short, and then she dropped back onto her heels.

His hand moved to touch his lips as if to make sure they were still there. *Did that just happen in real life?*

"I'm sorry," she said, her eyes examining his face, concerned. "I was just so hyped up by 'Belik-iel' finally kissing—"

Whether it was the wine, or the emotionally charged show, Charles was inspired to do something he wouldn't have dreamed of an hour ago. He leaned down and kissed her back, their lips pressed together for several moments.

When they separated, Gina smiled mischievously. "Do you know...I've never been with another man?"

Charles's body reacted to her declaration instantly. He let her guide him into the bedroom, almost floating as if in a dream. His thoughts were as cloudy as the graveyard in *Ghost Cop*, but Gina knew enough of what to do for the both of them.

#

It became a regular thing: dinner and a show, then a trip to the bedroom before dessert. Sometimes he went back to his apartment after that, but other nights there was an encore visit to the bed, or couch, or living room carpet, and he would stay the night.

When he was with her, his world was perfect. She was beautiful and fun and free, and she enjoyed his company—a rare quality. They loved so

many of the same movies and shows, played board games with similar competitiveness, and physically enjoyed one another.

But when he was away from her, he remembered that she was infested—dying from within—and refused to seek help. In those moments he would recall how her smell had changed over time to something sweeter, but not in a good way. In the moment, he could kiss her and not think of it, but later, he had to admit it was the smell of rot, of decay. Her eyes were sunken now. She had been losing weight, which could explain that away, but he knew she was not dieting, and that she drank every night, sometimes a bottle or two of wine herself.

The looping was the hardest thing to ignore. She would wipe the counter in the same spot ten or fifteen times before he broke her out. Or she would cut a piece of chicken breast, then keep slicing in the same place, cutting nothing, scraping the plate with the knife, until he stayed her hand and freed her from the spell. He feared she would loop during sex, repeating the same noise or words over and over. Waking her from that would be disturbing for them both.

They never spoke of her condition, except the occasional ‘thank you,’ when he freed her from a loop. She listened to him talk about work, even asking questions, but never related it to herself, not overtly.

In their two months of dinners and trysts, he had come to love her. To crave her. To imagine a life with her. This experience was new to him. All his past relationships with women had been brief and shallow. He had avoided making commitments to people his whole life. Commitments meant sentimentality, and that led to infestation. He was a young boy when his parents died in front of him, infested him, and nearly killed him. With no close friends or lovers, he was safe from infestation almost indefinitely. And with Gina, he was just a fling to her. He wouldn’t be expected

to sit beside her deathbed, holding her hand. He would be off somewhere mourning her, forgetting her.

But in those quiet moments of the morning before work, lying next to Gina, he pondered those new feelings. Her energy—and her touch—had taught him so much in a short time. And for the first time since his parents had been alive, he did not feel alone. Could he really just give that up?

#

Eric approached Charles’ cubicle, lingering in the slim entranceway. Instead of ignoring him until it was absolutely necessary to acknowledge the younger exterminator, Charles spun his chair around and smiled. Eric took a step back.

“You okay, Brink?” Eric said.

“I’m fantastic. How are you?” Charles answered.

Eric looked behind him, then back at Charles. “I see you...uh...changed your style.”

Charles looked down at his clothes. At Gina’s suggestion, he had purchased some new shirts in colors other than dark and dreary. Today he wore sage green beneath a brown and yellow polka-dot tie. “I’ve expanded my colorway, yes.”

A quiet moment passed. Charles was at a loss as to what to do next in the conversation, so he moved to turn back to his computer screen.

“What made you change your style?”

Charles hesitated. Eric did not strike him as the type of person who would keep his mouth shut. But Charles decided it didn’t matter. Not anymore. “I met someone. She’s changed my life. And me.”

The lewd insinuation Charles expected from Eric did not come. Instead, he smiled at Charles knowingly and said, “That’s so awesome, bro. I’m happy for you.”

#

That night, during a commercial break while watching *Essence of Andre*, Charles relayed his

interaction with Eric to Gina. She laughed at the way he imitated Eric's voice, but grew quiet toward the end of the story.

"Is everything okay?" Charles asked.

"Charles, I...really enjoy our time together. It's a miracle we found each other, don't get me wrong. But...I don't have much time left. You know that. I know you know that. I'm looping more and more. I can see my skin sagging—" She held up a hand to emphasize her point, frowning. "I want this to be fun, not a relationship."

The words cut into him, deeper than expected. He adjusted himself on the couch. "I know. I want it to be fun, too, but...can you tell me something?"

She raised her eyebrows, muted the TV, and said, "Sure?"

He knew what he had to ask, but couldn't be certain what would happen when he did. She could call it all off right away, kick him out, and that would be it. He looked at the television, then turned back to face those big eyes, as scared as he was. "Gina, why won't you let me help you?"

She closed her eyes. "Sometimes...sometimes, Charles...I wish I didn't meet you." She looked up

and took his hand in hers. "I was planning to just rot here in this apartment. Alone."

He opened his mouth to ask why, but she continued: "I deserve to die. What I did—this is my punishment. The infestation. Cause and effect." She looked off toward the door. "What I don't deserve is *you*. Brandon—my husband—was a tool. Inertia kept us together. We just existed around each other. It was when...Charles can I tell you something and please promise you will never breathe a word of it to anyone?"

He nodded, eager for her to keep speaking. He was still here, she was still talking and not kicking him out.

"I killed someone."

"Oh," he said, without thinking.

"I hit him with my car. A young guy. I was looking at my phone instead of the road."

"Oh my god." He knew her infestation had to have been sudden, but he was surprised nonetheless.

"Yeah." She stared distantly at the television. "I got out and ran to him and he looked *fine*, but wasn't breathing. I didn't know what to do. I was so shocked and scared and it was along the old



county road in the woods so no one saw me...so I got back in the car and kept driving."

He swallowed hard, keeping his grip on her hand.

"It weighed on me for weeks. I mean, of course it did. I was crying a lot and Brandon was pissed because I wouldn't tell him what was wrong. That's when we started fighting. And I just didn't care anymore—about him, about life, none of it. And then I started having symptoms...I was tired all the time, achy. He caught me looping once. That's when he left."

Charles had met people in this state before—people who believed they deserved their infestation—and he had known what to do—there were sample scripts for it in the Infestation Handbook—but as he looked at her sallow cheeks in the blue light of the television, he knew that was not what he wanted to tell her.

He squeezed her hand and took a deep breath. "I killed my parents," he said.

She turned and focused her eyes on his. "What?"

"I told you before how I was one of the first cases of a double infestation?"

"Yeah. You said you were only eight."

"I was. And I was an asshole, even back then. I didn't listen. I didn't care what my parents or teachers said, I just did what I wanted."

She added her other hand to the first, gripping him tightly. "What happened?"

"One Saturday morning I decided I wanted to go to the arcade at the mall. I was already grounded for something else, so I knew they wouldn't let me go. While my parents were still sleeping, I took the keys and started my dad's pickup truck. They both ran out into the yard in their pajamas, yelling. So I dove down to hit the gas pedal hard, hanging onto the steering wheel. I wanted to get away before they could catch me.

"The wheel turned with me hanging on it, turned directly into them, then into a cast iron

fence, then into the brick of the house." It was his turn to stare past the television now. "I got out and they were making noises...blood was everywhere—I didn't even try to call for help. I just stood there and watched them die in front of me."

"Were you hurt?"

"I had some bruises later. Nothing major. Not until the infestation symptoms started."

"And they were exterminated."

"Yes," he said, looking at her again, searching for something in her expression. "I didn't have a choice. My uncle made me do it. But I was guilty, too. I killed them. I wanted to die. I wanted to be punished."

"But you were just a kid."

"And you just made a mistake."

She pulled her hands back, shaking her head. "It's not the same..."

He opened his mouth to respond, but closed it again. After a breath, he said, "No, it's not. You have a choice and I didn't. And if I had made the choice I wanted, I wouldn't have met *you*."

She sat back into the couch seat, facing forward, her lips tight.

He had his answer. Nothing he said was going to change the outcome. She would leave him. She would die and it wouldn't help anyone.

"You know I have a spirit television?"

She nodded. "Of course, it's your job."

"No. I have an old one. Unlicensed."

"So?"

He knew it was a mistake to tell her, but he was about to lose her anyway. Anything that might change her mind was worth a shot. Wasn't it? "I thought about forcing you."

"Forcing me...?"

"Forcing you to write in spirit ink on charcoal paper. Holding your mouth shut until you chewed it. Hurting you until you denounced that thing inside you. Exterminating it, even if you didn't want to. There's ways to do that. Like they

did to me.”

Her jaw dropped. The look of fear on her face was one he knew, from before he met her. Back when he just barreled his way through exterminations—intimidating people into doing the right thing. On her face, it was unbearable.

“You don’t have to die,” he said weakly, wishing he could take back his words. He reached for her shoulder.

She dodged his touch, standing and stepping away from the couch. “I think you should leave. Now.”

He looked up at her frazzled hair and angry mouth. “I would do almost anything to keep you in my life.”

“That’s not your decision to make. And it wasn’t Brandon’s to make. It’s mine. Get. Out.”

Standing, he towered over her like that first night, but saw none of the playfulness or light in her eyes. She was lost to him. He walked to the door without saying another word.

#

It was about a month later when Charles walked toward his apartment and saw police tape across her door. She had finally passed. He wondered how it had happened. Did she loop for days until she collapsed? Did the fatigue confine her to her bed as she withered away?

He had not seen her since the night they confessed their sins to one another. Could he have lived with it? Watching her decay and fail before his eyes? Would he have held her hand at the end and risked infestation? Would he have welcomed it?

He opened a cabinet and stared at the middle shelf, the rainbow of flavors he kept stocked for himself. Lime Jello-O today. Gina’s favorite. It was Tuesday, and *Ghost Cop* would be on later—the start of the new season. Gina would have been bouncing up and down for it on the couch, singing along with the opening credits. He poured the pale powder into a bowl, then added boiling

water, enjoying the explosion of seaweed green as the powder and water mixed together.

“I’ll make spaghetti—your way,” he said, to no one. It would take time to get over his condition. But, thankfully, grief was not a death sentence.

❖

“UNKNOWNABLE”

by C. J. SHORT

When the creature tore its way into our world the sound of the heavens ripping open conjured up thoughts of aluminum foil being rended by a pack of dogs. Its amorphous body heaved its way through the gash in realities, its voice a clarion of the end times. It had feasted on the minds of innumerable worlds, countless civilizations, yet it hungered still.

It had no name pronounceable by any mortal tongue, its body was a luster of colors many of which had never been seen in our realm of existence, its mouths gibbered endlessly in languages long since dead. The ever-shifting mass of its form was a buffet of impossible angles that fractalized into even smaller geometries defying physics from the macro to the nano.

When it finally fell from its portal in the sky onto the rain slick pavement of Times Square there were screams. Many ran in terror. Some hid, closing and locking their car doors. Others drew weapons hoping to beat back the creature despite knowing in their heart of hearts, there was no stopping it. Among those were the brave and foolish who stood and stared at the creature or pulled out phones to capture the image of a being who defied reality itself.

All this gave the creature something it hadn't experienced in ages. It gave the creature reason to pause. Hesitating to move beyond the spot it had fallen to. It had flayed the mind and souls of gods and mortal. It had supped at the madness of beings with technologies or magics far beyond

our ken. It had gorged itself upon worlds for eons before our planet had even taken shape. Yet in all that time it had never seen this reaction.

