



create the world you dreamed of as a pupa
swallow everything else

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1 – Illian Cluster

The Illian Cluster was almost perfectly silent. Nobody remained in the empty laboratories and offices. Observation chambers remained unattended and decrepit, and the main boiler's failure resulted in a chilling air permeating through the entire facility.

Nobody remained, except for one creature – a human-shaped monster wearing a set of dapper black clothes and purple scarves, standing significantly taller than any ordinary person. Their steps echoed through the facility, piercing the overbearing silence with their every motion.

They're coming, Zev repeated in their head between footsteps. Visitors. They're coming.

Before their departure, they needed to visit their favourite room – the kitchen. They had to make haste. The visitors would surely not be waiting around once they arrived.

Despite the halls of the station frequently twisting and bending, lacking any noticeable landmarks, Zev remembered exactly which path to take to get to where they wanted to be. As such, it only took them a few moments of pacing down the barren passages to spot their destination.

With no warning, a sudden *thud* rocked the entire station.

“Ah, ah, ah... that's them. Not long, then...”

They turned one more corner, and there it was: the room containing the food. It was

unfortunate that most of the doors of the facility were so small, requiring them to duck down and contort themselves just to get through.

Judging by the size of the other pieces of furniture in the kitchen, Zev assumed the previous inhabitants were much smaller than they were. Or was it the other way around – was Zev simply much larger than average? They didn't care enough to give it too much thought, since they were already busy snooping around the plentiful cupboards lining the room. They weren't even aware they were drooling on the floor with their mouth hanging open in an excited grin.

Zev bolted to the fridge, crouching down and yanking the door open, only to come to a jarring realization. They couldn't find any food. The fridge was bare. The cupboards were bare. The cabinets that usually contained the dehydrated food packets told the same story.

N... no...

Zev wasn't sure how to react. They placed a hand on their head and staggered backwards, suddenly becoming aware of how hungry they were. They didn't think to ration the station's limited supply of food, and an uncomfortable stomach pain crept up on them as a result. They looked around the rest of the room – behind the food storage area was a table and a set of chairs, along with a couple planters beside the doorway hosting some dead vegetation.

Zev heard something quiet in the distance – the familiar sound of feet walking across the

metal floor. But it didn't matter. The only thing that concerned them was their hunger.

They rushed over to the planters without a second thought and yanked the dehydrated plants out of their soil, scrounging up as much of the leaves and stem as they could. The plants were so crispy and dry that they almost crumbled in Zev's hands, but it didn't matter. Zev quickly wolfed them down, happy to find a slight bit of sustenance, but disappointed by how unfulfilling and short-lived it was. They turned their attention to the table and chairs, hoping to find some other source of nourishment hidden away somewhere.

Knocking the chairs out of the way, they lifted the table from beneath and flipped it over, only to find nothing but dust.

Zev shrieked in frustration, their cry echoing for several seconds through the facility. Sheer anger was all they felt.

Something entered the room. Someone far shorter than Zev.

The visitors? Zev didn't care anymore. In a blind rage, they reeled their leg back and kicked the figure that had just entered the room with all their might.

It sent the human hurtling towards the food cabinets. She let out a cry of pain as she bounced off the cabinet doors, which flung open to once again reveal the bare shelves. In their fury, Zev's mind made the only connection that made sense – this new person was the one who did this. *They* took the food away. *It was THEM.*

Unacceptable. Zev would not have it.

Zev shifted the physical properties and internal workings of both of their hands to sculpt them into pickaxe-shaped spikes by rearranging their body's matter. The transformation was briefly dizzying, but minor shifts were something they'd grown accustomed to. Zev looked down to see the person just managing to stand up after being knocked onto the floor.

They don't deserve to get up after what they did.

Zev raised their spike-hands above their head before slamming them down on their target. The spikes impaled the figure's whole body in a massive bloody splatter, tearing through everything between their head and lower back with a loud *crunch*. The victim twitched once or twice before becoming perfectly still.

Ah! A human... Zev took a closer look at the mangled mess on their hands. The human was fully impaled on the spikes, resulting in an excessively messy splatter across the kitchen. They struggled to pull their spiky hands out of the ground; they'd impaled the floor during the attack, but with a quick yank, they removed their hands from the ground along with the human corpse. Zev shook their hands up and down repeatedly, shaking the body off their spikes as best as they could.

Though they were too angry to acknowledge it, Zev wasn't fond of the mess. Too unpleasant. But it was *that* person's fault for taking the food away. After scraping off the remainder of the human's viscera, they reversed

the transformation of their hands and shifted them back into their regular five-fingered state. To Zev's dismay, they were still drenched red.

Without any clear purpose or direction, Zev squeezed through the kitchen's overly cramped door and ran down the hall. While they bolted through the station, one fact became apparent: this person could only have come here with a ship. A ship with a human pilot *must* have food.

Once again, Zev began traversing the unremarkable halls with haste. The station's docking bay was not far. They would have to pass through the station's main lobby to get there.

Before turning the corner to the lobby, they stopped and listened for any sounds. Nothing could be heard, so they bolted around the corner and flung themselves into the next room, highly appreciating the enormous doorway.

After gathering their bearings, they quickly scanned the room. To their right, a series of lounge chairs and coffee tables along with the station's main entrance-way. Straight ahead, a large holographic display showing a big blue planet. To their left, another human hiding near a water vending machine. It ducked behind the machine the instant the two made eye contact, whimpering all the while.

Another human. Zev snapped to attention. The human was *scared*.

“Kyeh-heh.” Zev peered around the vending machine and made eye contact with him

again. As soon as their eyes met, the human's whimpers escalated into screams of terror.

“*Fuuuck!* Oh god, fu-u-u-uck–” The screams then degraded into pathetic sobs as he shot out from his hiding spot, sprinting across the room towards the main docking bay's entrance.

Something clicked in Zev's head watching him flee. They immediately became filled with an animalistic sensation – the thrill of a predator seeing prey run for its life. Zev couldn't believe they didn't realize it sooner.

Food... food... food...!

Driven both by hunger pangs and primal instincts, Zev charged after the fleeing human. Although the couches and table proved to be a hassle to stomp over, catching up to the runner was almost an effortless task due to Zev's sheer size.

Zev easily grabbed him off the ground with both hands, and the human's wails intensified into bloody screams when Zev bent over and chomped down on his upper torso hard enough to impale it all over.

Starving. Starving. Zev needed food *now*.

Lifting the remainder of the human into the air, Zev grabbed his legs as to stop the flailing, and repeatedly swallowed in an aggressive attempt to fill their stomach. Eventually only a pair of boots were visible between Zev's teeth before they gulped one final time and sealed the human's fate.

The hunger quickly subsided. Zev licked their lips.

With a full stomach came rational thought and emotional control, though it took a few moments before Zev could clear their head and gather any coherent thoughts. They took this time to pace around the room and focus on their situation.

Yes, those two must have arrived on a ship – it's the best explanation for that loud sound they heard throughout the station before the encounter with the humans. It was an exciting thought, but Zev tried not to get too ahead of themselves; they still needed to confirm the existence of this spaceship, and they also needed to be wary of any other humans who might have boarded the station.

In their frenzy, Zev almost didn't notice the human dropped something before they were incapacitated. It looked like a small tablet or device, which, upon closer inspection, seemed to be an electronic identification card.

Seth Lapine. Male. 30 years of age. Hallow. The tiny screen even featured a mugshot of the person Zev had just devoured.

Maybe I can use this sometime. Pocketing the device and looking around again, they saw that the automatic door to the docking bay was still open, which Zev took as an open invitation.

“Don't mind if I do,” Zev happily spoke to the door, practicing their English words.

The docking bay was huge. Like the rest of the station, it was almost completely empty, save for a couple of tools beside the staircase leading down to the main floor, one large metal

box on the other side of the room, and a spaceship over to the left.

There it was. A small, but clearly functional, spaceship.

Zev had nothing to live for on this station. This was their ticket out... if they could even fit inside it.

They ambled over to the ship and began inspecting it for any sign of an entrance. The far side had a very distinct door-like shape engraved into the hull, but Zev couldn't see any way to open it aside from an input pad to its left. Several numbered buttons were present on its surface, with a narrow slot at the top.

Zev pressed multiple buttons in an attempt to make something happen. None of their random number combinations opened the door, much to their disappointment.

That's when it hit them. The narrow slot in the top of the keypad. *Maybe...* Zev pulled the ID card out of one of their coat's pockets. Finding it difficult to finesse the card into the tiny slot, they eventually slid it through, and heard a sharp beep as the door-like engraving slowly slid open. The ship released a small set of stairs that led up to the elevated entrance.

“Kyeheh-heh-heh!” They couldn't help but express their elation. *Now I'm Seth.*

The stairs were relatively tiny for Zev's feet, and the door was even harder for them to fit in, but they managed to squeeze inside by crouching down into the doorway and crawling onto the ship's bridge. It wasn't big enough for

any more than a few people, thus, Zev almost took up the whole area inside the spacecraft's cockpit. They couldn't even stand up straight because of how low the ceiling was.

Zev hobbled over to the front of the ship where the controls were displayed. A large panel at the front showed a screen with several options, but the two lines of text that stuck out to Zev among all the others were “engine power” and an unselectable “autopilot (previous destination)” button. They touched the screen where the command to engage the engines was displayed, and a faint rumble progressively became louder throughout the ship. Just as Zev had hoped, the autopilot button became available after the engines were at full power.

“Hello, Tina! Hello, Seth!” A chipper, high pitched voice suddenly started speaking up from within the ship. Zev panicked for a moment, craning their head around to see where the voice was coming from, but it soon became apparent that it was just the ship's computer.

Though this was definitely the escape route they needed, Zev wondered about the massive airlock that closed the station's landing pad off from the expanse of space. Would it open automatically? They guessed that it might, since they never found any clear controls for it during their month-long searches of the station, and those humans must have been able to board the station somehow without someone controlling it from the inside. No matter what the case was, it was a risk

Zev was prepared to take. They'd been prepared for a long time.

After adjusting their position a bit so they were sitting in a more comfortable manner near the ship's controls, Zev pushed the autopilot button.

“Autopilot engaged. Sit back and relax!”

Zev wanted to obey its orders, but as the ship carefully lifted itself off of the bay's floor and moved forward towards the airlock, it immediately brought Zev out of their relaxed state.

Open! Open up...!

As if the space station had heard their prayers, the massive bulkhead disengaged its lock and opened up. Relieved, Zev sighed. *Now* they could relax.

The view outside of the ship quickly changed from the blasé, white interior of the hangar, to the vast blackness of space, dotted only by the shimmer of distant stars and small pieces of nearby asteroid debris. Zev had no idea where they may have been headed, but they remained ecstatic at the thought of leaving the Illian Cluster for good. Anywhere was better than there.

“Now en route to Karma's Gateway.”

2 – Karma's Gateway

The world was rumbling. Zev woke up, startled by the sudden turbulence. What was going on?

They sat up against a nearby wall. The walls, the surroundings – Zev was in a spaceship.

Ah! Yes! Things were starting to make more sense as they remembered what was happening, though there was little explanation for the rumbling.

That is, until Zev looked outside through the ship's main view port. Wherever they were, their ship was about to land, presumably guided by the autopilot program. The area beneath the ship was filled with tall structures, scattered fences, and tall orange and blue motifs hanging high just outside the settlement's circumference, all connected to one another via paved roads. The world was an amazing and almost mystifying sight compared to their previous home; the Illian Cluster had no orbiting stars to paint beautiful sunsets like this one, no day and night cycles to give each passing moment meaning, and no vast horizons to view with immeasurable wanderlust. Zev didn't even know where they were, but they were already mesmerized.

While the indescribable excitement that came from being free of Illian was almost overwhelming, the prospect of being discovered by the city's inhabitants was just as unnerving, even if these people might be the humans Zev had

become so familiar with during their time on the space station.

Boom. With one painfully rough bump, the ship hit the ground. It didn't *touch* the ground, it *hit* the ground, jostling the inside of the ship even more. Zev got jerked around a bit, hitting their head on the wall behind them.

Autopilot needs lessons, Zev grumbled.

“We have arrived at: Karma's Gateway!” the ship's computer blared out at an annoyingly loud volume. With that, the rumbling and the movement ceased. However, the view of the outside world had been completely blotted out by something. It was suddenly total darkness outside.

This was a mystery that needed to be solved.