“It has to be some kind of publicity stunt, right?” one human said to another as they stood with cell phone cameras pointed. “You think they’re making a new Hellboy or something?”

The bird-like peoples of Calindor had wept tears of blood as their eyes burned in their hollow boned skulls at its appearance. The amoeba creatures of Rigelia had torn the cilia from their body rather than experience the presence of this world devouring thing from beyond the stars. The people of prophet world X89R-Omega had their hive mind splintered sending each individual into a catatonic scream that lasted the rest of their short existence. This being had encountered almost every possible reaction to its presence, but never had it experienced this.

It tentatively reached out an oozing tentacle and before the mucus covered extremity had even touched human flesh it felt our minds. The minds of the human race.

A cacophony of images and ideas flooded into it. Far flung worlds filled with alien life, creatures or legend and lore, and monsters of various shapes and sizes. All of this and more within pages or displayed on screens. Books, movies, television, video games, the internet.

The Internet.

The creature recoiled with a fear it had never truly

understood before. It would redouble its efforts. It shifted its mass and bulbous tumor-like growths burst through its skin, eyes with split pupils erupted like geysers, and a miasma wafted from it in a purple haze.

“Dude, did it just shit itself? Mega gross. This is gonna do numbers on TikTok.” was all the nearby human replied.

Then it did something new, something it hadn’t ever considered before. It communicated with the humans.

“Do you not fear me? Do you not gnash your teeth as your minds reel and break at my presence?” it said in a voice equal part watery gurgle and cutting bandsaw.

“Bro, you’re gross and all,” one the humans replied “But like, I’ve seen every Cronenberg film so it’s whatever. You gotta be more imaginative than that.”

The creature was offended. It reached out and connected with human minds once again and saw a bevy of horrors. Killer Clowns, zombies, elder gods, and tornados filled with sharks were not only imagined up by these humans, they were *entertained* by these ideas! Not only did they not go mad, they had anticipated its existence.

The creature spoke again, “You know of my kind?”

“Bruh, I got like 2 Funko Pops of Cthulu and a Lego set of Nyarlathotep. Lovecraft was a jerk but dude had some cool ideas.”

The creature beyond comprehension harumphed. It was experiencing an emotion it had never considered before, inadequacy. It sat there, its flesh bubbling and fuming with thought for minutes that could have been ages. A small crowd had gathered around it taking selfies and daring each other to get closer by the time it finally gathered its mass together and spoke again.

“It seems I need to rebrand.”

It shifted and curled up upon itself taking a form more stable in this reality, more symmetrical, less apocalyptic. Who needed to consume the madness within others when you could market yourself and make millions?

Within a week the unknowable creature had the world’s largest social media following, just behind Taylor Swift. A month in and its merchandise was outselling Hello Kitty and there was talk of a game that could compete against Pokemon. It appeared on Joe Rogan’s podcast and preached about “manifesting transdimensional enlightenment.”

“Who needs insanity when you have Instagram?” It gurgled into the microphones. ❖

“CHARLIE’S LAST STAND”

by KIMBERLY B. HAYES

The mound loomed in front of him. It was home, the only one he knew. Charlie stood a few feet away, procrastinating. He had done his work, but it wasn’t his best and he knew that. He was burned out and knew he needed a break. Charlie was tired of requesting vacation time and being denied.

He could hear his manager now. “You must give your life to your job. We can’t expect you to slack off. What would our queen think? She expects the best from everyone, all the time.”

It was a constant, this being a worker drone. It was always MORE, FASTER, BETTER. No incentive for improvement. They drilled this into him from birth. There was no way to move up in such a society. It was always the same, day in and day out.

He kept on thinking of ways to escape. Would they discover him? Would someone catch him? He was unaware of any other escapes. Charlie never participated in any of the workshops on how to be a better worker. He was a loner, an oddity in a society so rigidly social.

A few other workers passed him up. One of them stopped and gave Charlie a disapproving look. “Better hurry, Charlie. It’s almost time for check in. We can’t be late, you’re dirty.”

Charlie nodded in acknowledgment and stopped to clean himself up from the bits of dirt and gravel that covered him. He had a meeting later with his shift manager. No excuse for showing up dirty.

He walked a couple of inches and then

stopped. The mound was busy with the shift change, as worker drones brought back dirt, bits of gravel and other things. The shift leaders stood outside the mound, directing the workers on duty down the correct tunnels.

“I just can’t. I cannot go back. I’d rather cut off my antenna.”

This was the only home he knew. But was it worth being miserable all the time? He wanted excitement. And adventure. What if he didn’t go back? Can he find a better mound elsewhere? Was there such a place? Or could he live on his own?

There was only one way to find out. With one last glance at his home, he walked away. He was excited to find out where he would end up.



“LEJOS DEL MUNDANAL RUIDO”

by ANA G. JIMÉNEZ

Tonight, he sits in his home office. With legs crossed under him, he is solely surrounded by his vast book collection, the smell of cedar bookshelves and a single leather recliner. He runs his fingers back and forth over his bushy eyebrows, as he concentrates on his reading. With his short stature and thinning hair, this man would pass for any man in the masses.

He unravels his legs from under him and as he lowers a foot to the ground, he feels the initial tremor of an unwilling transformation. He plants his other foot on the ground, and, abruptly, they branch and root and coil deep, deep into the earth. Leaves grow from what were his legs a second ago as they find soil under the concrete of his house. Swirls of green encircling his normally brown eyes for a fleeting moment. In his mind, *he hears her scream*. And just as soon as the transformation lets go, he gasps back into a man.

He raises his eyes back into the room and listens for sounds from the large sleeping house around him. He sees the soft yellow light from the dining room, the fluorescent lights from the kitchen where the aroma from a family dinner of pabellón still lingers in the air. He hears silence. “Fine,” he thinks, begrudgingly. His life-long secret, still remaining a secret to all his loved ones in the human world, and the loneliness of that secret continuing to be his sole confidant there too.

From an opened window comes a high-pitched whine.

“I know, Rhune,” he tells his German shep-

herd. “I guess, we’ll have to go tonight.”

He groans upright, resentfully, and puts his feet in his worn leather slippers, clasps his hands behind his back and sloughs to the hallway that looks to both the front and the backyard. His absence from the human world and the presence in the hybrid world always clashing. He knows he is unusual. He knows he has to live a double life. He knows there is no one to tell his secret to in the human world. No one to unburden himself with. No one who would understand. But, oh, how he wishes this was different. How he wishes he could stop being a shapeshifter, and just be a human father to his children.

Rhune runs around the house to meet him at the backyard gate that faces the kitchen.

“No, Rhune, we have to go the other way,” Kerek says. Rhune lets out a low whine.

Kerek grasps the doorknob to the front yard, a knob that is in the middle of the large wooden door, and steps into the warm and muggy Maracaibo night air.

He walks to the side of the front yard and stands, with Rhune by his side, in front of a voluminous jasmine plant that expands a full wall. “Madam Jasmine, if you will, Rhune and I need to come through to the hybrid world.” Its perfume is released into the air and dissipates as quickly as it started, an affirmation of passage, though no hybrid would dare refuse passage into the hybrid world to a shapeshifter, let alone a biome leader.

Its branches part, and where a wall should be,

instead, a small hut at the edge of a forest is visible, sunlight flooding through the portal into the Maracaibo night. Rhune lets out an exasperated sigh.

"Now, Rhune, I know you don't like children, but we have to see them. And Ivi." If a German Shepherd dog could roll his eyes, Rhune would have.

Kerek and Rhune step through the portal leaving the human world behind. Kerek turns around to see the curtain of jasmine closing. The view of his human home disappearing. He groans, not knowing how long it will be until he's back. But says, "Thank you, Madam Jasmine, for allowing us passage," and where the curtain of Jasmine was, now stands a plump woman with gray short hair and deep green eyes, "Of course, sir." she replies and bows her head.

Ahead of the trio, two small children play in the yard of the hut. The oldest, a girl of about 5 years of age looks up.

"KEREK!" she shrieks. Her companion, a boy younger than her also looks up and similarly screeches in glee at the sight of Kerek. Both children run towards Kerek and wrap their arms around his legs.

"Mis hijos!" his signature greeting to any child he meets, "Let me look at you!" Dutifully, both children look up to see a smiling Kerek.

The girl with shoulder-length black hair, brown eyes and blonde eyebrows, wastes no time, "Kerek, look what I can do!" and where the girl stood before, now stands a puppy with blonde eyebrows, black hair, a white under belly, and a tri-colored right front paw. The puppy runs around Kerek wagging her tail. She shifts back into a human squealing "I'm just like Rhune!"

A deep throaty voice of a muscular man with deep brown eyes, long black hair and a pointed nose coldly says, "No one is like me." Eevee furrows her eyebrows at Rhune and looks down.

"Oh, now Rhune, Eevee is just saying she

seems to be a dog-human hybrid, which is, in fact, like you, old friend," says Kerek with a smile, to his own protective hybrid. Rhune rolls his eyes in response.

Taking on a more serious tone, Kerek whispers, "Now, Miss Eevee, are there other shapes you have been able to shift into?"

"No, that's the only one," says Eevee, unbothered by the question.

"I can also shift now," says Eevee's companion who had been uncomplainingly waiting for his sister to show off. "Oh, is that so, Mister Iroh?" asks Kerek with a broad smile, which reaches his eyes. And where there was a small boy with orange hair and green eyes, now stands a small tabby cat of the same coloration. Then, the boy is back and the cat is gone. Rhune growls from where he stands behind Kerek.

"I will be the most *POWERFUL* tabby cat in the hybrid world!" Iroh exclaims throwing his fists in the air.

"And, the human world!" exclaims Eevee, joining Iroh. "Can we go to the human world now, Kerek?"

"No, hijos mios, not yet," says Kerek. A pout builds in Eevee's lips. "You two remain a mystery, hija mia, you know that. We don't yet know what kind of hybrids you and Iroh are," Kerek explains, bringing up her little face to his. "You two are special hybrids," Kerek offers, as further explanation.

Two simultaneous events interrupt this exchange. Out of the door of the hut, a tall woman with short salt and pepper hair steps out, exclaiming "Kerek?! Is that you? *Why are you here?*" and a murder of crows flies overhead and colonizes the trees at the edge of the forest, a short distance from the hut. Rhune, following at the aerial spectacle, smiles upwards.

"Word travels fast," says Ivi. The crow standing on the lowest branch of the tree nearest to the hut, jumps off its branch and lands as a human in front of Kerek and Rhune.

“Brother! Welcome home!” exclaims the tall man in tight black fighting gear, looking directly at Rhune. They approach each other and hug. As they separate, smiling, the crow-now-human turns his attention to Kerek.

“Sir, this is breaking protocol. We didn’t know you’d be entering the hybrid world today,” says Rowan.

“It’s an unplanned visit,” says Kerek. He turns to Ivi, who cocks her head to one side and asks again, “Kerek, why are you here?” anguish now showing on her face.

Kerek softens his gaze, and says, loudly, but without breaking eye contact with Ivi, “I heard an eternal scream just a few minutes ago,” the sound of an audible gasp surrounds them, each tree, and each insect, and each worm, joining in with the crows over heard, including Rowan. Rhune, looks over at his brother, knowing the news that his shapeshifter will deliver next. You see, protective hybrids can sense their shapeshifters shape changes, even though they can’t themselves change into more than two shapes.

Evee, who had been clutching at Ivi’s legs asks in a whisper “Ivi, what’s an eternal scream?”

“It’s a shapeshifter’s last summons,” Ivi says through shaky breath, fighting back tears. Evee looks down, still confused.

Rowan, composing himself first, asks “Who is it?”

Simultaneously, Ivi says, “That’s why you’re here, and not at the Council with this news,” she closes her eyes as the first tears fall.

“I’m so sorry, Ivi. It’s Ada,” he embraces his old friend. The sad cries of a murder of crows fill the air, in symphony with Ivi’s flowing tears.

Rowan, head bowed, whispers, “Our commander...” then, his expression hardening, says to Kerek, “Why you? Why does she want *you* and not Ivi, or one of us!” He gestures widely, angrily, at the army of crows above.

“I don’t know, commander. That’s why I’m

here,” Kerek says. Then, he says to Ivi, “Ivi, what were Ada’s final shapes before her human shape died?”

Ivi wipes her eyes and lowers both of her hands to clutch Evee in one hand and Iroh in the other, “I don’t know, Kerek, but I do know that she left this biome about 30 years ago,” Kerek stiffens, he turns to Rowan and his army. “It seems we do need to assemble the Council. Rowan, I’ll leave that to you,” he says, moving away from the tenderness of that moment of loss and grief. “We all know we have a finite window to find a shapeshifter after their eternal scream,” Kerek continues.

“Sir, will you be coming to the Council with us, then?” asks Rowan.

“No, Rhune and I will have to go to the library,” Kerek says. Rhune winces at this statement, his face turning into a scowl.

Kerek turns to his friend and the two little hybrids, “I’ll find Ada, and I’ll bring back anything she says, Ivi. I promise.”

To Evee and Iroh, he says, “You two, please keep Ivi company, and behave while Rhune and I are gone.” Evee and Iroh shake their heads in the positive.

“Um, Kerek, one more thing. After she retired from the crow army, she was obsessed with your research. She was convinced that there was more to our ancestry, more to hybrids,” says Ivi looking down at Evee and Iroh. Kerek nods. With a slight comprehension of why it may be him who is being summoned to Ada’s deathbed.

As Kerek is saying his goodbyes, the murder of crows takes off, over the vast mountainous land, and into the horizon, where, if one were to have binoculars, you could see a palace buried into a mountain in the distance.

Next to him, Rhune says, “Shall I carry you, then, old man, or will you be actually shifting today?” a small smirk escapes Kerek’s lips as he shifts into a massive golden wolf. Rhune laughs,

shifting into his German shepherd form and both take off in the direction of the library.

From the window of the hut, Ivi sees the wolf and the dog disappear into the distance and whispers to no one in particular “Ada, my love, I so hope you found something to help explain these two creatures,” and she looks down to see Eevee and Iroh sitting at her legs as a puppy and a kitten, and shifting back into human children. Each daring the other to see who can shift back and forth fastest.

If you are thinking, dear reader, that the two dogs are headed to a place of books, and paper smells and peace and quiet, you would be quite mistaken. The shapeshifter library is nothing of the sort. *Consider this your warning.*

The wolf and the dog arrive at a small, dark opening attached to a massive chimney-like structure. The vegetation taking over the rocks ages ago.

Kerek and Rhune, shifting into humans, both look ahead, knowing what each of them will have to do to retrieve information on Ada’s whereabouts.

“Right, I’ll stay here, as always,” says Rhune, breaking the tenseness of the moment.

“I’ll go in, and try not to get us killed,” says Kerek. He hesitates, thinking of his wife and six children in the human world. They would have no idea what happened to him, if he failed inside the library. But, he makes his legs trudge towards the opening, so that one man walks on, as the other, stands guard outside the opening to the cave.

As Kerek enters the structure through a dark tunnel, he walks to the end with his hands on the wall to guide him, a small bright spot in the distance tells him he is getting closer to entering the body of the library. The tunnel opens into a vast rock cave. To the sides, several staircases line the walls of the rocks, and go up towards to the top of the cave, where trees grow out of and a fine ray

of sunshine dares to escape into the cave. Below, there are three pools of water. Before Kerek has had a minute to collect his thoughts, it talks for the first time.

Shapeshifter, the roots, the insects, the bacteria, and all inhabitant animals within the cave say to Kerek in a unanimous whisper, *you have brought your protective hybrid with you.* Rhune, outside of the cave, can hear this, and swallows hard. He hates this part. And while him and Kerek have survived all of their previous trips to the library, he can’t help but feel his heart start beating faster. *We shall consume him when you loosseeeeeeee. We shall consume you, too, shapeshifter.*

“I’m here to find Ada, the last shapeshifter commander of the crow army, whose eternal scream I heard today,” Kerek exclaims loudly into the void.

You have three types of shapes to find her, and 30 seconds to determine each shape. If you do not meet those terms, we shall consume you, shapeshifter. We start now.

“Right...Ada lived to old human age, so any shapes she may have mastered late in life would have been longer-lived than humans,” he thinks out loud.

Outside, Rhune sees the roots coming, he fights his instincts to run from them. If he runs, Kerek dies. If he doesn’t run, he may die. Death often being the currency for information in the hybrid world. He takes a deep breath, and lets the tree roots take a hold of his ankles and calves. They stop there. *For now.*

Kerek looks down, hating the decision he has to make in the next few seconds, “Which of the three pools to get to hear the whales? Ada could be a blue whale right now,” he thinks to himself.

You have 15 seconds, shapeshifter. The cave resonates.

Outside, the roots around Rhune’s legs tighten. He feels their glee at their potential of getting a meal. He growls at them.

Kerek looks at the pool that is deepest blue, and from the rock platform he now stands, he dives into it. Long ago, he figured out that landing into water hurts less when one is a small fish, so as he dives, the human shifts and a minnow plops into the pool of water. He swims as rapidly as a minnow can, and then shifts, again, into a sturgeon, with each beat of his powerful tail, he now makes more lead-way into the ocean. He swims to the edges of the cave where he sees the open ocean, a root comes out of the rocks from the cave and grabs him by the tail.

Not so fast shapeshifter, we have a deal. You can't leave into the open ocean. The cave screams around him from every animal, every alga, and every bacterium in his watery surroundings.

The animal forms tend to take over human reasoning, especially when one doesn't shift often, as it is in Kerek's case. Kerek shifts from a sturgeon to a dolphin, while the cave still has a hold on him.

He chirps, he sings. *Where is Ada, the shapeshifter? Is she here in the ocean with you?*

His brother and sister dolphins sing back. *No, Kerek, the shapeshifter, leader of the Savanna biome, she is not with us.* Kerek, the dolphin, swims back into the cave. The cave roots letting go of him. He shifts into an eel and slithers up the water column, all the while thinking human thoughts and, then, the man breaks the surface of the water.

You have two types of shapes to find her, and 30 seconds to determine each shape. If you do not meet those terms, we shall consume you and your hybrid.

Kerek runs up the stairs on the sides of the cave, wet, cold, but thinking rapidly. "A long-lived tree, then," he continues running to the very top of the cave where trees have taken over the opening to the outside.

The roots on Rhune now crawl up his torso, and tighten. He looks up at the blue sky above and thinks, "Don't let me die now, old man."

Kerek, out of breath, arrives at the top of the

cave. *5 seconds.* He hears all around him. Barely stopping from a run, he shoves one foot to the side of the cave in between the rocks, his foot becoming roots that take over the rock. He plants his other foot next to the first one. Then, at 90-degree angle to the floor of the cave, he lets the shift take place. Where the man stood, just a second ago, now a quiet tree with no beating heart, sways. His roots grow fast, signal to all neighboring roots that he is the mother tree and the father tree, and other trees should not fear him. Finally, he asks, "*Is Ada, the shapeshifter, with you?*" through a series of complicated chemical mixtures. The reply is clear, "*Ada is not amongst our roots, not near, not far, for we roots are all connected.*"

Kerek falls flat on his human face as the cave releases his second form from the rocks.

You have one type of shape to find her, and 30 seconds left, shapeshifter. Your hybrid will be most delicious. We have so missed the taste of raw meat.

Outside, roots crawl up to Rhune's neck and start to tighten. He panics and starts thrashing against them.

Your hybrid is not playing nice. The cave reverberates. A snicker heard behind the whispering voice of a thousand creatures in unison.

Kerek's heart begins to race. His thinking rapid, "What options are left? A long-lived land animal? Longer-lived than a human? There are not many species like that. A bird? There are some long-lived birds, but not many that out-live a human. A mammal?"

10 seconds, shapeshifter.

Outside, Rhune has been overpowered by the roots, they have toppled him over, and have started to run across his face, silencing his screams. His attempts to shift out of their grasp, unfruitful.

A land animal, Kerek settles on. He shifts, and a python falls to the ground. It entwines around itself, tasting the air with its tongue, "*Is Ada amongst you?*" the python says, and other reptiles within the cave respond, "*Ada is the biggest*

amongst us,” they say to Kerek, the python, in a hiss, “Where is she?” he asks as a python. “The Seychelles,” they answer.

Kerek shift back into a human, and screams into the cave “I’ve found her. Release my hybrid now!”

The roots trapping Rhune, blocking his airways, retreat, unwillingly, leaving him panting and coughing on the ground.

Kerek runs out of the cave, into the tunnel, he trips and falls a few times in the dark, and back into the hybrid world, where he is blinded by the sudden daylight. He can only see the figure of a man on the ground where he left Rhune, “No, no, no, no,” comes out in breathless gasps “I took too long,” he panics and begins running at full speed towards the toppled Rhune. Rhune slowly sits himself up, coughing the whole time. Kerek lands at his side wrapping his arms around his hybrid.

“I’m sorry I took so long,” he tells him while still kneeling by his side.

Rhune stops coughing and catches his breath enough to whizz out, “Do you think telling the Council will go better or worse than this?” a smirk escaping his lips through coughing fits. Kerek smiles, as he helps Rhune to his feet.

Rhune shifts into a panting German shepherd, while Kerek, feeling protective over his hybrid, follows him towards the Palace that houses the Council meetings shifted into a brown bear. Sometimes the human thoughts also take over a shapeshifter’s shapes.

Now, the Council itself is not as dangerous as the library, you see. But, individuals of the Council have previously gained infamy. Imagine, dear reader, the ego that could amount in the human heart, if one could, at will, turn into any animal, plant, or bacteria. Imagine the power, imagine the potential misuse of it. The Council attempts to be civil and manage the hybrid world, though having the greatest ten shapeshifters of the time in one

room can be challenging, even dangerous, should there be a demonstration of dominance in, say hippopotamus form (which has happened), given the differing views on how to manage the power they hold.

Rhune and Kerek arrive at the edge of the grounds of the castle, and shift back to human. They enter the castle and walk straight into a circular, stone rimmed chamber that holds Council meetings, where most biome leaders and their hybrids are already present and waiting. Rhune walks in first, and lines himself against the wall behind Kerek’s chair on the circular table. Kerek enters after him.

“Is it true, then?” Ciric, a tall pale woman with grey eyes, the leader of the polar desert biome says. Kerek looks up at her, as he takes his seat.

Eidie, Ciric’s neighbor, and the leader of the tundra biome, a brown-haired woman, with cerulean eyes, says “Kerek, please!”