Zev stood up, though they had to hunker down uncomfortably low just to stay on their feet; the ceiling of the ship's bridge felt even lower than before. Zev wondered if their recent meal had triggered another growth spurt, or if the size of the ship was just smaller than they remembered it to be. Regardless, it was a pain just to move over to the main door on other side of the cramped vessel.

Lumbering around as awkwardly as ever, they opened the portal to this new world, ready to face whoever or whatever was on the other side.

However, almost to Zev's disappointment, there was no one there to greet the ship's lone passenger. All that was on the other side of the door was the interior of a dark, rusty garage, with metal workbenches and tools lining one side of

the room, and miscellaneous metal parts sitting on the other side. The only illumination came from a single lightbulb hanging from the room's ceiling between two heavy duty fans, painting the walls and floor with withered shades of brown and maroon. There was no light coming from directly above the ship – did Zev land inside a building?

Maybe this is a human town, Zev wondered, piecing together a few details they picked up on during their travel. The familiar tools, the autopilot's destination – perhaps this *was* a settlement of the species they knew most about.

Zev leaned out of the ship's entrance and clambered outside, accidentally stumbling and falling onto the cold floor of the garage, unharmed but rather irritated. They appreciated the garage's high ceiling after getting up, allowing them almost enough room to stand up straight without hunkering over like in the ship.

If there was one thing Zev would miss about the Illian Cluster, it was the vast and spacious rooms and hallways. The most frustrating aspect of this new location was the door to the rest of the building was probably meant for people six feet tall, not *sixteen* feet tall. There was no way Zev would be able to fit through that door.

However, there was a solution.

Arms, legs, torso, head – Zev molecularly rearranged every part of their body in a strange and eldritch display: skin and muscle contracted and compressed, organs groaned as they moved

around, limbs almost vibrating as they morphed. Even Zev's clothes were reformed, as those, too, were part of the shapeshifter's flesh.

They faced the door once again after their transformation finished. Zev was much smaller than they were moments ago, but their weight and appearance remained unchanged. They were still a few feet taller than the doorway, but Zev wasn't so tall that they couldn't crouch under and make their way into the building. Before opening the door, they made a point of listening to check if there was anyone else there, disregarding all the ruckus they made simply getting to the door. The lack of sound hinted towards abandonment, not too different from their old home.

With a turn of the doorknob and a gentle push on the door, the inside of the building revealed itself. From first glance, it looked a lot more comfortable and interesting than the chilly and boring garage. Working their way inside wasn't too hard with their new form – Zev ducked their head through the doorway and sidestepped in.

Carpet, they quickly noticed. Zev enjoyed how comfortable and warm the floor was, but was still upset that the ceiling was once again restricting their posture down to an awkward, crouched state.

They found themselves in a rather wide hallway with poor illumination and many rooms branching off from either side. On their right was both a staircase leading to a higher floor and a room with a stark white colour scheme. To the left

was a very dark room, and straight ahead was a very open room.

Zev decided to go into the white room beside the staircase. There must have been *some* reason this spot was a different colour.

After a careful inspection of the immediate area, Zev saw it. On the far end of the room, beneath a series of shelves, was a small fridge. Zev knew what that meant. This must have been a kitchen!

They rushed over to the fridge and yanked the door open, quickly falling to their knees to look inside. In front of them was a huge assortment of edible goodies, all free for the taking. Zev didn't recognize any of it, which made it even more exciting. More new things to taste.

Zev took everything in reach – small plastic containers containing meat of some sort, cylindrical containers holding some sort of liquid, a bar of something wrapped in a foily material – and chowed it all down. Zev didn't care one bit about eating the containers; their only goal was to get at the contents of each one, and with every bite they took, a new flavour washed over their taste buds.

Unfortunately, the fridge was rather small, and the hungry alien cleared it out much faster than they wanted to. But, for now, their appetite was put in check.

There was still so much to explore. Pleased with their findings so far, Zev ambled back to the hallway and made their way back over to the staircase, carefully walking up each step.

There was almost enough room to let Zev stand up straight while on the steps, but their posture returned to its bent-over state after they reached the second floor.

This floor seemed to be made of just two rooms: a wide-open living area and a sizable closet. The far end of the living area was illuminated by an open window almost the size of the wall itself, giving the room a gentle orange glow. Two loveseats on the left side of the room faced an exceptionally wide desk with both a holographic television set and a small laptop computer on top. Aside from a couple of potted plants near the corners of the room, there were no other objects of interest.

The computer had no external controls like the ones up at the Illian Cluster, so Zev touched the screen in an attempt to make something happen. To their surprise, the screen lit up when they did so, presenting them with a dark blue screen with some white words in the middle.

“Seth – enter password” was displayed on the monitor, followed by an empty box. Zev touched the empty box, and a large assortment of buttons appeared near the bottom of the screen.

This must be Seth's home. Ah, ah, ah, I don't know the password. But... ah, it's worth a try!

Zev had one idea for what the password might be. Kneeling down to get in a better position to type, they hit the keys T-I-N-A and pressed the “submit” button.

Incorrect.

Zev grumbled. That was all they could think to try, so they decided to leave the computer alone.

Instead, they turned their attention towards the holographic TV right beside it, sliding across the floor on their knees to position themselves directly in front of it. The base of the TV had a series of buttons on the front, including one large button labeled “power.” Zev pressed it.

Immediately, the translucent screen popped to life. Quickly looking up to see what was on TV, Zev was taken aback by what they were seeing.

EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM

Civil Authorities

Issued a

Civil Emergency Message

White words on a black background. The TV was blaring an intermittent alarm, followed by a much longer solid tone. Finally, someone began speaking.

“The following message is transmitted at the request of HLC fleet command of HLC Mystified Path in space sector F-3. A large, unidentified spaceship has exited subspace in close vicinity to HLC Mystified Path. The vessel is larger than HLC Mystified Path, and it is not of human origin. We have attempted communication with the unidentified spaceship and we have received responses in the form of an unknown language. There is a possibility that this vessel is of extraterrestrial origin. We do not know if this vessel is dangerous; all deployed human

spacecraft in the vicinity of space sector F-3 should immediately return to HLC Mystified Path or the nearest HLC space station while we continue establishing communication with the unidentified vessel. This advisory will remain in effect until further instructions or additional updates are broadcast.”

Beep. Beep. Beep. The TV then changed from the black screen to what looked like a weather report.

Zev couldn't comprehend half of what was being said in the alert. However, they did understand certain key phrases, such as “human,” “spaceship,” “unidentified,” “not of human origin,” and “unknown language.”

Then this must be a human planet... but do the humans know about me?

Zev grew anxious. The idea of humans discovering them was frightening. How could they hide their true identity without having any other physical forms in memory?

But then, they remembered. Zev reached into the pocket of their coat, taking out Seth's ID card. It had a picture of Seth's face on it, along with some other miscellaneous details Zev didn't care to interpret.

The only thing Zev needed was an appearance.

Morphing into a human's physique would be comparatively easy, since they just had to change how they looked on the surface rather than rearranging *everything*. Zev could even keep their clothes intact.

Taking a good, hard look at the photo, Zev memorized as many details as they possibly could from such a tiny picture. They changed the pigment of their skin and hair to match the photo, shifted the structure of their face around and gave themselves a 5 o'clock shadow, grew a human nose and pair of ears, hid their volon teeth behind a fake set of human teeth, and created fingernails on their hands. Most importantly, they changed their big cross-shaped eyes to the smaller eyes and eyelids of a human. They didn't like how limited their vision was in this form, but it was a necessary step to take to avoid detection.

Now I'm Seth, Zev happily recited in their head.

The light of the sunset outside was slowly fading away as the minutes passed by, leaving the building in a progressively darker state. Perhaps there was a light switch somewhere, but Zev didn't expect to be in the house for so long that it would become untraversable.

They *did* want to learn more about Seth and what he was doing on the Illian Cluster, though. With the computer inaccessible for the moment and the TV now playing some uninteresting program, Zev decided they would continue their search elsewhere. They went over to the nearby closet and opened the doors.

Nothing but hanging clothes at first glance. However, after taking a closer look at the small shelf above the clothes rack, there seemed to be some box-shaped object sitting by itself. Zev tried pulling it off, but the box flipped open when

it was carelessly yanked off the shelf, spilling several papers everywhere on the ground.

Irritated, Zev stepped back and looked down at the mess. They knelt down once again, trying their best to gently pick up the pages and stack them nicely, not bothering to figure out what order they were supposed to be in. As they were rustling the papers around, a picture of a spaceship on one of the pages caught their eye. Suddenly curious, Zev decided to read the page over.

“[...] boarding the ship, Aidan will cut the electricity and Tina will take the research crew hostage. Seth will secure the drive prototype, Aidan will leave, Seth will leave, and Tina will leave IN THAT ORDER.” Beneath the writing was what looked like a diagram of a large spacecraft, with several markers indicating different rooms, power routes, walkways, guard positions, and many more details Zev couldn't even begin to understand.

Is this a plan for a heist? Was Seth a pirate? Things were becoming a little more clear, but as Zev's questions were answered, more questions appeared.

Shuffling through a few more documents, there was one more page that looked like it contained relevant information.

“The target is HLC Hopeful Venture, the civilian capital ship one sector from Hallow. It is serving as a front for a small but advanced FTL research division, where a prototype subspace field emitter is being heavily developed. Hopeful

Venture currently contains a functional prototype of this field emitter, which is rumoured to have multi-sector jump capabilities, significantly more powerful than the HLC's current FTL drives.

We will board the ship from the lowest docking bay, closest to the location of the research bay. Upon [...]"

Mostly meaningless. However, Zev's suspicions about this whole heist business seemed to be confirmed.

Deciding to leave the papers on the floor, Zev rose to their feet and started walking back downstairs, once again enjoying the brief respite of the high ceiling above the stairwell.

Just across from the stairs was a small, dark room – too dark to see in. Zev reached around the door frame in hopes of finding a switch, and their efforts were rewarded: they felt a small knob on the wall, and, after a flick, the room was brightened with vibrant light.

Zev recognized this room – it was a smaller version of the big laundry room up in the Illian Cluster. This room seemed to match the kitchen's decor – white walls with a grey floor and ceiling – and it was also very crowded; there was just enough space to walk between the washer and dryer on the left, and the storage cubbyholes lined with books and other unidentifiable objects on the right.

On the far wall was a tall, monochrome poster hanging by a tack, featuring a military tank with the caption “DESTROY” written beneath it

in capital letters. Zev couldn't help but think of it as a clue to Seth's personality.

BANG BANG BANG.

Someone was slamming on a door. It sounded like it was coming from the front of the house. Zev immediately froze and listened.

The sound of a lock rustling around, followed by a door opening and gently closing, petrified Zev.

“Ey, Seth. Fuck-face. It's your good buddy, huh! Remember me? Aidan?!” a human voice rang out.

Zev panicked. They didn't have Seth's voice memorized, and they weren't even sure how well their disguise would pass.

“Where the fuck are you? I got a surprise waiting for you. Yeah, those techies you left me to get fucked by? Gave me a nice deal for your head. Good job coming straight back to your own home, by the way. Real smart move. Fuckin' idiot.”

Zev needed to get out, fast. There was no time to change their appearance. The front door was only a few seconds away, but Zev didn't know where this angry person was. Following their instinctive reaction, Zev jumped out of the dark room and turned to the left, ready to escape through the front entrance.

“Freeze, asshole.” Standing just before Zev was a human, presumably Aidan, holding a gun straight at Zev's face. “Wh... what the *fuck?!*” he shouted, clearly perplexed.

Zev quickly realized they were still scrunched down because of the ceiling. They

forgot they were nowhere near the correct height
to pass as a human.

3 – V-97

“I thought we had you all locked up already,” Aidan spoke, slowly stepping backwards, his gun still trained on Zev's face.

“...What?” Zev asked, imitating Seth's voice as best as they could, after only hearing a few words from the real Seth.

“Don't you “what” me,” Aidan demanded, “I know exactly what you are. Why don't you drop the facade and show me your true form?”

Zev froze. Did Aidan really know?

“James, get your ass in he-”

Aidan's beckon was cut off by Zev swiftly grabbing onto his wrist and wrenching it upwards, aiming the gun in the same direction. A piercing gunshot blasted from Aidan's weapon, firing straight into the ceiling.

Aidan grabbed Zev's arm with his free hand and tried to pry the alien off his wrist, but his human strength was nothing compared to that of a volon. With Aidan's arms up above his head, Zev lifted a leg in the air and kicked him in the chest, sending Aidan sailing to the floor with a loud *oomph*.