“Do you not trust the word of the commander of the crow army? The most prestigious in our land?” says Kerek, as he looks around the table and notices an empty chair, anger exploding within his chest.

“Of course, we do!” pipes up Reinier, the leader of the Taiga biome, and a tall man with scruffy blonde hair and moss green eyes. “But, we have to hear it from you.”

Kerek laments, “I heard Ada’s eternal scream a few hours ago,” he hears a hint of disbelief in his own voice.

The eight other biome leaders at the table bow their heads in silence. A moment of reverence and respect for the last moments of a once-great warrior and commander. A friend to many of those at the table.

Obviously, no creature would ever live forever, dear reader, but shapeshifters live many lifetimes; as humans, and when that form dies out, as other species. Despite the length of one

shapeshifter's life, all lives must come to an end, and there is always one last shape. The shape that eternally screams.

A Harpy eagle flies in through the chamber's only window and shifts into a massive, bulky muscular man with a grey beard and all black eyes. He stands behind the empty chair on the circular table. Kerek hears a low growl from Rhune.

A jaguar, then, leaps into the window and shifts into a man, "So sorry! My apologies!" says Syls with a flourish, as he lazily takes his seat at the table, "What have I missed?"

Kerek tastes his disdain for this man, and swallows hard.

"Kerek heard Ada's eternal scream today, Syls," Navan, the leader of the Montane biome says, the youngest of the group.

"Kerek did? *Why you, Kerek?*" asks Syls with a tone of indignation, the old feud between the neighboring shapeshifter leaders still alive and well, after once-young Syls attempted to take control of the savanna biome behind Kerek's back.

"Maybe we can put aside animosities for now, children?" Rosor, a stout woman with a smooth, silky voice, the leader of the desert biome, says.

Syls shoots her a dark glare. Kerek continues to stare ahead out the window, where, if he had binoculars, he could see Ivi's hut from where he is sitting.

"Where is she, then? What shape is she in?" says Oddo, the leader of the Mediterranean vegetation biome. A short man with a head of dark curls, cherub cheeks, and playful brown eyes.

Kerek inhales deeply, knowing what the next few words will cause him. He feels Rhune tense behind him. "She is in the Seychelles, an Aldabra tortoise, I assu..."

"YOU WILL NOT BE COMING ON TO MY LANDS!" is the immediate scream that spews out of Syls, the chair he was sitting on, flying backwards, his fists pounding the table. His massive hybrid tensing, talons taking over his hands,

as he stares at Rhune and snarls.

You see, dear reader, most shapeshifters can come and go across both worlds, changing shapes in each habitat they prefer to inhabit, at leisure. But, the common shapeshifters take months or even years to perfect a new shape, and they cannot shift into as many shapes, or as quickly, as the leaders of each biome can. So, after the great attempt of Syls to over-take the Savanna biome from Kerek, each leader now has to ask permission to come on the lands of another biome, else wars or such, break out. Imagine the espionage possible when one can turn into anything that is living. Imagine the *delicious* black mail.

Syls continues screaming obscenities at Kerek while Aziza, the leader of the mixed and deciduous forest biome, and Arora, the leader of the steppe biome, grab each of his arms in turn, pulling him back from Kerek's face. He thrashes against them.

"There is no other choice, Syls," comes the thunderous response from Kerek, "I don't want to go into the tropical biome any more than you want me there," continues Kerek.

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" continues to bellow Syls, Ciric and Eidie rolling their eyes at the age-old outburst.

"Could I offer a potential solution, then?" says Oddo calmly, unperturbed by the explosion of temper, "I'll come with Kerek." Oddo, being the calm and rational presence in the council, is highly respected, despite his petite size. No request of his is ever denied.

This suggestion stills Syls. He picks up his fallen chair, sits back down, as a lazy sneer spreads across his mouth. "You would do that, Oddo? You would risk your life to help *Kerek?*" he chuckles at the absurdity of the suggestion.

"Wait, are we assuming foul play here? Is this a natural death or has someone done something to Ada?" says Navan, a worried crease forming across his eyebrows.

"I don't know," says Kerek, and looks over at Oddo frowning. "Aldabra tortoises are long-lived, and Ada has only been without a human shape for about 20 years. It could be foul play," he continues.

"I will go with Kerek, as a sign of respect to Ada," says Oddo as a reply, looking at Syls.

Kerek, still confused at Oddo's insistence on coming, concedes with a nod to which Syls replies "Fine. Kerek has permission to enter my biome *only* when accompanied by Oddo."

"And, what of your protective hybrids?" says Oddo, looking behind him at the slender woman with cat-like eyes. The question takes the rest of the Council aback, an audible gasp leaving many of their lips, as no biome leader would ever cross into other biomes without their protective hybrid. But, Oddo knows the play-on-words that Syls has been capable of in the past.

Syls snarls at Rhune, and replies through gritted teeth, "Your hybrids can come through as well."

"It is settled, then," says Oddo and without further ado, stands up looking over at Kerek and Rhune, "Let's not waste time," gesturing at the window of the chamber.

Kerek, stunned at this unpredictable turn of events and the unexpected resolution of the Council meeting, stands and looks over at Rhune in dismay. Rhune shrugs his shoulders slightly, and follows Oddo and his protective hybrid.

Oddo looks out the window and extends one arm out of it, which turns into a thick vine that twists down to the ground, Rhune and Nyx, climb down the vine. Once they are on the ground, Oddo's vine retracts and the man shifts into a barbary macaque and climbs down the side of the building. Kerek flies out of the window as an African fish eagle, and down to meet his three companions.

As he lands, he shifts into human and starts, "Oddo..." but he is cut off, "Not here, not now,"

Oddo says firmly and beckons the group to follow him out of the castle grounds and into the thick forest of hybrid trees.

Oddo walks the group to a Magnolia tree, and says to it, "Bartolomé, if you could allow us passage, please." Briefly, a man's face forms from the leaves, the leaf face nods and from its bark a portal opens. The foursome walk through and pass back into the Human world and into the Málaga air. The salt from the ocean and a light breeze hits Kerek in the face and, momentarily, he smiles.

Oddo and Kerek keep walking with Nyx, as a lynx, and Rhune, in German shepherd form, down the Paseo del Parque near the University of Málaga. Kerek smiles at the sight of the old building, and remembers his time at this university fondly.

Kerek starts again, "Oddo..."

"Apapapapa..." is Oddo's response with a finger up on Kerek's face. Kerek resigns and just follows wherever Oddo may be leading them.

The group walks through dusk in Málaga, with silent streets, through the historic district and into the Alcazaba.

As they start their ascent into the Alcazaba, Oddo says, "Did you know that even here in the heart of Málaga, in this old fortress, we still have a rich diversity of trees, brushes and flowers?" Kerek is surprised by this topic of conversation and looks at Oddo sideways with a deep furrow in his bushy eyebrows, "Is... that... so?" he replies, letting his confusion show.

Undeterred by Kerek's tone, Oddo continues, "You see, many humans, and some in our world who prefer animal shapes, see green, and assume that it's all the same species. Plants are categorized as one *simple, green* thing, not a multitude of species, as they often are. It's called green blindness, and I think it's an *affliction*," he accentuates this last word, his Spanish accent coming through. "An... *affliction*?" asks Kerek, even more puzzled

now than he was at the beginning of this conversation. “An affliction we’ve taken advantage of,” Oddo continues.

The four arrive into a courtyard with trees lining the edges, their branches long taking over as the ceiling of the structure. Four triangular hedges line a middle fountain. Inside each triangle of hedges are rose bushes blooming. Oddo steps into one of the triangles, turns to Kerek, and says “If you could, please, step next to me. Nyx and Rhune will keep watch while we talk. There is much to be learned here.”

Oddo shifts into a rose bush, fitting with the rest of the bushes inside the hedge triangle. This particular species is not one Kerek has shifted into before, so he examines its leaf structure, its flowers and their arrangements, their aroma, the placement of their thorns. He, then, shifts both feet into roots and, using chemical signals, sends out a message to determine the correct root pattern. His root-feet receive a message back, and he shifts into a rose bush. He gets messages immediately. There’s old knowledge here. *A human afflicted by green blindness may have not been able to determine the subtle differences in all the rose bushes in this particular hedge*, Kerek, the rose bush, thinks. *So, these are not mere rose bushes, but other shapeshifters*. Oddo, the rose bush, states in chemical signals a confirmation of “foul play” in Ada’s death. Another chemical message comes to Kerek “cracks between our worlds.” Most shapeshifters tend to pass on knowledge cryptically, so Kerek can grasp a rudimentary understanding of the message, though the substantive parts will have to be worked out later.

Kerek sends out his own set of chemical signals, “Why Ada?” All concurrently reply “knows too much.” Death being the currency for knowledge in the hybrid world. Kerek sends chemical messages of thanks, and shifts back into human, as Oddo joins him. Kerek leans over to Oddo and whispers, “How long have you known?”

Oddo shrugs, “Not long enough to understand. I suspect we’ll discover more once we enter Syls’ biome. And, with any luck, find Ada before she dies.” Kerek nods, though so many questions remain unanswered, steps out of the triangle hedge, and with a cock of his head, tells Rhune to follow. The pair walk down the Alcazaba together, with Oddo and Nyx following close behind. Quietly, Kerek says to Rhune, “It seems we are walking into danger, *watch yourself*,” as he throws Rhune a side-ways glance. Rhune, the German shepherd, sneezes in indignation.

Oddo leads the group to an abandoned greenhouse. In the back of the greenhouse a tall Banyan tree stands. Oddo and Kerek both stand in front of the tree. Kerek says, “We have permission from Syls to come through to the Seychelles. My name is Kerek, and this is my protective hybrid, Rhune,” Kerek gestures to the German shepherd sitting next to him.

Oddo, then says, “And, I’m Oddo, leader of this biome, and this is my protective hybrid, Nyx,” and he gestures with his mouth to the lynx sitting next to him. A portal opens through her bark. As dawn is breaking over Málaga, darkness still engulfs the Seychelles. The foursome walk through from the human world back into a dense forest in the hybrid world. Rhune and Nyx automatically shifting back into human once they step into the hybrid world.

As the portal closes, the foursome look into the darkness, Kerek smiles and says in awe, “Excellent. Fireflies. They always know the night’s secrets,” and he shifts into the masses of fireflies, disappearing from the group, as Oddo loudly whispers “Kerek, no!”

“And he tells me to watch myself,” says Rhune, incredulous. He throws his nose into the air, and tenses, “Someone’s here with us,” while standing behind Oddo, “That brute of a harpy eagle,” he continues.

Oddo without looking back at Rhune, still

fixated on trying to find Kerek, the firefly, says, “You didn’t think Sylys would let us enter without supervision, did you?”

Nyx shifts back into a lynx and swiftly climbs up the nearest tall tree and also watches the mass of fireflies, tail flicking off a branch. Ready to pounce, should it be needed.

“How do we get Kerek back into human form, Rhune?” asks Oddo.

“Look for the firefly using morse code. He thinks it’s hilarious to morse code with his butt,” Rhune replies fighting a smile. “Does she ever talk?” he asks, pointing with his thumb at Nyx.

“Only rarely. Ah! Yes, there’s some morse code! I see him!” says Oddo.