Zev took the opportunity to run straight out the front entrance as fast as possible. The door was still open; Zev ducked just low enough to pass through it as they bolted out of the building.

“VCF. Code white. Code white,” announced a nearby voice. “Karma's Gateway,

apartment 88...” the voice trailed off as Zev ran farther away.

A sudden sting shot through Zev's back as they reached the other side of the street, submerging himself in the dark veil of a nearby alley. They staggered around for a moment before regaining their footing; whatever that sharp pain was, it wasn't going to stop them.

Zev did a quick shoulder-check – those humans could have been in pursuit, but no one seemed to be coming yet. Regardless, Zev kept running through the narrow, nearly pitch-black alley, trying their best to avoid stumbling over any obstacles hidden in the darkness.

VCF? Code white...? They had no idea what that human voice was talking about. *But how did Aidan know exactly what I was? And...*

Zev slowed their pace a bit.

And...

Their train of thought suddenly stopped. They couldn't remember what they were just thinking about. They soon noticed they were very short on breath. There was a wide alcove in the wall to their right – Zev ducked into it to take a quick rest.

They started taking some deep breaths. However, no matter how hard they tried to stabilize their breathing, both inhaling and exhaling was a very shaky process.

Something was wrong. A sensation of lightheadedness came over Zev, and they were forced to lean against a nearby wall to avoid collapsing. Their mind was slowing to a crawl,

except for the vague sensation of confusion and fear invading their thoughts. Numbness was taking over their body.

A human walked around the alcove's corner, holding a long firearm in his hand. Just as Zev was about to speak, their legs gave out, forcing them to the ground.

"What did you do?" Zev hissed in their natural, growling voice, barely able to lift their head enough to look at the man.

He laughed, then took out a phone with his free hand and pointed it at Zev.

Reduced to a prone position, Zev tried to drag their body towards the human with what little energy they had left. Their breathing grew even heavier and their vision grew blurry in the timespan of just a few seconds.

"What... you..." Zev tried to repeat between gasps of air, but the words hardly came out.

The human walked up to Zev.

The volon's vision faded out.



When Zev woke up, they'd never felt so groggy in their entire life. Were they even awake?

Everything felt strange. The ground felt... grainy? Coarse? Zev tried to move one of their hands across the floor – a perplexing mixture of both rough and smooth met their touch, followed by an intense crushing pain in their hand.

Zev didn't have the capacity to react to the pain. However, they did manage to decipher a

voice – an echoing, reverberated voice that sounded like it was an eternity away.

“Ah! Can't be having any of this, can we, mate?”

The words felt meaningless, but still managed to instill stress in Zev's spaced-out mind.

Another sharp sting hit Zev in the back. Within seconds, everything faded out again.

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When Zev woke up, they'd never felt so groggy in their entire life. Were they even awake?

Everything felt strange. The air felt... biting? Frigid? The colour blue filled their head. Zev tried to move one of their hands through the air – but they couldn't. Something was locking Zev's hands in place.

Restraints...?

There was a loud mechanical noise. In an instant, the air's unforgiving atmosphere turned into something much more bearable. Soothing. Comfortable. The blue colour that was swimming in Zev's head quickly turned into beige.

“*Who're you...?*” Zev said to no one in particular, their speech incredibly slurred.

“It spoke,” someone whispered.

“Get it... before... wakes up,” someone else murmured.

Another sharp sting hit Zev in the shoulder. Within seconds, everything faded out again.

~~~~

When Zev woke up, they'd never felt so groggy in their entire life. Were they even awake?

Everything felt strange. The ground felt... smooth? Clean? Zev tried to move one of their hands across the floor. Yes, it was definitely smooth. This much was clear. It was quite cold as well, but not unbearable. However, the perfect silence of their surroundings stuck out to Zev. Either they'd lost the ability to hear, or they were completely isolated in a quiet place.

It was a chore just to pry their face off the floor, but their vision seemed stable enough for them to see properly, and they'd managed to form at least a few coherent thoughts.

As soon as Zev's mental functionality returned to a relatively normal state, a growl from their stomach made it immediately apparent that they hadn't eaten in hours.

Irked, Zev growled back. They could definitely still hear.

One slow movement at a time, Zev lifted their arms and legs off the floor, pausing every once in a while to avoid a head rush. Carefully, they brought themselves up to their knees, and, with the help of a nearby wall, they eventually found their way to their feet.

Now able to stand, see, and think somewhat straight, Zev surveyed their surroundings. They were in a large, grey room with an exceptionally high ceiling. However, aside from what looked like a big door in the corner, that was it. There was nothing else in the room.

What... what is this? Where am I?
Searching their memory for any clue as to what

was going on, they distinctly remembered the human with the gun, the dark alley, and...

That was all they could recall regarding recent events.

Zev walked over to the door – the only discernible feature in the plain room – and inspected it in an attempt to find a way out. It was extremely heavy-duty with no doorknob to turn; instead, there was a small pad with a series of buttons and a thin slot right next to it, just like the one on Seth's ship. Zev tried pressing all of the buttons, but nothing happened.

They noticed a small window near the top of the door. All they saw on the other side was a hallway extending both left and right, and another door across the hall identical to the one they were looking out of.

Have I been... imprisoned?

Panic started to set in. Zev looked back at the keypad and mashed as many buttons as possible, yet the door remained shut. They frantically looked around the room for some way to escape, running around and touching each wall for anything to help them get out.

Zev's rapid footsteps and shrieks filled the room. They weren't looking for clues anymore, rather, they were bashing the walls and screaming out of pure distress. They ran over to the door and repeated the process, smashing it with all of their might, but it still didn't budge.

As fast as the frenzy began, Zev realized the futility of their situation. They hit the door one

final time with both fists before sliding to their knees.

They knelt there for about a minute. The same few questions cycled through Zev's thoughts: *why am I here? How did I get here? Am I going to starve?*

Zev meekly stood up and walked around for a moment before resting their forehead against the cold, metal wall, pathetically drooping their arms down by their sides. Terrible thoughts continuously spun through their head: starvation, captivity, hopelessness. There was nothing they could do to get out. No food. Complete isolation.

Roughly five minutes passed. Zev remained still, their hat still scrunched between their face and the metal wall.

They had almost completely given up until a loud *clunk* blasted through the silent room.

Yes, very distinct and clear, it was the sound of a door opening. Zev bounced off the wall and prepared themselves to run.

Just as they were about to bolt for the open doorway, a human walked in, and the door shut behind him.

As fast as the hope of escape came, it left. At least there was someone here now.

Zev stared at the human for a few moments, who awkwardly stared back. Without knowing why this person was here, Zev decided to greet their new guest.

“Hello... hello...” the volon muttered, their terribly dejected voice echoing throughout the room.

The human stepped back.

“No! Don't leave!” Zev cried. “I need...”

There was a long pause before the human eventually took a careful step forward and started approaching Zev, who crouched down with one delicate movement to bring themselves closer to the human's eye level.

“What are you called?” Zev enunciated each syllable softly to not unnecessarily expend any energy in their low mood.

“...Damien,” the human responded.

“Damien,” Zev interrupted, caught between a smile and an exasperated sigh. “That's nice, Damien.” Zev wasn't looking at their new acquaintance anymore, though. Their gaze had drifted down to the floor by their feet, their head slowly tilting from one side to another.

“Damien,” Zev continued, distracted by their own thoughts, “I'm so hungry...”

No reply from the human.

“I'm so hungry,” they repeated, their voice quieting to a whisper.

Still no reply from the human.

“Do you have... food?” Zev asked.

After the human gave no response for the third time, Zev brought their head back up to look at Damien again, which quickly gave an explanation as to why he wasn't talking.

Damien's hands were shaking. *He was afraid.*

Zev couldn't help but crack a smile. “You...” they began, pausing to make room for a couple of sudden, quick breaths, “you fear me?”

“No,” Damien fibbed, evidenced by his shaky voice. He kept eye contact with Zev the whole time. “I have to get, uh... take a sample of...”

Zev breathed out a depraved chuckle, standing straight up with the same delicate motion they'd crouched down with, towering over the frightened human. “You're scared, Damien.” A drop of saliva involuntarily fell from Zev's feverish grin as they watched Damien's entire body begin trembling.

“Sit back down. The faster we get this over with, the faster-”

“Come here,” Zev insisted, stepping forward and reaching for the human.

“Hey!” Damien shouted while stumbling backwards. “Do *not* touch me.” He shifted his attention to the doorway he originally came from. “Guys, this is getting bad! Are you guys there?” he cried out before fleeing back to the door.

Interestingly enough, the door remained shut for the human, which only encouraged Zev.

“Come here, Damien, come here, Damien!” they chanted, their voice growing more aggressive and raspy as they pursued the human.

“Abort! V-97 is unstable!” Damien screamed.

Zev continued their madness mantra as they gave chase, which quickly decayed into incoherent growls and hoarse attempts at speech.

Damien quickly entered numbers on the door's keypad, and when that did nothing, he pulled out a card and swiped it through the slot

just beside the buttons. Yet, the door remained shut.

“Open up!” He yelled, banging on the door. “*OPEN IT!*”

Zev had him cornered. With an excited laugh, the volon grabbed Damien's neck with a single hand and lifted him up in the air.

The human's screams were crushed into chokes.

“Damien,” Zev panted, drool oozing from their open smile. “I'm so hungry.”

4 – Research Assistant

A petite, blonde-haired woman wearing a dignified grey suit with yellow markings walked into a small waiting room. She gave a quick glance over the mostly-vacant seats.

“Janice?” she called.

“Yes, right here,” a black-haired woman with inhumanly pale skin replied as she eagerly stood up from one of the seats. Her wardrobe was a stark contrast to the dapper lady's outfit – a black tank-top with matching cargo pants and boots.

“Come on in,” said the suited lady.

On cue, Janice followed the woman into a monochrome office; Janice took a seat in one of the padded chairs in front of the desk, and the suited woman sat down behind the desk.

'Anders Ortega, Captain' was the well-dressed lady's name and title, as demonstrated by the gilded name plaque facing Janice.

“So,” Anders began, adjusting her ponytail, “I don't do this often, especially for someone like you.”

Janice hummed in agreement.

“Let's make sure our time isn't wasted here, hm?” she continued.

“Right. The only thing I wish to discuss is the incident in cell 97.”

Anders raised an eyebrow. “Okay. What about it?”

“Well, there are a couple details about it that I would like to bring up.” Janice spoke

carefully, keeping her tone of voice agreeable and friendly. “Firstly, nobody was informed that that cell was occupied until the moment Damien entered the cell, and we know how that turned out. There was no update or announcement about it anywhere. That volon didn't officially exist until after the incident. Second of all, when Damien was sent in there, he had no backup personnel to speak of. The lack of an escort was a clear breach of procedure, and the mysterious presence of V-97 only makes me wonder more. Doesn't it seem strange to you?”

Anders waited a moment before taking a long, deep breath. She started gently tapping a pen on the surface of her desk. “Damien was a great researcher, and his death was a terrible tragedy. But, Janice, I don't have the answers you're looking for. My orders were to send Damien to cell 97 to perform preliminary tests on a new specimen; it was an order I've given many times, and it was something he'd done many times. That's it.” She shrugged.

“But Damien is – *was* – under your direct supervision. Shouldn't you have—”

“What are you trying to say, Janice? I got my orders from the director himself. It's not my job to investigate freak accidents. We have a different team for that.”

“Can I meet with someone from that team, then?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because they're way higher up than me. I don't even have the permission to see them on a whim, let alone someone such as yourself.”

Janice huffed. “Would I at least be able to have the info on cell 97's new occupant?”

“...Fine, I'll give you that.” Anders stood up and walked over to a shelf lined with binders and documents. She quickly pointed out the folder prominently labeled V-97, which she took from the shelf and placed on the desk.

Janice waited patiently, watching Anders take a few pages out, walk over to her rather old-fashioned photocopier, and individually scan each page. Every second in Anders' office felt like an hour while watching her do something so menial.

The captain put a paperclip on the bundle of papers and handed them to Janice without a word.

“Thanks,” Janice replied, taking the papers.

“Is that all?” Anders impatiently asked.

“Yeah. Thanks for meeting with me.” Janice hastily stepped out of Anders' office without a reply.

Janice walked out of the waiting room and down a small flight of stairs, which led to a hall that turned a couple times before opening up into a larger foyer. She passed several security officers stationed around every door and stairwell, suited up in grey and red combat armour with holstered firearms attached to their waists. She paid little mind to them; her relationship with the facility's guards was forced, at best.

Aside from the odd guard here and there, she was the foyer's only occupant. Janice walked into a lengthy passage that led to a junction, lined with nine staircases leading to the floor below. She took the second flight of stairs from the left.

The floor below the main level was much more dark and grim than the rest of the complex – its smooth walls and polished floor transitioned into an underground prison, with metal and stone melding together to form the floor, walls, and ceiling of a dreary passage lined with several vault-like doors, all labeled with a “V” and a number.

Janice walked along the rows of doors until she reached V-33. She pulled a card out of her pocket, swiped it through the slot in the door's keypad, and opened the door.

Home, sweet home, she sarcastically told herself. The room was a huge, white, square box, brightly illuminated by powerful lights on the ceiling. Janice eyed down the small collection of furniture against the middle of the leftmost wall that she had fashioned into a personal space – complete with a desk, chair, drawer, bed, and umbrella. It almost looked out of place in the massive room, as the vast majority was in pristine, untouched condition, compared to her tiny, cluttered space.

Janice ambled over to her spot and sat down at the small, unkempt desk. She slapped V-97's document on its surface, flipped open the pages, and immediately started skimming through it.

“Found in Apartment 88 of Karma's Gateway by Operative Aidan, imitating a male middle-aged civilian by the name of Seth Lapine,” she whispered aloud as she read, “apprehended by Operative James, two minutes after discovery. Initial height, 9' 11” when apprehended, 14' 3” natural height. Weight, 664 pounds. Unstable, aggressive and violent tendencies. Possessed the ID card of Seth Lapine. Operative Damien M... killed by V-97 on day of arrival, method... consumption.”

She sighed.

Three pictures filled the next page: one shot of V-97 crawling on the ground, one shot of V-97 restrained to a metal board, and one blurry shot of V-97 with its mouth open, lunging for something just beneath the camera. However, what stood out to Janice wasn't what V-97 was doing in these pictures, it was its appearance.

Why does this volon look like him, of all people? Janice could tell V-97 had quite a high level of intelligence just from the imitation it attempted with Seth, but what bothered her more was its outfit. That volon obviously had a story to tell, and Janice was confident that if there was anyone who could get that story, it was her.

She would have to arrange an escort – something she wish she'd asked about while meeting with Anders – since she wasn't allowed to access any cells without at least two guards monitoring her. A tense arrangement, but a mandatory one.

She may have missed her opportunity to ask the captain about it, but she had one more idea in mind. One more person who might be able to help her out.

Thus, only minutes after returning to her room, she left, bringing along the photos of V-97. Her destination was a psyche lab in a different branch of the facility, which led her back up the stairs to the facility's main floor and down the hall to the bright foyer. However, instead of hugging the eastern wall as she did earlier, she proceeded through the northern passage.

Compared to the straight halls she normally accessed, the northern section of the facility was a maze of zigzagging passages and laboratories haphazardly branching from the main hall. There were colour coded instructions on the walls that made the passage a bit more feasible to navigate through, but Janice was familiar enough with the facility to safely ignore them.

It was only a few moments before she ended up at a large door with '*Dr. Lowe*' engraved on it, with two guards standing stoic just outside. She just hoped he was available.

Janice pushed a button near the door, revealing a small laboratory with a tiled floor and metallic counters, encompassed by navy blue paint coating the walls.

"Carson?" Janice stepped into the lab.

A well-built researcher with a scruffy beard and a long, sky blue coat draped over his body stood alone in the far corner of the room. He

looked up at her for just a moment, his face lighting up the instant their eyes met.

“Jan! Good to see you!” He cheered.

Janice grinned. “It’s good to see you, too. Your smile is contagious as ever.”

Carson chuckled, walking over to Janice. “Oh, you have to put on a good face in a place like this – it’d drive you mad otherwise!”

His voice was always so genuine that Janice couldn’t tell if that remark was serious or not.

“So, what brings you here today?” He clasped his hands in front of his chest.

“It’s a couple things.” Janice gently reached over and pushed the button to shut the door. “Sensitive things.” A small thud of the door’s automatic latch confirmed their privacy.

Carson raised an eyebrow. “Mmm, I understand,” he began, keeping his voice down, “What’s going on?”

Looking from side to side, Janice stepped closer to him. “You know about Damien, right?” she whispered.

The cheer on Carson’s face was short lived, changing to an expression of pain the moment Janice mentioned Damien’s name. He shut his eyes and nodded his head. “Yes, I know.”

“I’m sorry to bring it up so soon, I jus-”

“No no,” Carson interrupted, “it’s okay. It’s not your fault I grew too close to my co-workers here.”

“I guess. But, Carson...” Janice paused, darting her eyes back and forth one more time, “I think Damien was set up.”