Out of nowhere, the Harpy eagle, comes out of his hiding spot and goes straight for Kerek in firefly form, beak snapping, ready to crush the shapeshifter. Nyx jumps from her perch, claws

out, and catches Conan, the harpy eagle; they both fall towards the ground, but Conan manages to shake Nyx loose before they hit it. Rhune shifts into German shepherd, jumps into the air, and snatches the eagle mid-flight by the neck with his teeth, one canine tooth penetrating a full eye socket on the bird, and he throws the eagle hard into the ground. The man, Conan, screams, “AH-HHHHHHH!!! My eye!” as he hits the ground.

Not bothered by the commotion, Oddo looks down at the bleeding Conan, and at Nyx and Rhune both holding him down and says, “Even Sylys knows how unlawful it would have been for you to harm, *or kill*, a biome leader, if that was your intention here. *You are so loyal to him that you would face your own death?*” he says to Conan, who continues screaming in pain grasping at his bleeding eye socket.

“My brother will love to see you hang!”



screams Rhune right at Conan's bleeding face.

"Ah, yes, let's make sure the crow army knows what's happened here." Again, without looking away from the fireflies, one thick tree trunk grows out of one of Oddo's legs, and he sends out messages to all of the surrounding trees to alert Rowan and his crow army.

Kerek shifts back to human "Did he...Was he about..." he looks at the scene, eyes wide.

"Yes," says Oddo. "It seems Nyx and Rhune have just foiled your assassination attempt."

"We have more trouble than that," says Kerek. "These aren't hybrid fireflies. They are human fireflies, *in our world*," Oddo, Nyx and Rhune all turn and look at Kerek in shock. Oddo is the first to reply, "We must be near one of the cracks between our worlds, then. But, that's a problem for later. We have to move, and find Ada. Head towards the beach, we'll portal onto the Aldabra atoll through the hybrid mangroves," Oddo again points with his mouth, "Bring the brute with us, I'll continue to update Rowan on our location," thick tree branches come out of the ground and bind Conan's arms behind his back, a thicker single branch wraps around his neck. Rhune gladly takes the opposite end, as he walks Conan with the rest of the group out of the forest and onto the beach.

The group arrives at the beach where, in the distance, the Aldabra atoll can be seen. As they near the mangrove portal, they see the cloud of crows headed their way. Conan, bound as he might have been, starts to struggle against his restraints and against Rhune. He attempts to shift, but the restraints won't allow a transformation. Nyx joins in to help Rhune drag Conan into the portal.

The mangrove hybrid shakes before the group approaches, a worried woman's face forms from the leaves, "Kerek, the shapeshifter, I know why you are here. You are almost out of time. She is right on the other end of my portal." Heart

pounding, and completely exasperated with Conan's attempts of delays, Kerek shifts into an African bush elephant, picks up the struggling Conan with his trunk, and runs into the portal, with his three companions running after him.

Upon emerging on the atoll, Kerek shifts back into human and lets Conan drop hard on the ground, Rhune and Nyx quickly resuming their posts at restraining him. A single Aldabra tortoise sits with a pool of drying blood all around her. Tears prick Kerek's eyes at the sight, he walks up to her, and shifts into the same species. Screaming from crows now coming from everywhere around him now.

"Ada," Kerek, the tortoise, says gently. The dying tortoise struggles to lift her head, and quietly lets out a "You came, Kerek." Kerek ambles closer so he can hear her.

In a hushed voice, she says, "I love Ivi, tell her that. In this shape, and in any other shape I've taken, she is my one true love." Kerek, the tortoise, feels remorse for being the one at Ada's deathbed. "We are the product of a genetic mutation, you and I. You know that. You found that mutation. But, this crack between our worlds is advancing hybrid evolution at a rate unseen before. Hybrids will soon be able to become shape-shifters, should their animal form die before their human form," Kerek, the tortoise, looks at her with wide, unbelieving eyes. "I've seen it happen here, near this crack. It will change our world, and you must learn more about these cracks before it is too late. You alone can track the evolution of this mutation and figure out how it came to be. You alone can figure out exactly what Eevee and Iroh are. You know they're not mere hybrids, as well as I do. But, that's only half of the reason I called for you. The second part, dear friend, is knowledge I hope will ease your tortured soul. I tracked down the original family tree of shape-shifters from thousands of years ago." Kerek, the tortoise, continues to look flabbergasted, and

starts to say “No one has ever been able...” but she cuts him off, “I don’t have much time,” she says now struggling for air, “The original family tree of our ancestors showed that shapeshifting was familial, a genetic trait that didn’t just *appear* in someone, as we’ve all assumed, but was passed down from father to father to daughters. Our original line has been so dispersed since shapeshifters stopped mating with other shapeshifters, you know how complicated relationships between shapeshifters can be, that our genetic mutation was diluted with human genes, but *it is* a family trait. One that I expect will jump a generation or two, but will remain.” Ada, the dying tortoise stops, to let Kerek’s tears fall freely. “Dear friend, you have a large family back in the human world. You will not be alone in this for long, I suspect.” Kerek, unable to compose himself, walks up to Ada and puts his neck around hers. And it is then that Ada takes her final breath. Held by a friend of hundreds of years, and with her beloved crow army protecting her final moments.

Oddo shifts into tortoise now too, and says gently, “She’s at peace now, friend, you can let her go.” The pair shift back to human, Kerek with large swollen eyes, and a tear stained face, and Oddo holding his friend up. Rhune holding Rowan who is weeping in concert with the rest of the crow army.

“We should bury her,” Rhune says to his brother in a whisper. Rowan manages a nod, and attempts to calm his breath. And the two men start digging a giant tortoise-size hole on the beach next to Ada’s body.

“She called me over Ivi to give *me* peace,” says Kerek, now staring blankly at Rhune and Rowan. “I have to go back to Ivi, to tell her that...” he chokes up again.

“The crow army took Conan away, I suspect you can find a hybrid here that can lead you close to Ivi’s hut,” says Oddo.

“No, I need to go home first,” says Kerek

through gritted teeth, as tears continue to fall down his face.

So, he waits until Rhune and Rowan bury Ada. He waits until everyone present has been able to say their final farewells. He waits until the cruelty of having to continue to exist after losing a loved one sets in. He waits until the realization that he will have to watch the world move on from this loss while their reluctant hearts cannot—will not—let go. He waits until the sun sets on the following day, and, then, tells Rhune, “We have to go now.”

Through a series of portals, Kerek and Rhune come through the backyard portal, a loquat tree hybrid, of Kerek’s family home in Maracaibo. They emerge into full daylight to hear shouts coming from the front yard. *Carajito, bajate YA!* Rhune, immediately runs into the front yard, and barks at all of the turmoil.

His youngest child emerges from the kitchen door, and says, “Papá, we’ve been looking for you!” She’s wearing thick glasses, a head band, and pig tails.

Que te acabo de decir! His wife’s voice continues to scream.

“Guess who decided to avoid punishment by climbing onto the roof again?” she says by way of explanation with a shrug. Kerek knows exactly who, and smirks.

The girl takes his hand, and asks, “Where have been?”

Kerek goes down on one knee, hugs her, and says “Lejos del mundanal ruido, hija mia.” ❖

“BAD ANGELS”

by JASMIN LEIGH

Bright pop-up ads selling Glessite skincare for “softer & smoother skin” and the new Cushaw Juice sure to “quench your thirst with a healthier zap” compete with the digitized losing game of blackjack on one screen and a search engine on the other, text caret blinking for attention. Deft fingers adorned with chipped iridescent mauve nail polish move across the gaming keyboard, as if sure of what to type, but then stop halfway in thought.

She stares at the two women on screen, between their steamy french kisses and naked caresses, imagines their skin is fried octopus under her teeth, their hair as soft as tulle, a lilac bush between her lips.

There’s a loud banging at Anya’s front door that snaps her out of her thoughts. She grimaces, hunching over in her purple gaming chair further. She squints angrily at her dual monitors shining their warm blue light on her despite the darkness of her tiny apartment. After a moment’s breath the knocking picks up, even louder and more annoyed than before. She can tell he’s more pissed off than usual. Was our meeting today? Was today Monday? She eventually shrugs, trying to keep focused on the task at hand, which at the moment, consisted of finding a good fantasy to indulge in, beyond the blurred images of nipples and silvery tongues.

Her cellphone vibrates at the hint of another unread text and her own unsent ones accompanied by more banging on her front door. Despite her patience, she slams down on

her keyboard, getting up from her seat. She lived in a pretty worn-down boarding house, the rent was reasonable enough for her parents to pay, especially since she was unemployed, and it was near downtown, with its vivid neon lights signaling extravagance, ornate bars, noisy streets, and colorful signs selling everything under the sun, consumerism included. The old couple who ran it were nice enough and didn’t ask any unnecessary questions, their only request was to keep noise at a minimum. I wonder what he’d do if I got kicked out of my apartment because of him.

Anya stomps over to the door, getting on her tiptoes to peer through the peephole. The noisy banging jostles the frame and she purses her lips at the man on the other side of the door. Despite the pristine white suit and graceful wings, it’s the scowl on his face and the invisible vein pulsing in his temple that she notices first.

“I know you’re in there, you fucking good-for-nothing shut-in!” He says it against his own obnoxious knocking, jaw clenched.

She watches bored as his lips curl around each word in spitting anger.

“And you ruined what would’ve been a really great orgasm.” She whispers bitterly to herself, unlatching and unlocking the door.

Ralph stares Anya down with such roughness it would’ve cut into her.

“Why are you here?” She asks simply.

“Are you stupid or something? I already told you, since you can’t seem to remember our appointments, I figured home visits would be easi-

er.”

“But I’ve only missed like two or six meetings.”

Ralph quirks an eyebrow. “And of course that’s not an issue for you, but it is for me.”

He walks past her, stepping into the sanctuary of her one-bedroom apartment, under the dingy red lighting he suddenly looks less angelic, not that anything about him was actually pure to begin with. She eyes him intimately, the synthetic skin like leather, his burnt umber glass eyes, somber black hair. Really, it’s just nylon that was sewn into holes in his head, but she still wonders what it would feel like to run her hand through it and tug. Would it hurt? She frowns, ignoring his spiel on responsibility. Probably not.

She eyes the beauty mark underneath his left eye. It’s just silicone, probably the same kind used to make my sex toys.

Anya’s pulled out of her lamentations by the finger flick to her forehead.

“Ow, asshole!” She yelps.

“Pay attention dammit! If not for my sake, then at least for your own!” He snaps back, “Unless you wanna be stuck with me until the day you die and we wind up coworkers, can you at least try to get your life together?”

She pouts, “You talk all high and mighty, as if you weren’t just as much of a waste of space to society. Don’t deny it, you wouldn’t even be here right now if we weren’t the same.”

“At least I had a job when I was alive,” His gruff voice trails off, “Until I got fired.”

Already bored of the conversation Anya yawns, shuffling back into her bedroom. “I like my life the way it is, thank you very much.”

“If you wanna call this a life.” Ralph follows loosely behind.

Anya plops back down into her gaming chair, “You Lose” in big glaring letters on one monitor and blurred out animated images of women tonguing and groping each other on the other.

Ralph notices the knocked over bottle of aspirin on her desk, white tablets scattered about, along with a half empty bottle of water-based lube and her discarded subway pass. He wonders how many months that card had gone unused in comparison to the lubrication.

He watches her change the game from blackjack to craps and asks, “Do you enjoy solitude?”

She doesn’t turn around, “I’ve always enjoyed my own company.”