“Pardon me? You think his death was intentional?”

“I don't know for sure. But there are too many abnormalities about it to just let his passing go without an investigation of some kind.”

“What do you mean by this? I'm all ears.”

“Short version: Damien was sent in cell 97 *alone* to do preliminary tests on a volon that, according to our records at the time, did not exist.”

Carson exhaled sharply. “No kidding, huh?”

“No kidding,” Janice repeated. “And I don't mean to make light of the topic, but there's a different pressing matter that I need your help with.”

“Hmm?”

“It's about that same volon. I want to meet it.”

“*What?*” Carson's voice was filled with bewilderment. “You want to go in there and introduce yourself right after it just *murdered* one of our colleagues?”

“Frankly... yes.”

“Frankly, that's poppycock! You'll be killed too!”

“Honestly, I think I'll be okay.”

Carson shrugged. “I don't get it. Why would you want to go in there? And what makes you think you'll magically get out unharmed?”

“There's something about that volon's clothes that—”

“What, are you a fashionista now?” He let out a concerned chuckle.

Janice rolled her eyes. “Look.” She stood beside Carson, pulled out the pictures of V-97, and promptly handed them over to him.

Carson inspected them closely for a few seconds. “My word,” he mumbled. “Okay, I'll give you that, Jan. That outfit... that is rather odd. But how is it worth risking your life over?”

“Like I said, I think I'll be okay. I have a rather innate understanding of volons,” Janice affirmed, raising an eyebrow.

“Mmm... I suppose you do, don't you? I just hope you know exactly what you're doing. But may I ask how this involves me?”

“I can't do it without guards watching my back.”

“And you're asking me to loan you my security personnel on the other side of that door?”

Janice raised her eyebrows and smiled.

“You couldn't just sneak in there on your own?” Carson joked.

“You know how much these guys are sticklers for protocol.”

Carson huffed. “If I get caught doing this for you, there could be trouble for both of us if your claim about Damien has any merit. Thus... I fear the consequences of disobeying any policies right now.”

“I won't be long. Thirty minutes max. We'll be fine, I promise!”

“Fifteen.”

“If V-97 is stable enough to communicate with, I want to try to tell it not to hurt any of us. It still has to go through preliminary testing, right? This could save lives. Thirty.”

“You know what this thing is capable of. Do you really think you're going to be able to get through to it?” A look of deep thought washed over Carson's face. “I don't like it, Jan. Let me make that very clear. I'll... I'll do it, but you *better* be careful. I don't want to lose someone else so soon after... that...”

“Thank you so much,” Janice beamed. “I'll be as careful as possible.”

“Thirty. Minutes.” Carson sternly emphasized, wagging a finger with each word. “If you're not back in thirty, I can't call for a rescue without throwing us both under the bus. So you're on your own with this after you leave this room.”

“I know. I won't be long.”

Carson walked past Janice and opened the door, beckoning for the two armoured guards to come inside the lab. Once they stepped inside, he shut the door behind them.

“You two... I need you to escort Janice to – 97, was it? – V-97's cell and station there for half an hour or until she leaves the cell. Return to your post here afterward, and keep it on the down-low.”

The faceless guards nodded at each other, voicing their acknowledgment through their mechanical helmets.

“Thanks again, Cars.” Janice turned to the lab's entrance. “I'll come see you as soon as I can, and I'll give you the full scoop on Damien.”

“Be safe.”

With the two soldiers in tow behind Janice, she opened the door and walked back into the hallway.

She backtracked down her route through the complex once again, from the lab to the foyer and back to the cell block, acting as casual as possible to avoid suspicion from any prying eyes. The foyer and halls were, thankfully, just as empty as before, providing few witnesses to her armed escort. When she made it to the junction with the nine staircases, instead of taking the second staircase from the left, she took the fifth – straight down the middle.

Janice found herself in another hallway identical to the one connected to her cell, the only difference being the numbers on the top of each of the bulky doors. She counted the labels as she walked along the series of doors – V-91, V-92, V-93 – until she reached V-97's cell.

She stared it down and took a deep breath. She approached the door and stood on the tips of her toes to peer through the door's narrow window, but there was nothing in view. It seemed clear to enter.

With a quick glance back at the soldiers behind her, she pulled her keycard out of her pocket and unlocked the door.

Janice stepped inside V-97's cell, quickly shutting the door behind her. Sitting against the

rightmost wall was a massive figure clothed in black pants and a matching coat, its face obscured by an exceptionally wide-brimmed black hat and a pair of purple scarves, one hanging from its hat and one from its neck. The only other item of note in the room was a pair of brown shoes strewn near the cell's entrance.

The distant figure looked up and spotted Janice. It immediately scrambled to its feet and began rushing toward her.

“New human!” V-97 shrieked. “New human!”

Don't show fear, she reminded herself. Stay cool.

V-97 was approaching too fast for her to avoid its charge.

“I'm not a human!” Janice confidently shouted.

Once the towering creature was only a couple dozen feet away, it started slowing down. Janice held her open palm at V-97 as it eventually came to a stop a couple feet in front of her.

V-97 reached down and grabbed onto Janice's shoulders before hyperventilating right into her face. She shut her eyes and remained motionless until the volon leaned back a few seconds later.

“You're no human...” V-97 hissed. “You smell like... one of me.”

Janice nodded. “I am one of you.”

V-97 let go of her and hopped away, screeching as it flailed around. “No food! No!” It

eventually planted itself against one of the room's far walls, its face flat against the smooth surface.

Waiting for the moaning to subside a bit, Janice cautiously followed V-97. She awkwardly waited around until the volon stopped its shrill whining.

“I'm not your enemy. I'm here to help,” she said, hoping to clarify her intentions.

V-97 didn't respond.

“Do you have a name?” she quietly asked after a long pause.

“I'm called Zev,” the volon groaned, its voice muffled from its face still being pressed against the wall. “What are you called?”

“My name is Janice.”

Zev... she thought, shutting her eyes for a moment. *I knew there was something more to this guy.*

“Zev, huh? Where did you get your name from?”

“A picture on a wall.”

Her small talk seemed to be working. “Yeah? Where was that picture...?”

Zev lifted their face off the wall and slowly turned their head toward Janice. “Why do you need to know?” Zev growled through clenched teeth.

“Whoa, sorry, sorry! I don't need to know, I was just curious.”

“Why are you here, Janice? You said you wanted to help.”

“I do! It's just...” Janice could tell Zev didn't have the patience for a full explanation. She

had to think of something, quickly. "I just need to know a bit about you before we can let you out of here."

"Where is *here*?"

"This is... a... facility of sorts."

No reply. Only a perturbed stare.

"Unfortunately, we're kind of trapped here..." Janice continued, avoiding prolonged eye contact.

"What?! Trapped?" Zev suddenly yelped.

"Well, yes, but-"

"No! No, no, no! I can't be trapped again! No, no..." Zev trailed off as they ran over to the cell's only door.

Janice stood and watched from afar as Zev looked through the door's small window, before they started scratching and pounding on the door. They let out an ear-splitting scream before collapsing on a nearby wall.

Janice was thankful Zev didn't take their frustrations out on her. She quietly walked over to them, keeping enough distance to stay out of any further tantrums.

"Let me out," Zev whined.

"I'm sorry, I can't." Janice bluntly explained.

"Let me out."

"Listen," Janice started, keeping her voice soft, "why don't we talk about something else."

"Let me out..."

A brilliant idea popped into her head.

“If you behave while we chat for a little bit,” she continued, “I’ll get you some food.”

Zev immediately perked up, bringing their full attention back to Janice. “I want food.”

Janice couldn't help but smirk. “You'll get it, as long as you cooperate.”

“Yes! Bring me food, Janice.”

Were it not for Zev's man-eating tendencies, Janice would've giggled at their juvenile demeanor. But she had a good guess as to what Zev was expecting when she said “food.”

She took a few more steps toward Zev. “So, can I ask what you were doing before you came here?”

Zev leaned back against the wall and slid down to a sitting position. “I was exploring Seth's house.”

“Seth, hm?” Janice recalled the name on the report she read – Seth Lapine. For whatever reason, Zev had his ID. “Do you know him at all?”

“I know he was tasty.” Zev cracked a wicked, menacing grin.

Oh no. She cringed, turning away while instinctively biting her lip. The more she knew about Zev, the less she wanted to know about Zev.

“Later, a different human came inside the house. I think he was called Aidan.”

Janice inhaled sharply, raising her eyebrows with concern. “Don't tell me you...”

“Ah, ah, I didn't. He had a gun.”

Janice looked up at the ceiling, breathing a sigh of relief.

“He pointed it at me, and we got in a fight. Then I ran away.”

“Did you get away from him?” She sounded surprised.

“Yes.” Zev put a hand on their hat and looked up a bit. “But... to say the truth... I don't know what happened after I got away. I can't remember.”

“I see. That's what I think happened to me too – my memory is still a bit foggy when I try to remember how exactly I got here.”

“Ah, you're just like me.”

Janice nodded in agreement, though wincing at the comparison. She walked over to the wall Zev was sitting against and leaned on it herself. “I'm curious about your clothes. They look nice,” she began as she inspected the volon's outfit, trying to shift the subject.

“I like them too,” Zev answered.

“Where did you get them?”

“None of your business!” Zev snorted, immediately locking eyes with Janice.

“Okay! Sorry, sorry.” She took a step back and raised her hands in front of herself. *There's obviously something troubling about this fellow's past. But... what?* Janice was starting to feel like she was walking on eggshells. “Is there... anything else you don't like talking about?”

“I don't like being trapped. I hate it, I hate it...” Zev moaned.

Janice hummed. “I know what you mean. I really do.” She looked around the room for a

few seconds. "I want out of here too. So listen closely, okay?"

"Ah, ah?" Zev looked at Janice again.

"You need to show everyone that you can behave nicely like this. That's very important. If they think you're dangerous, they won't let you leave. But if you show them you can be civil and *not* eat people," she paused, shivering at the thought, "you might be allowed to... roam free, you know?"

Janice knew the chances of that happening were almost zero, given what Zev had already done to Damien.

"Who is "everyone," Janice? Who am I being captured by?" Zev asked.

"Well, it's a group of humans who—"

"Pah!" Zev spat. "We're being trapped by *humans*? How humiliating to be captured by my prey..."

"What- okay, no," Janice stuttered, wide-eyed, "humans are *not* prey."

"Then why do they taste good...?" Zev muttered, tilting their head down.

Janice took a deep breath, almost shaken up from how unsettling this creature was. "Listen, Zev... you can't eat humans anymore."

"Why not?" Zev enthusiastically replied before Janice had a chance to continue.

"Because they're living beings just like us," she explained, putting a hand on her chest. "They're intelligent, they have thoughts and feelings. They have lives just like we do. We're even speaking their language right now."

“Humans are very interesting. But I don't understand.”

“You... don't understand? What don't you understand?” Janice was beginning to wonder if Zev was already too far gone to reason with.

“Did you know humans hunt other creatures for food?” Zev abruptly asked.

“Yes, I do know that.”

Zev leaned closer to their conversational partner. “What's so different about me hunting them?”

The longer Janice spent with Zev, the more uncomfortable she became. She could tell arguing about morality with someone like them was a lost cause.

“Uh, well... think of it like this. If volons started hunting humans on a larger scale, humanity would win. That's that. We may be powerful... but they are more advanced than you know. They would wipe us out if we started killing them. Wouldn't it be better if we could live in harmony instead?”

Zev raised their hands in the air and looked around the spacious, empty cell. “Is this harmony, Janice?”

“N-no, it's not. But we need to show humanity that we're capable of harmony first. Only then will they start treating us as equals. It's why I'm allowed special privileges in this place.”

Zev grunted and turned away.

Janice took a few steps back from Zev. “Listen. I'm running out of time, so I'm going to have to leave now, okay? I'll have somebody

bring you some grub. Just don't hurt anyone else, please?"

Zev laughed – a very distinct, high-pitched “kyeh-heh-heh” – before standing up. “Ah, ah, ah, Janice, I don't know. I'm always so hungry.” They flashed their malevolent, toothy smile again.

“For both of our sakes,” Janice pleaded as she walked over to the door.

Zev snickered again.

“Put it this way,” she said, stopping in her tracks. “If you attack the human who comes to give you food, you won't get any more food.”

“Is that a threat?” Zev cocked their head sideways.

“No! But I've seen it happen, and I don't want it to happen to you.” Janice paused, ensuring the two had eye contact. “I'm going to need you to back away from the door while I leave. And when the next person comes in here to bring you food, stay away from the door until they leave, got it?”

“Why don't I leave with you right now?”

“Because there are security guards outside, and if you try to leave, they'll shoot you. I know you don't like this, but please listen to me for now. Just stay clear while I leave.”

Zev did as they were told, expressing their disdain with a deep grumble.

Janice searched her pocket for her keycard, slid it through the door's keypad, and met up with the two security guards waiting just outside.

5 – Seth's Paradox

Breaking away from some computer work at the back of the lab, Carson sighed as Janice's unharmed figure walked inside.

“Thank goodness, Jan. *Thank. Goodness.*” He walked over and met her halfway through the room.

She smirked. “Should've had some more faith in me.”

“You're not hurt, are you? Still in tip top shape?”

Janice nodded.

“I could hug you right now, you darned fool.” Carson started the motions to do just that, but awkwardly paused halfway through doing so. “Ah, right,” he said, holding a finger up while stepping back. “Maybe not the best idea.”

They both knew unprepared physical contact with a volon would probably make Carson ill. Janice figured he probably wasn't used to that kind of restriction.

“So? I may not have condoned the idea, but I couldn't lie and say I'm not curious about what you found out.”

Janice giggled, always finding comfort in Carson's cheerfulness, although her mood quickly soured when she started reporting. “Don't get your hopes up too much; I didn't learn all that much. Not about Damien, anyway. You know Seth Lapine?”

Carson listened intently.

Janice looked towards the floor. "Eaten, apparently."

"No. That can't be." His unusually flat reaction was hard to decipher. "Seth... wasn't he-"

The door to the lab whirred open. A short-haired staff member dressed in navy blue overalls and a black t-shirt popped his head in and asked, "sorry, am I interrupting? I heard my name."

Janice, feeling as foolish as ever, stared the man down. "Seth...?"

"Speak of the devil," Carson spoke up, audibly relieved.

"Uh, sorry!" The man raised a hand in the air and took a step back. "I'll leave if this is serious-"

"Oh, no, no! Not at all. Come on in," Carson answered, his everyday enthusiasm returning as fast as it had just left.

Janice remained silent, wearing a puzzled face as she stared the newcomer down.