“So, you never had many friends? I wonder why.” He scoffs.

Anya puts in her wager, craps wheel staring back at her. “I got tired a really long time ago of trying so hard to be liked, trying so hard to make connections and keep them. At school, at work, on the street. I was exhausted. I still feel lonely sometimes so I can’t help but consider trying still, but instead of trying to build up credits for college or job searching when I’m feeling particularly bored or lonely, I’d rather do this.”

Ralph gazes at the back of her blonde head, hair tied up in a high dangling ponytail. “Have you ever thought about working at a casino, since you enjoy gambling all your money away? Or maybe becoming a bartender, since you like to drink so damn much.”

Anya merely shrugs, “I don’t know what I’m doing, I feel like I won’t be okay regardless how hard I try, how much I wanna be. Unlucky...” She mumbles, losing a third time in a row.

Ralph heaves a sigh, “I won’t bullshit you. I don’t actually give a shit.” The lack of sympathy lacing his voice is enough to get the hint, “If you don’t start acting like a respectable citizen, I’ll be stuck as a virtual angel for the rest of my immortality.”

“Can’t fathom spending the rest of your days with me, huh?”

“Not at all.”

The government chooses those who were less than virtuous and honorable in life, so those un-

employed, scored low in school, or perhaps never went to school, weren't married or with children, shut-ins, criminals, i.e. the ones who contributed nothing to society. Those are the ones they bring back as virtual angels to repay their debts to society in a buddy system sorta way. They're able to help those alive and down-on-their-luck not go down the same path as them. What do they get in return? The chance at an artificial afterlife of their own creation. Their own paradise, or I guess heaven. Brain uploading was usually done every two years, but especially after death, similar to getting your ID, every citizen was on file. It was just a brain scan, after all.

Anya finally spins her gaming chair around to face him. "When you were alive, when you had a menial job, was that your life's goal? The epitome of your happiness? Just ending up another useless cog in the machine?"

Ralph would be lying if he said he didn't remember days of stocking shelves with forced positivity, promising his undivided devotion to the company whose name he can't even recall now.

"Why should we hire you?"

"Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years?"

"Why do you want this job?"

He shakes the memories loose against the hemisphere of his mind file. "Of course not. But then, I don't actually believe in happiness either. I never really got to experience it when I was alive to justify the bags under my eyes."

He moves, accidentally stepping on an empty Chinese takeout box and immediately sticks out his tongue in disgust, careful to mind the stuffed animals as he takes a seat on her messy bed.

"It's this." She gestures out at her bedroom, "This is happiness."

Ralph presses his lips together, leaning forward. "What about fresh air free of powdery cosmetics and greasy delivery? Or actual sunlight

that isn't tinged fluorescent?"

"Pfft, everything is online nowadays anyway. You can order food online, try on clothes and makeup at any boutique you want, go to casinos, arcades, even get a lap dance at a strip club. There's nothing that's not connected to the internet. Pedestrian signals, cars, microwaves, elevators, even you." She gives a mocking smile, glancing at Ralph out of the corner of her eye.

He sneers back, "I've already come to terms with my mortality, but thanks."

"Besides that, what's the actual point of going out? You talk about fresh air and sunlight. It's so dark outside from the constant smog, I think there's fresher air in my freezer than there is out there." Anya stares out the window at the never-ending night sky engulfing the city and all its scrambling prisoners.

He clears his throat unnecessarily, "How about a little give and receive? Tomorrow, come down with me to the unemployment office, if we really can't find you a job at least part time, I'll stop nagging you about it."

"Don't you think it's kinda ironic? You're preaching to me about being a respectable citizen dressed up as a fallen angel." Anya snorts.

"Believe it or not, my cruelty is hanging on by a thread."

Ralph stares dumbfounded across at Anya dressed in a blouse without any food stains on it and a pencil skirt without wrinkles, pointed toe heels clacking against the floor. He'd never, in the year he'd gotten to know her, seen her get dressed up. He didn't even believe she could clean up this well. He vaguely wonders if he finally short circuited and this was just a hallucination. Despite this professional persona, he knows her internet history would give her away in a heartbeat, all sleaze, games, and overindulgence. Anya grimaces her resentment, lips the color of pitted plums, blue-black near the line of her lips, and dark red

everywhere else.

“What a slow build up.” Ralph says, after a moment’s breath.

“You’ve contoured my life just to fit your quota, feel bad.”

Ralph watches her get ready for their appointment at the unemployment office, suddenly looking out of place in her own drab apartment. He feels vaguely obligated to help her in some way, maybe it was just programming on the government’s part, or maybe he actually wanted to see what Anya would look like as a responsible member of society. Perhaps he really didn’t want her to end up like himself, dead with nothing to show for it except more work in an immortal afterlife.

Even if his motivations were for the wrong reasons, he was just as selfish alive. What would make him act any differently dead?

The train ride there is rumbling and overcrowded, with Ralph standing over Anya who managed to steal a seat quick enough. He holds on, staring down at her with a look akin to annoyance but it’s more quizzical than that. What happened to make her shun other people so furiously? He watches her play games on her cell-phone, flinching each time someone’s shoulder or leg brushes against her, completely oblivious to Ralph’s lamentations and steady gaze. Was the work too hard? The people too cruel? Now that he was thinking about it, he didn’t really know much about her life, how easy or difficult it may have been. He’d never asked. She paraded around like a stuck-up so and so, hating the thought of having to surround herself with working people when she could just ask mommy and daddy for money in a pinch. He briefly ponders if she was actually afraid of people, a twinge of guilt settling somewhere deep in his hardware, but then he remembers he couldn’t care less, regardless, this was for his sake.

“Why are you walking like that?” Ralph can already feel a nonexistent headache start to throb in his forehead, watching Anya limp and waddle alongside him.

“My feet are killing me you fuck, that’s why.”

Anya clutches onto Ralph’s shoulder, leaning against his mechanical weight, his feather wings sheathing her like a down blanket. It didn’t take nearly as long as he thought it would to get to the unemployment office for their appointment, even the wait to get their number called was prompt. Ralph would be lying if he said he wasn’t relishing the thought of being able to pawn Anya off on her case worker for a little while, if only so he can have a smoke.

Anya’s eyes perk up at the sight of a nearby vending machine, clumsily trotting over. She presses a few buttons on the machine before a can of grape-flavored Smitter energy drops down to the bottom.

Ralph heaves a sigh, practically growing roots where he stood, watching her crack open the can with a cheeky grin.

“You’re a bathtub slowly draining the last of my sanity.” He grumbles.

Anya takes a long slurp. “Nice analogy.”

Ralph gnashes his teeth, gripping Anya’s wrist, along with the rest of her wandering personality, and drags them to the cubicle housing her case worker. The woman sitting meticulously at her desk drums her fingernails across her keyboard, the coarse taps and clicks welcoming the two.

Anya sits in the chair in front of the women’s desk like a slice of moldy bread.

“Well, I’ll let you two get to it.” Ralph says more than eager, fingers itching for a cigarette.

“Actually,” The woman stops him, her voice droning on, “It would be easier if you were to stay during the appointment. You *are* her virtual angel, correct?” She emphasizes that last remark like pouring salt in a wound.

Ralph stares for a moment in silent desperation, enthusiasm ruptured. Eventually he slouches into the chair beside Anya who can't help but smirk at how witless he looks.

"Alright, since you don't appear to have any certifications, let's go over some of your hard skills," Her case worker peers hard at the bright screen in front of her, "Python, C++, C, C#, HTML, customer service, food preparation."

Ralph quirks an eyebrow Anya's way. He had no idea, though it makes sense she would be so tech savvy.

"Do you have any soft skills?" Her case worker asks, flitting between Anya's work experience and a pop-up tab displaying her own dating profile matches.

Anya simply shrugs, her face on autopilot, sweating can of Smitter in her hands.

Ralph chimes in. "She's very openminded! An exceptional listener too!" He laughs; pupils consumed in a lie as he leans forward.

Anya smirks, turning to gaze out at the grey sky, screech owl clouds outside the windows. She can't wait to soak up the smoky air. For such a shit-talking bastard, he was a terrible liar in the heat of the moment. Thankfully, she can tell this woman doesn't give a damn, the mix-match of her floral print blouse and metallic-colored nails, the oversized glasses sliding down the bridge of her nose as she stares fixed at her screen that says more about Anya's past than it does who she actually is. She misses the blue light from her PC screen stinging her eyes red, the startup and shutdown sound, and the feel of her gaming chair under her weight.

"We've been on a quest, her and I, searching for her unrealized talent, and she wants a job really bad." Ralph smiles unnecessarily, his eyes shifting towards Anya. "Isn't that right?"

Anya listens to his unique version of herself, and she wants to vomit, not because of the blatant lies but because she wishes she was connect-

ed to the internet, the cybernetic world of recognition.

Her lips twist up into something comparable to a smile, eyes staring off into space. "I won't let you down."

"We gotta stop and get something to eat." Everything in Anya's line of vision suddenly starts to pixelate and swerve.

Big glaring signs advertising full body waxing and liposuction thrust themselves at her on the streets. Anya holds her head in her hands, as if to keep whatever was left from shattering. "I'm fine for a little while, but when I'm out too long my head starts to get weird."

Ralph quirks an eyebrow but doesn't dig any deeper than that.

Thankfully for her, they're only a block away from a Saucebox. Amongst the hubbub of uncertain streets, strangers stitched together in awkward verses of noise and busyness. The chitchat, advertisements, wheezing of cars and exhaust all work together with the sound of her clicking heels on asphalt to soothe her flinty mind. When they walk in the two are hit with the scent of frying grease, soy, and animal guts of some kind.

The two notice a couple of advertisements between cycles of the restaurant's menu. One for lipstick promising a sexier kiss and another for SSRIs selling a happier personality. Fish stew, lentil meatloaf, grilled synthetic lamb burgers, pineapple teriyaki, vegetarian pizza, deep fried octopus. Ralph clicks his tongue, grateful to no longer have taste receptors or a need for nutrients and glances over at Anya, pursing her lips at all the choices.

In the end, she orders herself a grilled lentil burger topped with red curry, french fries with a side of spinach sauce and mint jelly, as well as a club soda, of all things.

"Want anything?" She asks absentmindedly, searching through her purse for cash.

Ralph crosses his arms over his chest. "I don't

eat, obviously.”

“Well then, be useful and find us a table, maybe one near a wall outlet so you can charge.” She snorts at her own terrible joke, the fluorescent lights above their heads making her blonde hair and his white suit glow brighter than usual.

He glowers. “Am I just a laptop to you?”

Anya simply pokes her tongue out at him; eyes squinted with mascara.

Finding Anya insufferable was an understatement, however, it was his job to be useful to her life in some way, even if his opinions were often ignored. The two take a seat among necktie businessmen and uniformed students, the sound of the fountain drink machine and sizzling food in the background. Ralph watches her eat with reckless abandon and suddenly finds himself trying to recall the mundane moments of his own life when he was alive, what made him who he was. From the food he mindlessly ate, to the clothes he loathed having to wash. Did he miss it? Not necessarily. But the realization that he no longer needed to do any of those tedious human things hits him like a wave, cold and cosmic.

“I think I preferred beef burgers.” He says randomly.

Anya’s brows furrow. “Huh?”