Seth walked inside confidently, though he gradually slowed his pace to a stop after becoming aware of Janice's stare-down.

"Is... something wrong?" He looked from side to side as he spoke.

Something *was* wrong, but Janice didn't know how to address it.

"Um... look, this is going to sound strange, I know, but..." she started, keeping her eyes fixed on the man. "Where have you been for the last few days?"

"Working down here, why...?"

"Did you ever go to the surface?"

“No?”

“Did you encounter any volons in the last few days?”

“Other than you, no. Where are you going with this?”

“This isn't right...” Janice mumbled with a hint of curiosity in her voice. “From what I've learned, Seth, you shouldn't be alive right now.”

Seth pursed his lips and looked around the room again. “Uh... what's she talking about?” he asked Carson.

Janice kept her focus on Seth. “Humour me just for a bit, would you? You don't happen to have your ID on you, do you?”

“I'd like to know what's going on first.”

“Okay, fair, fair... do you know about the volon that was just captured recently? V-97?”

“N-no?”

“One moment.” Janice finally broke her gaze to briskly walk over to the door and press the button to close it. She turned around and faced Seth, walking back to where she just was. “We just had a volon come in under the designation V-97, but there are a lot of things about it that are really bothering me right about now. But to keep it brief, Seth, it was found in your home, with your ID in its possession.”

“My home?! And... what? My ID?” His skepticism started to show as he spoke.

“You're absolutely sure you didn't encounter any volons recently at all?”

“I'd know if I was around any of those monsters.”

Janice expressed her appreciation of Seth's remark with a quick side-glance. "I just went to V-97's cell and talked to it. It claimed to have eaten you specifically."

Seth tilted his head a bit. "You're joshing with me."

"I don't know the whole story of what happened down there, but Janice *did* just go meet with V-97," Carson added.

"Well... no, it didn't eat me. I'm right here." Seth paused. "If you really need to know, fine, here's my ID," he conceded, digging through one of his overall pockets. He pulled out a faux leather wallet, and from that, a small card with his name and other personal information inscribed on it.

"But then... how did he..." Janice quietly voiced her thoughts as she inspected the card. "Wait!" she yelped out. "Stand still," she continued, briefly pointing towards Seth. She walked forward a few steps, moving right up in front of his face, staring closely into his eyes. "No," she continued after a few intense moments, stepping back and giving Seth's personal space back. "He's not a volon."

Seth huffed. "Of *course* I'm not... wait, you can tell just by looking at my eyes?"

Janice raised her eyebrows. "You work *here*, of all places, and you don't know that?" Even Carson mirrored her expression, scratching his brow in her distant peripheral vision.

"Hey. Look, guys, they didn't make a point of telling me *anything* when I applied here."

“Should've expected as much.” Janice sighed. “Look closely into my eyes, Seth.”

“A-all right.” He did just that, leaning forward, staring sharply as she'd done moments ago. “Oh, your eyes have that shape. The cross in your pupils.”

Janice nodded. “Remember that. No volon can hide the cross in their eyes.” She rested a hand under her chin. “Anyways, this still doesn't make sense. If they found your ID on Zev, and you had your ID with you the whole time... was Zev's maybe a fake?”

“What are you implying? That I would need a fake ID for something? And... who's Zev?”

“Oh, uh, Zev is what V-97 called itself during our chat. And, no, I'm not implying anything like that, Seth. This is just a weird contradiction of facts, and there's too much else about this volon that's really peculiar to put it down as a coincidence.”

“...Okay, know what? You hooked me,” Seth admitted. “Go on. I'm interested.”

Janice cautiously looked over to Carson, leaning back against a nearby table. The glance they exchanged was mutually understood; Carson nodded, so Janice turned back to Seth. If Carson trusted him, Janice did too.

“Keep this low key. I don't need anyone unnecessarily knowing about this investigation. Not after the recent incident.”

“Right... I was trying not to think about that.” Seth awkwardly smiled, dodging Janice's

gaze. "Wait... don't tell me... don't tell me V-97 was the one who did it."

"You're not going to like the answer, I'm afraid," Carson replied.

"And you went and talked to it. Like, in its cell," Seth continued, pointing to Janice.

"I thought it ridiculous too," Carson added.

"I know it sounds crazy," Janice butted in, "but it happened, and I'm fine. *Anyways*, as I was saying, there are two more things about V-97, aside from the ID oddity, that strike me as weird. It's its name and its clothes."

"I'm listening."

"You're familiar with Redmond, right?"

"No, I can't recall the name."

"How long have you been here? How do you not know these things?"

"Listen. I'd sooner off myself than pay attention to every last detail of this place."

He had a point. "Redmond is the director, the big head honcho here. You've probably at least seen his pictures all over the place."

"The guy with the big, wide, black hat? Purple scarves?"

"That's him."

"That man looks like the pinnacle of the evil corporate CEO stereotype," Seth joked.

Janice smiled. "So, here, take a look at these." From her pocket, she produced the pictures of Zev that she'd shown Carson earlier, and handed them to Seth.

“Hah, that's fucking creepy,” he immediately responded after only a brief look. “Geez. That's a bit much.”

“Notice any similarities between Zev's and Red's outfits?”

“Uh, yeah,” Seth laughed. “I think the better question would be, “what *isn't* similar between their outfits.”” He looked over the pictures once again, slowly shuffling through them one by one. “And what's that about its name? Zev?”

“Well, I neglected to mention Red's last name. It's Severus.”

“Severus.” Seth scratched his head. “Sev, Zev. I mean, it sounds like a stretch, but, assuming you're not pulling my leg, the matching outfit does make a pretty convincing argument.”

“It has me thinking all over the place right now. Did Red encounter Zev before coming here...? They must have a connection of some sort.”

“You should've asked that when you went to talk to Zev.”

“I did.”

“And?”

“He got really defensive. *Really* defensive. I tried to ask about his past a couple times through some small talk, but he got dangerously agitated each time.”

“Huh.” Seth puckered his lips. “Should get Red to go meet Zev. I'm sure they would have a lot to talk about.”

“I wouldn't say that too loud. Red probably has hidden surveillance in every nook and cranny of this place.”

Seth let out an empty laugh. “Fair. Sure wouldn't want to be the next Damien,” he remarked, looking off to the side.

A morbid joke came to mind about how Damien was actually the next Seth, according to Zev. Janice dismissed it with a quick exhale and stroke of her bangs.

“Well!” Seth announced, tapping a foot on the floor. “Keep me updated if you find out something juicy. I've got a door sensor to go fix.”

Janice silently waved goodbye.

“Right,” Carson started, “thanks for stopping by and letting us know you're not monster chow.”

Another awkward laugh from Seth as the door slid open and he stepped through. “Yeah, not *yet*.”

The mood in the room had worsened considerably since the mention of Red's hypothetical omniscience.

“Hey,” Janice spoke up, pushing through the permeable aura of unease stifling the air, “I'm starving.”

“It *is* about lunchtime,” Carson noted, peeking at his watch. “Go get some food! Surely it'll help you process all this strangeness.”

“Don't have to tell me twice,” she replied, turning to the door. “Thanks again for letting me borrow your lab guards for that visit with Zev. I won't ask anything shady like that anymore.”

Carson hummed and nodded in approval.
“Care if I join you?”

“I'd love it, but I'm going straight home after I get something. Too much to think about right now.”

“True, that's very true. In that case, I'll finish up my work in here and head out in a few minutes. I'll see you sometime soon, yes?”

“Yes, I'll be around.”

Carson smiled. “Take care, Jan.”

Janice stepped outside the lab.

Unlike her previous trips through the maze-like halls of the facility, there were a few other staff members wandering around as well. Most of them were unfamiliar faces or people she'd met with a fleeting glance now and then, but no one noteworthy enough to greet or distract her from her mission of finding something good to eat.

There was a small cafeteria nearby that branched off from the main foyer junction, although her last few visits there were memorable not for the delicious home-style meals, but comments about her biological toxicity and suggestions of “you probably shouldn't be in here.” Luckily, there was a pair of vending machines just outside the cafe's entrance that generously dispensed free items without any kind of biting remarks, making that her go-to lunchtime destination.

The thinner machine on the left had an assortment of candy and small bags of flavoured potato chips on display through the glass screen,

and while the taller machine on the right had nothing on display, it advertised a variety of premade sandwiches ready to eat at the press of a button. The quality wasn't anything to speak about, but Janice wasn't a picky eater in the slightest.

Thinly sliced plant-based steak with mayonnaise and mustard spread. Janice pressed the button on the side of the machine, and a moment later, a wrapped hoagie sub dropped to the open slot near the bottom of the machine with a small *thump*.

Janice hastily unwrapped it and sunk her pointed teeth into it. As the mixture of flavours washed over her taste buds, a feeling of ease and comfort tingled throughout her body. *Ahh*.

After dispensing a small pouch of chewy fruit bites from the candy machine to go along with her sandwich, she made her way back to cell 33, eating lunch as she walked.



Sitting on the side of her bed with the remainder of her meal beside her, Janice continued thinking over everything that had transpired in the last day or so. Damien... killed after being sent into a cell that shouldn't have had a volon in it. The very same volon's unknown connection with the director, Redmond. Seth's ID conundrum. It felt like bits and pieces of some huge conspiracy, and it seemed like the only one who might be able to shed any light on it was the volon that had an aggressive appetite for human flesh.

Without warning, the door to Janice's cell opened, with only one figure in view. She was easily recognizable with her distinct outfit.

Janice locked up. "Anders!" she called out.

Anders locked the door behind herself. "Afternoon," she greeted, her mouth audibly full of food.

Janice stood up and started walking over to Anders, which was quickly interrupted with, "no, sit back down," which she did without contention.

"Don't look so scared," Anders continued after she finished the bite in her mouth. "You're already pale enough."

It wasn't the worst comment she'd ever heard. However, a joke from Anders was rare enough, which lightened Janice's mood just a bit. "Sorry, can't help it," she admitted, picking up her sandwich without taking her eyes off the captain.

"Try a bit harder." Once Anders arrived at Janice's tiny living area, she pulled out the chair from the nearby desk and sat down in it, directly facing Janice. "Go ahead and eat. It's lunch. I know you're hungry."

"Right, yeah." Janice awkwardly took a bite of her sub.

"I don't plan on this being a long visit, so let's get straight to the point. I saw your visit to V-97's cell."

A pang of stress shot through Janice's body. She became completely still again.

“I don't know why you'd do something that stupid. So... why? It wasn't because of Damien, was it?”

“Well,” Janice started, her mind searching for a believable explanation, “V-97 looks like a stable volon, even if he... did *that*. I thought maybe it would be worth talking to him.”

“Let's make something very clear, Janice. You're not good at hiding things. Don't waste my time and just spit it out.”

Janice huffed in defeat. “Okay, yeah. I was curious about Damien.”

“*Anything else?*” Anders' stare turned into a glare. “Seems like you forgot this place has cameras *everywhere*.”

She obviously knew about what Janice was trying to investigate. Dejected and fearful, she took another bite of her lunch. “There was some stuff about Seth that wasn't making sense! And the fact that Zev looks like Redmond...”

Anders sternly shook her head at Janice. “You can't wander into unauthorized cells just because you get curious about something. You disobeyed the rules by going in there without clearance, and you know that.” She paused to cross one leg over the other. “But at the very least, you did everything else by the book, which is why you're getting off with just a warning this time. *THIS* time.”

Janice took a deep breath. “Th-thanks. And... yeah. Sorry.”

“You're not going anywhere you don't belong anymore, correct?”

“Yes,” Janice replied, tilting her head down.

“Right answer. With that sorted out, I came here to tell you that I'm clearing you enter V-97's cell whenever it doesn't interfere with the work of other staff, and as long as you do it by the book.”

“Wh... really? Why?”

“I gleaned some interesting information from your talks with Carson and Seth. The similarities between 97 and the director? Don't care. Probably a coincidence. Volons like to mimic people, you know that. What I do care about is the whole duplicate ID issue regarding Seth. If Seth is an impostor, or he's involved in something that has a conflict of interest with this facility, some sort of corrective action will have to be taken.”

“By corrective action... do you mean-”

“I don't know. That's not up to me.”

Intentionally vague wording, but Janice had a good idea of what it meant. “Right... and you want me to see if I can find anything out?” The idea of being a snitch stirred uncomfortable emotions inside her.

“Let me make it perfectly clear that I'm only permitting you to go into 97's cell if you follow proper procedures like you did last time.”

“Understood.”

“I won't be *nearly* as lenient if I catch you in 97's cell without doing it right.”

Janice nodded. “I understand.”

“Good. Then let's change the subject. Last thing we need to talk about. 97's prelims never got done during the Damien incident.”

“Mmm. I figured.”

“Carson was chosen as the next person to do it.”

“What?!” Janice exclaimed, her heart suddenly pounding. “Carson is in psychology, not biology!”

“Don't shoot the messenger. Order from the director himself.”

Janice put a hand on the side of her head. “Zev... he'll...”

“That's why I'm clearing you to accompany him.”

“...What?!” Janice repeated, cracking a relieved, albeit confused, grin. “I'm to go with him?”

“The director says Carson is to do the prelims, and you're going with him, seeing as you have a bit of a fondness for 97. You also have the best track record of not being killed by 97.”

“I would gladly.” She exhaled a long, deep breath.

Anders stood up. “Good. Tonight, 5:10pm. Meet Carson at 97's door. If he gets hurt, I'm not going to be a happy captain. Make sure that doesn't happen.”

“Absolutely,” Janice affirmed. “Forgive me, but... what time is it now?”

Anders looked at her wrist. “1:44pm. I expect you to be there on time, yes?”

“Yes. I'll keep an eye on the clock.”

“Good.”

As Anders stood up and started walking away, Janice clumsily called out to her. “M-mind if I ask one or two small things before you go?”

“Hurry up,” she ordered, turning to face Janice again.

“My clearance to talk to 97 and accompany Carson... was that also the director's order?”

“...No.”

Anders' reply shook Janice a bit. Why was she being so nice?

“I also want to know... why here? Like, wouldn't you rather I come to your office instead of you walking down here to my home?”

Anders' face tensed and she took a deep breath. “The cameras in these volon cells don't record audio. That clear things up?”

It took her a moment, but Janice understood.

6 – A Futile Lesson in Etiquette

About 20 minutes before Carson was scheduled to perform Zev's preliminary tests, Janice stepped into his lab once again. He put on a smile for her, but it was painfully obvious how forced it was.

“Hey, Cars.”

“Good evening, Jan.” No extra pep or enthusiasm.

“You... got your directions, I take it?” Janice realized how dumb the question was right after speaking it aloud. “N-nevermind.”