“When I was alive, I liked their cell cloned beef burgers more. I’d find myself eating takeout from a Saucebox more often than I could count, it was all I could afford most nights.” He vaguely misses the taste, but only because he can hardly remember it now, overclouded by more important things he wished to remember through the haze of brain uploading antemortem.

“Well, I’m allergic to most foodstuff, so artificial beef makes me ill.” Anya pouts, staring at the lipstick stains on the bun of her lentil burger.

Ralph’s eyes widen, eyebrows raised. “Seriously? You would’ve done well back in the twentieth century, I suppose.”

Anya laughs out loud. “I doubt it, I don’t

mind that there’s only a handful of things I can eat, it’s been this way my whole life.”

Ralph watches her stick a french fry into her spinach sauce and then her mint jelly, resisting the urge to blanch. “Well, I think the appointment with your case worker went well. She even did the impossible and got you a job interview.”

“You’re really cherry picking, aren’t you?”

Anya scoffs.

“If I didn’t, I’d give up all hope with you. Call it seeking escape.” Ralph deadpans.

“How long did it take you to form an opinion on me?” Anya asks with red curry sauce still on her lip. It doesn’t mesh well with her smeared plum lipstick, but it still manages to catch Ralph’s eye all the same.

He wants to ask, “Where did this come from all of a sudden?” but instead, decides to dissolve his disdain for a moment. “As soon as I met you, I knew you were the type of person I hated. Always trying to hold sway over everything and everyone, even though you’re just as scatterbrained.”

Anya smiles around her straw. “You have such an easy view of the world for a dead guy.”

“And you?”

“Well, I try not to think too hard when it comes to you. You’re obsessive, but not like compulsive. You obsess over the niche stuff, like me for example. Not only that, you’re fucking stuck-up too. A robot with a superiority complex, I’m sure there are some philosophers who would’ve loved you.”

Ralph laughs despite himself, but still can’t help but scowl, Anya eyeing him down with a mouth full of watery food.

“What’s with your obsession with cyberspace, anyway?” He asks.

“It’s better than sniffing bleach just to get a high, isn’t it?” Anya says it between bites of her lentil burger, the earthy taste staining her tongue.

Ralph can’t really argue with that. “You should be more thrilled, if this interview goes

well—”

“I’ll be making \$15 an hour.” Anya smirks.

“Plus tips.” Ralph adds.

“There’s no fucking reward for enduring life.”

Anya’s eyes stare through him like meat cleavers, it’s a shifting gaze as cold as obsidian. “It’s just apparently *moral* that I get a job, in your eyes.”

He loosens his white polyester necktie with a sigh. “Then I suppose the next thing we should work on would be getting you a boyfriend.”

“Nah, I remember my last boyfriend enjoying himself more than I ever did while we were together, it nagged at me all the time since he was polyamorous and I wasn’t. Besides, I prefer women.”

Ralph nods with certainty, probably a quirk he picked up in his robotic programming since he was never as diligent alive. “I can work with that.”

“By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask, what’s with the obnoxious wings but no halo?” Anya smirks between bites of her burger.

Ralph scowls. “Don’t you think that’s a bit on the nose? Let’s be realistic.”

Ralph’s hand, steel and silicone, connects with Anya’s front door in a cacophony of angry thudding. Against the heavy sounds of the metropolis outside and the dingy butterscotch color of the hallway he knocks on Anya’s door with an axe to grind. Three weeks had passed since her interview and to his surprise, she had been hired on as a bartender. Finally, the pearly gates of his own personal heaven were closer to being opened for him; the thought put his overactive mind at ease for the first time in his entire afterlife. However, it was her first day last week, and she hadn’t shown. Thankfully, the owner was willing to give her a second chance, apparently the woman thought Anya was cute.

“Damn it, you better be dead in there!” He scathes against his knocking.

Eventually, the front door opens, uncere-

moniously, to reveal a disheveled Anya, with her bangs sticking straight up and bags under her eyes to match.

“What do you want? I thought I was finally done with you.” She grumbles.

Ralph clenches his fists. “I have half a mind to punch you in the fucking face.”

He doesn’t bother trying to be polite, pushing Anya out of the way, he finds himself stepping over dirty laundry with the scent of booze lingering in the air.

“Why aren’t you at work?” He asks as calmly as he can muster.

He’d had it drilled into his head, quite literally, that empathy was the most important thing in being a virtual angel. But he already knew that didn’t work with someone like Anya.

“What day is it again?” She murmurs, checking her cellphone for the date, but instead gets distracted with the mobile game was playing a while ago.

Ralph pinches the bridge of his nose and Anya wants to ask why; it’s not he has any blood vessels or a nervous system he needs to calm down, but since he was already pissed off at her, she bites her tongue.

“What do you think will happen if your parents decide to stop helping you out financially one day?”

“Why do you care?”

Ralph steps towards her, close enough that it makes her forget about her cellphone for the time being. “Because unlike me, you get a chance at life and you’re wasting it like a spoiled brat.”

“What? Do you have like have the entire self-help shelf installed into your software or something?” Anya snorts.

“I’m dead Anya, this isn’t living, it’s purgatory for me. But you, you’re getting a second chance to turn your life around and you’re blowing it. The way I see it, I should be the one alive and you should be the dead one.” Did he really mean

that? Ralph furrows his eyebrows at that last part, covering his mouth with his hand as if to keep anything else from coming out in a fit of anger.

There's a silence so heavy after that, it threatens to crush the two like a dense rainstorm. Ralph walking over to the nearby window for fresh air he doesn't need and Anya sitting dumbly on her sofa in the thoughtful darkness of an urban night.

"You didn't have to say I should die." Anya pouts, her voice only a murmur.

Ralph grimaces. "What? I didn't say that."

"Did so."

"Did not."

Something suddenly feels unloosed in the air, Ralph searching for the moon in a sky devoid of the numinous he'd never even believed in to begin with. This brief sonatina between living and death abruptly felt like a lobster pot, having the idea of freedom so close at hand only to have it snatched away again. It's not like he had the best life when he was alive anyway, he doesn't miss living so much as the idea that he was still alive. Right now, he was just the phantom consciousness of a man he may or may not have been. Was he even the same person anymore? He had the same memories and quirks he had when he was alive, as well as some new ones. The notion that he was just software where his heart and brain used to be, an idiot who died young and worthless, crosses his mind more than he'd like to admit.

"You... you must've had a tough life, when you were alive that is." Anya's words are hesitant and smaller than they've ever been.

"Life is tough in general, just one big collective lesson." Ralph grumbles. "I don't know if life gets better, I genuinely don't. And I don't know if I care about the uncertainty anymore."

"How come you were never assigned a virtual angel?"

Ralph rests his steel weight against the windowsill. "Well, for the most part, I've never been

without a job for too long."

"No wonder we don't get along." Anya purses her lips.

Ralph folds his arms over his chest. "I was never the sharpest crayon in the box growing up, barely got into high school, and when it came time to take my college entrance exams, I failed. Since my parents already saw me as a disgrace, I went out and got a job."

"Did it help?"

Ralph snorts. "If you mean helped me pay my rent on time, then yes. But it was a never-ending cycle of being fired and searching for a new job, only to be fired again."

Anya's nails dig deep into the flesh of her thighs. "No one knows what I've gone through, or understands what I'm going through, so how can they offer suggestions on what I should do to live a happy life? I try hard not to be the type to yuck somebody else's yum, you like it I love it, but don't try to push your values onto me. It's annoying, the skewed view of me."

Ralph glances at her out of the corner of his eyes. "I'm not trying to push my values onto you. What I see in you is essentially myself. I perceive you; those perceptions are created in me. So, I'm trying to save myself when I'm with you."

Anya sits there like an ailanthus that was just rained on, quiet and unsure what to say after something like that.

"Have you ever thought about visiting your parents?" She finally asks.

Ralph sighs, making his way over to the sofa, he perches himself on the arm. "I'm not allowed to just roam around freely like that; I've got a tracker installed in me. I can only leave home for client consultations, software maintenance, and emergencies. Besides, they already know I died, they held a funeral and everything apparently." He mumbles that last part like an indignant child.

For a split second, Anya forgets the body sitting beside her is purely robotic. The real Ralph

had been buried or cremated for a while now.

Her eyes perk up briefly. "Home? Where do you live?"

"I live in a government-funded capsule hotel."

"...Ew."

This time Ralph does laugh, his voice low and calm. Anya wonders if that's what he actually sounded like when he was alive.

"You should laugh more often." She says without much thought.

"Then give me something to be happy about." He retorts.

Anya doesn't hide her grimace. "What time is it?"

"7:56 pm."

"I guess I should get ready for work then." She heaves a long sigh.

Ralph stares fixed at Anya's messy blonde hair and finds himself smoothing down her bangs. She even lets him, without much of a fight, the soft silicone of his fingertips patting her hair down, too tired to get up off the sofa anyway.

"You can start tomorrow, if you want."

There's a gentleness to his voice that Anya isn't at all used to.

She finally finds it in herself to wave his hands away. "Nah, if I don't do it now I never will."

When she does stand up, it's with a tentative confidence and tipsy wobble that Ralph finds admirable, not that he'd ever admit that to her face.

Anya flashes him a cheeky smile. "Life gets worse, then it gets better. I'm sure it'll get worse again, but it'll also get better."

I jolt awake with the words "Death was caused by sharp force trauma to the skull" repeating in my head over and over again. Instinctively, I reach for the back of my head, gasping for breath that no longer exists, checking for the imaginary blood I feel slicking over my synthetic skin.

"It's quite all right. Welcome back."

"Welcome... back?"

"Congratulations. You've been brought back to repay your debts to society as someone's virtual angel. I look forward to working with you."

I glance around the stark white room, at the meticulously dressed woman in front of me with her rehearsed smile, down at the crisp white suit I'm wearing, feather wings protruding out from someplace on my person, and reach behind me to touch the mechanical feather wings welded to my back.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

Between the long hours at work and the speed dating shit Ralph had signed her up for, Anya can barely keep her eyes open on her walk back home, her brain shutting down with each step of her heeled boots. So far, she didn't hate mixing drinks, the smell of whiskey in the air, the light reflecting off ornate wetness, and the quiet conversation found between cocktails. She sighs with exhaustion, making her way up the walkway to her boarding house when she notices someone sitting on the front steps.

"It's you?" Anya doesn't hide her tired confusion.

Ralph stands up with grocery store bags in hand. "Welcome home."

"Did we have a consultation today?"

"Nope."

Anya rubs the sleep from her eyes in vain.

"Then why...?"

"You've been consistently going to work every night for a month now. Good work tonight." He says simply.

"And the groceries?" Anya points down at the aforementioned plastic bags.

"I thought I'd make you dinner for all your hard work. Well, come on, open the door, my hands are full." It vaguely occurs to her that Ralph was actually waiting to greet her when she got home from work at 3am. In the back of her mind, she wonders how long he was waiting for.

Anya's too tired to argue, it's not like she'd turn down free homecooked food anyway. How long had it been since someone had cooked for her? She rarely even cooked for herself, the plates and utensils still clean in her drain basket. As soon as she unlocks the front door, she doesn't even bother taking her boots off, instead she immediately trudges toward the sofa where she collapses in a sleepy heap of muscle and absinthe scented clothes.

Ralph quirks an eyebrow, hitting the lights. "Long day?"

"Mm-hmm." It's muffled against her face in the sofa cushion.

Ralph takes out a package of miso paste, tofu, green onion, dried seaweed, parboiled bamboo shoots, and dashi stock.

Anya shifts on the sofa to get a better look at him in the kitchen. "You know I'm allergic to most foodstuff, right?"

Ralph gets to work washing off the green onions. "I'm making vegetable miso soup. You can eat soybeans, yeah?"

Anya stares narrow-eyed. "...Yeah. It's fine."
"Good."

"Is it that big a deal?" The question is sudden, but she can't help but feel like she hadn't done anything to deserve this.

Ralph searches through her cabinets for a knife to cut the scallions. "Given the hell you put me through to get to this point, I'd say it is."

Anya glares, but there's still a glitter to her eyes that Ralph notices with a smirk.

She watches him in a sleep-blurred fog of soaking wakame seaweed in a fragrant tidepool, cutting green onions and silken tofu on a cold beach, slicing and boiling packaged bamboo shoots in a relationship of water and vegetables, dissolving a dashi packet and miso paste into the soup broth before adding in soft tofu, an umami scented festival of flavors.

It had been years since she'd been woken up

to homecooked food. The rested haze combined with the growling of her stomach at the thought of a warm meal, the lights clouding over her eyes upon waking up, warm and safe indoors. The light behind Ralph's head makes him look like a literal angel staring down at her, jostling her awake with his rubbery flesh.

In her tired reverie she can't help but reach a hand out to tousle his shiny hair, gripping the strands hard between her fingers.

"Have you ever taken a flat iron to your hair? I bet nylon can handle heat, right?" She mumbles with a ditzzy, sleepy smile. She imagines what his hair would look like curled or crimped.

"You're a weird one; it's time to eat."

The spoon against her empty bowl is the only sound that echoes in the silence, followed by the last gulp of broth. She debates thanking Ralph for the meal, but instead, Anya watches him light up another cigarette with furrowed brows.

"Do those even do anything for you?"

"Hm?" He blows a slow drag, grey smoke swirling into the air in wisps, "If you mean can I taste the nicotine then no, I don't have any taste receptors, which is probably a good thing. I think I mostly do it out of habit."

She debates staring over at him, eyes flickering for a moment. "Smoked a lot when you were alive?"

"Yeah." He says softly.

The air suddenly feels stagnant and weighted with the idea of death. The reality that he was dead, that this body wasn't his despite the human likeness of what he looked like when he was alive hit both of them in different waves. Ralph contemplates his immortality and Anya ponders over if that made him any less human than her. He obviously had more self-awareness than she did.

"Holy crap, talk about freaky. I look exactly the same. Even down to the birthmark underneath my eye."

Why do I look the same? I mean, you could've made me look like a straight-up robot or a muscled babe."

"We find that keeping your appearance the same as before you passed on helps keep you... calm. We understand the shock of dying but then to wake up and find you have a completely different face and physique might cause a breakdown." She says breakdown as if I'm still human and might mentally snap, what she really means is malfunction or short circuit.

"Huh. But I mean, you could've made me look like I was 12 again or 65."

"But you didn't die when you were 12, and you never lived to be 65. You passed on at 31, therefore your appearance will stay at 31."

"...Right."

"You've also been implanted with a morality chip, just for safety reasons. Your goal is to be an upstanding example to your client, granted you still have all your memories, tendencies, and personality, faults and all."

"It's to keep us in line."

"So that, for example, if you had a client who was dead set on killing someone, you can't, for example, assist them in doing so. With this in place, you have a more clear-cut understanding of what's right and wrong than you ever did when you were alive and can report any incidents to the proper authorities."

"Why can't I remember the details of how I died?"

"Death is something traumatic, and given it's your last memory, we found that for whatever reason, when brought back from brain uploading, it just won't retain properly. In stasis, we simply implanted the direct cause of death to compensate. We understand the need for closure, unfortunately, this is all we can offer."

Under my breath, I repeat the words "Death caused by sharp force trauma to the skull."

Her name is Georgina. She's the giggliest girl Anya's met and to think they met through a multiplayer game, something more apt to her than dating apps. An asymmetrical horror game at that. They were both on the same team and healed one another throughout the entire round of their

very losing game. Dating her is easier because despite her genuine smile, she isn't comforting. She's flighty, she can be cold and brutally honest, in the same way she can be quite sweet, but it's what Anya's used to, even Georgina not wanting her for more than a moment's distraction is what she's used to. Kindness scares the crap out of her, and it's fleeting. Overly gentle people, they're not meant to stay long, not that anyone stays long, that's the point of life, but there's some broken mess in Anya that certain people can see and handle and then there's the people that seem way too sweet and normal to even fathom how broken she really is deep down. Anya understands she feels keener towards the people that don't give her much just because it's more comfortable, but it's also more realistic because people aren't just overly kind for nothing, right?

Ralph would probably say that's where her self-righteousness comes from, but their consultations had become less and less lately. When they do meet, it's brief and odd, with Ralph not being all gruff and annoyed, and Anya not knowing what to say in the absence of irritation. She had a job and a partner, all the things society said would make her feel happy and satisfied in her life, technically his job was accomplished. What did those spats mean to me? Anya finds herself going to work each night to mix drinks for the same patrons with the same woes, just to trudge home and maybe get to call her girlfriend, but most nights she doesn't feel like trying too hard just to have a conversation with someone, only to take a handful of pain pills and antihistamines so she can fall asleep. With Georgina, I have to actively be the one that reaches out, I have to try and think of what to say to keep interest and hold a conversation, her mind constantly moving onto the next new thing. She's constantly changing the script of her life, and I envy that. I suppose I find her attractive not just because she's hot, but she has the qualities I enjoy and desire, and I want to

get closer to the warmth and lack.

Anya thinks back faintly to when she “*confessed*” over videocall.

“I feel something like comfort, but it’s not necessarily comfort or even joy. There’s this warmth I feel at the thought of you, this nervousness of losing the idea of this warmth. It’s not even a passionate heat or anything, it’s just warmth.”

“Aw, you’re so cute when you wanna be.” Georgina’s eyes crinkle with joy, her purple ombre-dyed bob bouncing with a silent giggle.

Anya grimaces. “C’mon, these feelings weren’t immediate for me. I don’t know how or why. It would be easy to say it’s because you don’t treat me like shit, but that’s not why either. I feel at ease with you, like maybe I can let my own mask slip a bit and you wouldn’t judge me or even care. I’m not tipsy right now, I feel like we should just forget I said anything.”

Maybe it’s because she doesn’t care. I’m not a super important person to her and I like that? She realizes her own oddities in the moment. It’s not that she doesn’t have feelings for Georgina, she’s beautiful and funny and it’s super fun playing video games together, sharing a beer with her while she makes all kinds of dirty jokes about people Anya’s never met.

She also knows it’s never going to last because Georgina moves forward, and Anya can’t help but stay stagnant in her own fears.

Ralph makes his way to the windy rooftop of Anya’s apartment complex, since that’s where she told him to meet her over the phone. It had been a month since she last spoke to Georgina, her mind cross-referencing what could’ve gone wrong other than her ex-girlfriend’s finicky, salacious personality. She was the most important person to herself, after all. In the same vein, she quit her job a few nights ago in-between angel face cocktails and mint juleps. For what it’s worth, she

kept in contact with all her coworkers at the bar and even her boss who offered to give her a letter of recommendation whenever she wanted. She knows Ralph probably won’t understand, but she hated herself more the more she had attained. Anya hears the door to the boarding house’s rooftop creak open, already knowing who it was.

“Did you know my name could’ve been Azalea, but for some reason, my parents chose Anya.”

“Azalea’s far too pretty a name for someone like you.”

Anya smiles, staring up at the night sky and its void through the smog. She sits on the ledge with her feet kicking off the side, Ralph slowly walking up to her. Something about being up so high on the roof makes him feel a bit uneasy, as if something bad were about to happen, some sort of *déjà vu*.

“What about you?”

“Me? Oh, I have my grandfather’s name. It’s ironic that we’re both dead now. Who knows? Maybe Ralph is a curse.”

He takes a seat beside her, his feet dangling off the side of the building. She wants to say how much she missed this, but the words get lodged somewhere in her throat. It felt like she hadn’t laughed in a month.

“I’ve always felt like an outcast and a forgettable one at that, so I get it.”

Ralph pats her knee. “Don’t worry, you’re an outcast, trust me.”

“Maybe I’m cursed too.” Anya sighs.

“Let’s curse each other then.”

When Anya does look at him it’s with dilated fatigued eyes, her back arched. “Curse me.”

Ralph falters a bit. “That was too hot a line to be coming out of your mouth.”

She laughs so hard she throws her head back. “I missed your rapid-fire retorts, that snark and wisdom.”

“You think I’m wise?” Ralph crinkles his nose in a way, not unlike her ex.

Anya stares straight ahead at nothing and everything. "For the most part."

Ralph merely blinks at that, as if computing something unspoken. "Well, unfortunately, you're unforgettable."

"I'm a mess though."

"You don't show the mess as much as you think you do."

"Really?"

"It's been a pleasure working with you."

There's not much else to say after that, so the two simply sit in silence with the sound of traffic blaring and the wind tousling their clothes and hair.

"I did everything you wanted; all the things society sells to us as "good." Stable job, partner, even made friends at work. Paying my own rent for a while felt really good, I won't lie. Honestly, getting those things wasn't even as difficult as I thought it would be. But I just felt empty."

Ralph gazes at Anya's slumped shoulders, leaning back to look up at the sky. "When I was alive, I just remember wanting to be okay and enjoy life as much as I could. I also quickly realized I'd probably never be happy, at best, I was just trying to be content."

"Those things didn't give me peace though." Anya finally looks at him again as if pleading for something desperately, anguish etched into her quivering face.

Ralph suddenly wants nothing more than to make that face disappear, it doesn't suit her at all. It was the first time in the year and a half they'd known each other that he puts together the fact that his job wasn't to make Anya an upstanding citizen for society's sake, but perhaps he should've been trying to heal her suffering for her own well-being. Even if that meant he'd probably never get to experience heaven.

"What would make you happy?"

Anya closes her eyes and thinks on it for a bit.

"Peace of mind would make me happy."

"How will you know when you've got peace of mind?"

"I've spent my whole life going with what feels good and right deep in me. I guess I always assumed I'd just know when it happened, which sounds dumb in retrospect. When I feel a sense of calm finally wash over me, I suppose."

"It's not dumb. You're right, peace of mind is a real feeling and when it happens, you can easily recognize it."

Anya wearily rests her head on Ralph's sturdy shoulder. He lacks much warmth, but he smells like metal and clay. "When did you ever feel calm?"

"Between losing my jobs, working split shifts, getting disowned by my family, getting cheated on—this. I feel calm now."

Anya scoffs. "Now that you're dead?"

"No. Just being here with you, on this rooftop, in the middle of the night."

Anya can faintly feel sleep overtaking her mind. "How oddly sweet of you."

What was it that truly made us human in the eyes of others? Was it really just the ability to comprehend and understand the world around us? Was feeling hurt or anger or love what made humans separate from divinity? Humans were messy and honestly, even with a "purpose" installed in him, Ralph doesn't feel too different than when he was alive, he's just as lost and scrambling. Amid the people desensitized on the streets, the neon ads profiteering in the shadows of blackened skies, all the other little condemnations weighing on everyone too weak to give a damn anymore, the two sit in the hushed quiet of their own small existences that just so happened to coincide with each other.

"Just live in a way that makes you proud of who you are." ❖