“Yes, indeed I did.” Carson bit his lip, looking like he was searching for something to say.

“I'm coming with you, you know that, right? Anders told me herself.”

Carson nodded. “She told me she wasn't ready to lose someone else so soon. Not much of a vote of confidence, is it?”

“And we're not going to lose you! I'll show you how to act around Zev, and if he gets aggressive, I'll stop him from hurting you.”

“I appreciate that, Jan. I do. But should it come to that, I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to you while protecting me. Especially not after losing Damien too. Darn it all...” He shut his eyes for a second.

Janice carefully considered her next words. She was tempted to explain to him that if she should die defending a human, maybe others

would take note of how volons aren't all monsters after all. Maybe that would change how people viewed her species as a whole. *Agh! That won't be happening right now*, she reminded herself.

“Listen to me, okay?” She wanted to put her hands on his shoulders to reinforce her seriousness, but, physical contact. *Agh*, she spoke in her head again. “Nobody's getting hurt tonight. I went in there and met with Zev. He's not a monster hell-bent on killing people. Think of him like... someone who's really moody and was never told no when growing up. You know what I mean? Maybe a misguided teenager with violent tendencies.”

She paused to collect her thoughts, wincing at the comparison she just made. “He's capable of rational thought, he's capable of emotion. And, well, yes, it's true that he has had some... *incidents* in the past... if you stay cool and calm, don't show fear, be assertive, he's not going to hurt you.”

Janice wasn't absolutely confident with her last statement, but if it meant helping her friend, she had no qualms saying it.

“Jan... how can you be so sure about that after just one visit with him?” Carson took a deep breath. “Not to mention, one of the other most glaring problems I have with this is it's not supposed to be my job. This is normally done by the biology department, not psychology! Ergo, I can't help but wonder why.” He took another breath. “Ever since you brought up the idea of Damien's death possibly being *intended*, I've

mulled it over now and then, thinking, “hum, maybe it is true. Maybe he did something someone didn't like.” And now, for me to be sent into the same set of circumstances as him?”

“I don't want you to take this in an accusatory way, but... have you done anything here that someone may have not liked?”

“I don't know, Jan. You know how close Damien and I were. We did discuss personal matters with one another from time to time, but I don't recall him being involved in anything that would've warranted his death. Maybe he was a bit, well... eccentric? But that certainly shouldn't have garnered such a harsh response. At least not to my knowledge.”

Janice nodded in consideration.

“Maybe we're just thinking this over too much,” Carson continued. “There's still no proof of anything malicious actually taking place here. I might just be a big ol' worrywart.”

“You *are* a big ol' worrywart,” Janice lightheartedly repeated. “Justifiably so, I think, but let's look at it objectively for now! What do you need to do for these tests?”

Carson started listing off tasks, tapping a finger in his palm for each one he announced. “Topical reactions to a few chemical reagents, a blood sample if it's within the realm of “safety,”” he air-quoted, “and a communication and intelligence exam. By the sounds of it, intelligence testing will be a breeze since you've already done most of the work for me in that regard. But the others... I've got my work cut out

for me. I've not a drop of knowledge on how to take blood, either!"

"Chemical reagents? What kind of chemicals? I don't recall this being done with me when I was brought here."

"I couldn't say. It's a fairly new procedure, as far as I'm aware. I wasn't told what they were or how a volon might react to them."

Janice thought long and hard for a few brief moments. "...Do you happen to have them here with you?"

"Indeed."

"What if you tested them on me first?"

"Jan! These could be dangerous – hell, even lethal for all I know!"

"No I know, but... just a drop! I can't think of any sort of chemical that would seriously hurt or kill someone with just one drop on their skin, and I doubt they'd give something that potent to someone who only has basic lab clearance. Wouldn't it be better to go into this with a little bit of advance knowledge?"

"You know how fond I am of the idea of you being hurt. That said... I suppose you're right. I haven't heard of any volons in here being killed voluntarily before." Carson paused. "But there's a first for everything in here," he grumbled under his breath.

"What time is it now?"

"4:54pm," he answered after a peek at his watch.

“We barely have 15 minutes before we have to be down there. Hurry, let's do this quickly.”

Carson walked over to the far end of the lab where a long countertop stretched from one side of the room to the other. On it rested a small, wooden test tube rack, holding two vials containing a minute amount of dark, grungy-looking liquids, and a small collection of miniature lab tools on the side. He walked it over to a table near Janice.

“You're sure about this?” he asked, raising his eyebrows at her as he set the rack down.

“Yes, let's do it.”

Carson sighed. “Just a drop of each, okay? Nothing more.”

“That's fine.” Janice rested her arm on the table next to the rack.

Visibly hesitant, Carson picked up a dropper from the tools on the side of the rack, and removed the cap from one of the vials. “I feel as if I should have safety equipment while doing this...”

“Y-yeah...”

“Unsurprising that they'd refrain from supplying me any.” He dipped the dropper into the tube and sucked up a tiny amount of the fluid. “If anything happens, speak up, would you?”

“Course.”

The first liquid Carson dropped on Janice's arm soaked into her skin rather quickly,

but left a small yellow blemish on her skin. No pain or weird sensations.

The second liquid that Carson administered stung.

“Ow.” Janice winced. She inhaled sharply. “Ow!”

“Ah, darnit!” Carson grabbed a nearby cloth and thoroughly wiped the area. “Is it any better?”

“Mmmhh... you're kind of spreading it around... but it's a bit better. The pain's wearing off.”

Carson removed the cloth and squinted at the spot he'd dropped the liquid. No visible marks or anything of the sort.

He shook his head. “I'm dearly sorry, Jan.”

“Hey, I was the one who volunteered! You're fine.”

“Just what are they expecting from these concoctions?”

Janice shrugged. “Whatever the case is, at least we know what to expect.”

Carson was busy putting the dropper back into the lab rack. “I suppose so. Not that I'm particularly eager, but we should get going.” He picked up the rack.

Wiping her arm a bit more, Janice took a moment to reply. “Yeah. Let's go.”

Carson walked to the front of the lab and pushed the door open with his hip. He beckoned his two guards to follow along, leading the way down the hallways.

“Hey, couldn't you bring your guards inside Zev's room?” Janice asked, not far behind.

“For whatever godforsaken reason, they're not allowed inside.”

“Mmm.” *They value volons more than humans*, Janice concluded. “Oh, wait, hold on.” At a junction in the halls, Janice suddenly changed direction, heading towards the cafeteria.

“Janice? We don't have much time.”

“This'll be quick! I have an idea to help keep Zev sated. He likes food, right? Tell your guards to stay there for a sec.” Janice hurried Carson over to the sandwich dispenser she often got her food from. “A distraction might be our best tool.”

“*Not too shabby*,” Carson remarked, sounding genuinely reassured.

Janice hit every button on the side of the machine. The dispenser rumbled and clanked as several premade sandwiches of every variety fell down to the bottom of the machine. She leaned down and began collecting the sandwiches as they came, eventually cradling at least a dozen in her arms.

“Okay, let's go.” Janice led the way from there.

“Remind me – how come we aren't given any tranquilizers to work with? All these rules to follow, but they can't even give us simple safety measures?”

“Probably to protect the volons. They don't seem to hold human life in high regard here.” Janice mumbled her disdain. “S-sorry.”

Whatever the reason is, we have to work with what we've got! So, let's get this done.” She made a note in her mind to ask Anders about the lack of anesthesia if she got the chance to.

After another minute of walking, the group arrived at the volon containment chambers. 92, 93, 94, 95. Janice eventually stepped up to Zev's door – 97 – and peered inside through the window.

Zev wasn't in sight. *Is he hiding in the window's blind spot to the side?* For all she knew, Zev could be waiting to ambush anyone who came through.

“Zev?” she called through the door. “Can you hear me? It's Janice.”

No response, but she thought she heard some shuffling somewhere on the other side of the door.

“I'm coming in, okay?”

Zev angrily huffed and continued shuffling around, but still couldn't be seen.

She turned back to Carson. “Okay, let's do this. I'll keep Zev distracted while you do what you need to do, okay? I'm with you.”

Carson pursed his lips and took a deep breath. He stepped up beside Janice and opened the door.

Janice quickly looked towards the door's blind spot near the eastern wall as she walked in first. Zev was lying on the floor, perhaps 15 feet away, lying face up on the floor with their limbs spread out on the ground. However, they quickly got up to their feet as the two came in.

Janice quickly remembered just how huge Zev was as they stood up. *Damn! These sandwiches will hardly last!* She'd have to get creative.

“Ah, ah! Has Janice brought me food?!” Zev called out.

“Yes! I have these sandwiches here for you.”

Zev wasn't looking at the sandwiches. They were looking at Carson, who was trying to walk off to the side, away from Janice.

“Zev, that's my friend. He's just going to be checking out the room for a few minutes. You're not allowed to hurt him, okay? I brought these subs for you,” Janice explained, trying to pry Zev's attention off Carson.

“I'm so hungry, Janice.”

Janice glanced at Carson, who was quickly looking more terrified with every second. “Here!” she continued, “check this out. They're loaded with meat and cool flavours.” She dropped most of the sandwiches on the floor and held two of them towards Zev.

Finally managing to distract Zev, the giant volon crouched down and briefly inspected the sandwiches before snatching them from Janice. They immediately tossed them into their mouth and swallowed without a single bite.

“W-wait, you're supposed to unwrap them first,” Janice said, cracking an anxious smile.

Zev tilted their head in consideration. “More,” they exclaimed, reaching down for the rest of the sandwiches.

“Now, wait a moment. Why don't you try eating them slowly? I can show you.”

“Because I'm *hungry*.”

“But you're missing out on all the flavours! You need to savour your food.”

Zev grunted and leaned against the wall. “First you tell me I'm not allowed to eat humans. Now you tell me how to eat my food. Janice.”

Janice clasped her hands together. “Well... uh, you don't *have* to eat slowly, but I just want to show you how you can get a lot more flavour if you do. You might enjoy it more. Try it with me!” She handed Zev another sandwich while picking up another for herself. “Come on, we're friends, right?”

In the corner of her eye, Janice noticed Carson standing just behind Zev, preparing his tools.

Distraction... keep Zev distracted...

“Friends,” Zev scoffed. “Give it to me.” They yanked the food from Janice's hand.

“Okay, now, before you eat it, try unwrapping the plastic first.” Janice did just that, demonstrating it to Zev.

Zev grimaced in frustration, but tried picking away at the plastic wrap regardless. However, their hands were far too large to do it effectively, and their frustration quickly peaked when they snarled and bit the sandwich in two, plastic and all.

But, to Janice's delight, Zev was actually chewing their food, at least for a couple moments.

“See? Now how was it?” Janice asked.

Zev bit into the rest of the sandwich.
“Slow.”

“But... does it taste good?” She had no idea what ingredients that one had (not that Zev would care).

“Mh.” Zev grabbed a few more sandwiches and repeated the process, ignoring the plastic wrap entirely.

That's as close to a yes as I'll probably ever get from Zev. Janice thought.

Carson was about to begin some sort of topical examination on Zev, judging from the dropper in his hand. Janice had to keep it up.

“Uh, so, have you been doing anything in here..?” she asked, scrounging her thoughts to bring up some form of distraction.

“What do you think,” Zev growled between bites.

“Um... sorry. Dumb question. Maybe... is there something you can tell me about yourself?”

“I'm hungry. I'm *always hungry*, Janice.”

“I-I know, but, like... do you have any hobbies? Other than, well, eating.”

Zev tilted their head up a bit, sitting down with their legs crossed. “Ah, I had friends...”

Janice was shocked, albeit in a positive manner. “Tell me about them!”

“No! NO!!” Zev suddenly snapped in agitation, lurching closer to Janice.

“Okay! Okay, sorry!” Needing another quick distraction, she handed Zev another sandwich. Zev grabbed it and fell back into their old eating habits.

“Never! NEVER again! I'll chew my way out of that place!” Zev jumped to their feet.

“U-um! Zev, it's okay! It's okay! I'm here, Zev!”

With a sharp screech, their right arm began transforming into a knife-like shape and they slammed it into the wall, piercing through it like butter.

Janice stepped back and looked at Carson. He picked up his supplies and started running towards the door in a hurry.

Janice tried to raise a hand to tell Carson to slow down, but it was too late.

“HUMAN! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” Zev screamed. “YOU WERE MODIFYING ME!!” They lunged towards Carson.

Janice jumped at Zev and intercepted them. She grabbed hold of their leg before they could reach Carson, yanking them hard enough to send the giant volon crashing to the ground.

“Oh, *shit*,” Janice exclaimed. *He's going to be pissed!* Her immediate reaction was to run to the door with Carson, who was almost out of the room.

Another fell screech pierced through the air as Zev voiced their explosive rage. Zev leaped forward again just as Janice hustled out the door with Carson, crashing into the wall beside the door.

Janice hurriedly shut and locked the door.

The armed guards beside the door had their guns at the ready, even with the door closed.

Zev pounded on the door and continued screaming, but to everyone's relief, the door wasn't budging.

“Jan,” Carson breathed, looking at her in disbelief. He didn't follow up with anything else.

Janice wasn't entirely sure what to say either.

“Are you unharmed, professor?!” One of the guards asked, voice muffled through their helmet.

Carson put a hand on his head. “Yes, I... yes, I believe so...”

7 – Snooping Around, As Usual

Mental note. Mental note. Mental note. Never bring up Zev's past ever again! Janice buried her face in a pillow on her bed. The humiliation was overbearing.

She and Carson had a long talk after the encounter with Zev. Carson was barely able to get anything done in regards to the examination, but the two concluded that he'd be better off fudging the results by noting how the reagents affected Janice's skin, and she helped give details on Zev's perceived intelligence levels and personality.

Though nobody was hurt, Janice was still mentally berating herself. She'd forgotten to mention to Carson that running is a big no no when near an agitated volon like Zev.

She pressed the pillow against her face harder. "He wasn't hurt. It's okay. He wasn't hurt," she repeated to herself. "Carson is fine." She sighed.

Sleep wasn't coming easily.



Janice woke up to the same blaring lights as usual. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, not sure how much sleep she'd gotten. *Probably not that much*, she guessed. A proper circadian rhythm was nigh impossible in this cell.

She couldn't help but wonder what time it was. She groggily slid out of bed, keeping her gaze low to avoid the floodlights on the ceiling. There was one way to get a better sense of time; Janice walked her way over to the cell door, slid

her keycard through the slot on the door, and opened it up.

Nobody in sight. Though, that wasn't totally unusual, as traffic wasn't particularly heavy near the containment chambers even on the busiest of days.

But even after walking up the stairs to the relatively prettier parts of the facility, there still wasn't anyone around, giving the hallways a glaringly different air. Rather than the oppressing, tense atmosphere Janice was used to, she felt a strange sense of freedom. She still wasn't allowed to leave, but she could freely walk around without judgment or malicious eyes leering her down.

She frowned. *I miss the forest...*

A nearby wall clock told her the time: 12:20am. As expected, she hadn't slept much at all.

At that moment, Janice had a whim. *If there aren't many people up and about... maybe I could do a bit of snooping.* She wasn't oblivious to the surveillance cameras in almost every corner of the building, but something as benign as checking a storage locker surely wouldn't arouse much suspicion... even if it did belong to a deceased co-worker.

She'd have to pass by the main lobby and cafeteria. Not a problem, but it was still a ways off.

He had to have done something, Janice told herself. *If it really was intended... what could Damien have done to piss Redmond off so badly?*

If Damien's belongings were still in his locker, maybe she could find some answers.

Taking a quick look around to confirm the coast was clear, she then opened the door to the storage room and flicked on the light. Conveniently, each of the pristine, chrome lockers was labeled with its owner's name, thus, it hardly took ten seconds for her to find Damien Maguire's locker among all the others.

“Damn,” she muttered. The locker was locked with a generic cyrite padlock. Giving it a second thought, she didn't really know what else she was expecting.

...

She did a quick double-take at the lock. “Wait... is it...?” she whispered. Cautiously, she reached up to the lock and gently grabbed it and pulled it down.

Click. The lock disengaged.

What?! Janice was stunned. Was somebody else already in here? It was either a careless mistake by Damien, or someone had already beaten Janice to the punch and tried to make it look as if it was still locked.

She squinted. *Even so... why would they have left it unlocked like that? Do they plan on returning?* It didn't make sense to her. Nevertheless, the amount of convenient coincidences were piling up a bit too much at this point for her to believe this was all just an accident.

Janice slowly opened the door. There were no clear signs of anyone else rummaging

around, except for the general lack of belongings still in the locker. There wasn't much of note on first glance: a few comic books, a few papers (blank, as she'd find out), and a massive pile of tangled cables. She gently searched through the contents, trying not to jostle anything too much so it wouldn't look like she'd gone through it.

...Who am I kidding? With a mess of cords this big, who in the world would notice? She got a little rougher with her search.

At the bottom of the pile was a small, black case of some sort, resting against the back wall. Far too curious, Janice slid it out and inspected it.

HSD 8PB was written on the front in small white letters.

HSD... 8PB? It took her a moment of pondering to realize what it was. *Ah! A computer hard drive! Who knows what could be on here...?* Did the hypothetical "other person before her" miss it because of the huge mess on top, or did they leave it on purpose? She was definitely on to something. She pocketed the hard drive along with its attached cable (luckily for her, the cord was too short to be tangled in that big mess).

She quietly shut the locker and slid the padlock back into place. She delicately tried to close the padlock just enough so it merely looked like it was locked, just like before.

Click. She accidentally locked it.

"Damn." At the very least, she had something worth checking out. Assuming the alleged mystery person wasn't someone able to

monitor surveillance cameras, she was confident she'd be fine.

Computer lab. She tapped a finger in the air. Not far from the staff dormitories on the next floor up was a small office with six computers freely accessible to any employee. She wasn't *technically* an employee, but she figured she counted, given her honorary status as a research assistant.

She'd have to be quiet. To her knowledge, the walls were soundproofed quite well (understandably so, seeing as volons aren't known for being calm and quiet), but she'd rather not wake anyone up while doing sneaky tasks of a questionable nature.

More walking. Janice took a deep breath, enjoying her relatively peaceful time in the halls.

She ascended the carpeted staircase to the comfy second floor, only for her peace to be cut short. Just past the lab door on the right side of the hall was a vending machine and a coworker enjoying a refreshment.

As she approached, his face became clear: Tomo, one of the resident IT gurus. Barely acquainted.

It's fine. Act normal. Janice gave him a brief wave before abruptly breaking eye contact, and Tomo returned Janice's wave and took another sip from his drink. Not a word exchanged; Janice slipped into the computer lab before that changed. She just hoped that he wouldn't get curious about what she was doing.

Six computers were lined up in the fairly cramped room, three on each side of the table, all decked out with flashy holographic screens and keyboards built right in to the desk. Janice picked the computer in the corner, farthest from the entrance.

She powered it on and waited for it to warm up.

Janice impatiently bounced her leg up and down, idly looking around the room. Just above the door was a camera monitoring the area, occasionally looking back and forth to scan the room. She knew there were surveillance cameras on the market that could easily be cloaked or hidden into the walls for cheap, but these ones were in plain sight, hovering over everybody at all times. She figured it was an intimidation tactic.

Once the computer was showing the desktop screen, she plugged the hard drive into the port on the desk. A window popped up, revealing a huge mess of files, apparently unprotected by a password.

Time to snoop. Janice's heart raced.

Hardly anything was properly labeled, and most of the files made no sense, with gibberish names like *mse.c118502* or *a_TERM22*. Attempts to open them were met with a prompt asking what program to open the files with, which Janice was clueless to. However, after scrolling through enough files, she came across some names that *did* make sense.

Staff_Uniform_Changes

V-97_Tests

Weird_contact

Clicking on them opened up archived e-mails with subjects matching the filenames. Each one was clearly labeled, in red text, “Official Maroon Correspondence, Company archival use ONLY, Breaching clearance protocol will result in immediate termination.”

Janice felt a cold sweat creep up through her body. A gut feeling told her that Damien shouldn't have been in possession of these e-mails. *Was he a hacker? Did he get caught red handed?*

She then realized she was just as guilty as Damien now that she had this hard drive.

No, no... I can play it cool... I can bring it up to Carson first, or... or someone else. I'll show them proof that Damien was a mole... that would win over their good side, right? Yeah.

With her loose plan in mind, she clicked through a few more emails, taking a look into their contents for anything worthwhile.

From: Silas Caldwell

Subject: Volons (1-3)

Recipients: N/A (Illian Cluster log)

There's a lot of interesting chatter in the staff bunks lately. I've been hearing coworkers mentioning a new species found in the caverns of this rock. Nothing we're strangers to, but the amount of attention this one is garnering leads me to believe that it might be something more noteworthy than alien bacteria or miniature stone beetles. I'm looking forward to hearing more.

They certainly did find something unique. At first glance, it seems to be an aggressive, amorphous white creature. However, what's really got people talking is its ability to change form; when left in sight of someone from the scouting team for long enough, it turned into a shockingly similar clone of that crew member.

Was the transformation autonomous? Or did the creature intentionally bring about this change itself? Whatever the case may be, I can't even begin to imagine the applications a nigh supernatural ability like this could have. We should begin research immediately.

We've named them volons. Interesting.

The discovery of volons? Janice's stress quickly began welling up. Though she hadn't heard of the Illian Cluster before, it was hardly her main concern. *They talk about us like zoo animals...!*

From: Silas Caldwell

Subject: Distress (1-3)

Recipients: N/A (Illian Cluster log)

This is Prof Caldwell, V-97 is in the room right next to me. I can see it through the window, I don't know what to do. The doors on either side of my room are sealed shut, but I don't know if the window will hold if it tries to break in. It seems to be using the computer... is ,. it just licked the keyboard. It's eating the keyboard now. Good grief, it just eats everything...

It saw me and it's trying to break through the glass! my god, its baring its teeth, its trying to bite the window, if i dont make it, i love you jamie, i love you so much! please dont be sad

It left. It's gone. I mean it's somewhere in here still but it couldn't break the window. Is anyone even left in this place?? Whatever the case may be... I'm going to run to the main hangar on the top floor and see if my ship's still there. Hell, I'd be happy if there was ANY ship left

V-97! These logs are documenting Zev! Zev was on this "Illian Cluster"?! Janice minimized the emails and opened the internet browser. She typed "illian cluster" into the search bar.

"Did you mean: alien cluster," the browser pompously suggested.

No meaningful results. Janice grumbled. If no one knows about this place... is it some secret project by Maroon?! Her curiosity only grew with every click.

But she had to make this quick. She skimmed over the remaining filenames and quickly checked the sender and recipients of the e-mails, hoping to see Damien's name somewhere.

From: Redmond Severus

Subject: Recent incident

Recipients: Soma Jagson

Jagson, your disdain for AI is getting in the way of your work. This reflects poorly on not only myself, but on Maroon as a whole.

DO NOT harm another robot unless you are explicitly authorized to do so. Failure to comply with this order will result in strict discipline.

With the MSE coming to an end, I cannot have another incident like this. These robots are part of groundbreaking research that's been in the works for almost half a decade.

The Z11 Prototype should be ready for use within the year. Do not force me to cancel this weapon, Soma.

The subject "Recent incident" captured her interest, but she was sorely disappointed to see it was unrelated to Damien's incident. She knew who Redmond was, but the name Soma was entirely foreign.

From: Carson Lowe

Subject: Made a kelor?

Recipients: Damien Maguire

Hi Damien

Have you heard of anything called "madeakelor"? I've been browsing my phone and I have a contact called madeakelor on it all of a sudden. I don't even know what it is. made a kelor? anagram? If you've ever heard of it before please send me a message.

Carson

From: Damien Maguire

Subject: Re: Made a kelor?

Recipients: Carson Lowe

yes, my phone has madeakelor too. I saw it 2 weeks ago. idk either. Maybe its something maroon is trying out. otherwise i have no idea

Madeakelor? Janice made another impromptu internet search. There were several relevant web links, but they all seemed to be asking the same question as Carson. Evidently, from each of the link preview blurbs, nobody had any answers. Searching for “made a kelor” with the spaces resulted in nothing worthwhile. She tucked the phrase away in the back of her head.

From: Damien Maguire

Subject: Tdv

Recipients: Carson Lowe

hhwwwoa now i get it! damn she got some of that! wow!!

so come on tell me, what DEAL did she give you :)

...What in the world is this?

From: Carson Lowe

Subject: Re: Tdv

Recipients: Damien Maguire

Hi Damien

I don't know what you're talking about. Please never send me such a crude email again, these company emails are for professional use only.

Carson

From: Damien Maguire
Subject: Re: Tdv
Recipients: Carson Lowe
ok sorry

Janice would've laughed if she wasn't on a mission.

The subject... TDV.

“Nothing the internet can't answer,” Janice did not say, because the net searching was incredibly unhelpful so far. Regardless, she looked up “TDV” anyways, and came up with countless results that all came up with some different answer to the supposed acronym. None of them made sense given the context, nor would she have the time to go through every single one of them.

Janice, 0. Internet, 3. She huffed.

Keeping in touch with her paranoia, she wiped the internet browser's history. She unplugged the hard drive and slipped it in her pocket, turned the computer off, and got ready to leave.

As she stepped back out into the hall, she glanced over at Tomo still standing beside the vending machine, relaxing against the wall. The two exchanged another silent wave before Janice walked down the hall, down the stairs, and back onto the tile floor of the ground level.

Ideally, she would have returned the hard drive to Damien's locker, but she ruined that opportunity by accidentally locking it. Thus, she continued back down to the containment

chambers, back to cell 33, with the drive still in her pocket.

If they find out about this... worst case scenario, I guess I could just eat it.

8 – Her Only Lead

Janice crouched down against the wall of her cell, far from her belongings. She looked to the other side of the room with stark determination, took a quick breath, and sprinted to the other side. Once she reached the far wall, she tagged it with her hand and ran back.

She touched the wall where she began. “8,” she said aloud between rapid breaths. “8.”

There was little to do while waiting around for time to pass.

It was around 4am last time she checked. She was tempted to have a nap to catch up on some of the sleep she missed out on, but her mind was far too restless for that.

Should I tell Carson? Janice kept asking herself. He talked to Damien about stuff... maybe he knows more than he lets on? No... he wouldn't be dishonest with me, would he? Maybe he just needs a reminder.

She touched the ground with her fingertips, crouching down again before breaking out into another sprint. She touched the far wall, ran back to where she began, and stopped again.

“9.”

She didn't have any solid idea of when Carson began work, as she was usually still asleep by the time he arrived. So, she crouched down again before breaking out into another sprint.



Janice rolled around, trying to find a comfortable position on her bed (to no avail).

It had to have been at least two hours since she last checked the time. 6am? He had to have been here by now. She'd seen him around as early as 7am before, so 6am wasn't too much of a stretch.

She rolled off her bed, clambering to her (sore) feet. After making her way over to the door, she slid her keycard through the slot and walked out into the hall.

Ascending to the floor above, a nearby wall clock confirmed that it was about 6:20am. She spotted someone far off in the distance down the hallway. A good sign – perhaps Carson would be around too.

She wondered how exactly she was going to bring it up to him.

“So... Damien had something of questionable legality...”

Maybe. Sounded too formal.

“Damien had an archive of Maroon e-mails, and I looked through them...”

That wouldn't work. It just made her sound bad.

“I saw your name in a couple of archived e-mails between you and Damien...”

Not too bad. It sounded somewhat less shady than the other options.

The two armoured guards were stationed just outside Carson's door. Did that mean he'd be there? Janice continued up to the door, hesitantly slowing her pace. She still had to address yesterday, as well...

Largely ignoring the guards, she knocked on the door twice and waited for a response. A pair of footsteps approached from inside the room, and a moment later, the door opened.

“Hey, Carson.”

“Morning, Jan.” Coffee cup in hand, he opened the door further to let Janice in.

She shuffled into the room rather sheepishly.

“I’m... sorry about yesterday,” Janice apologized before Carson had even shut the door behind her.

“Oh, nonsense. If it weren’t for you, I don’t think I’d standing here right now.” He met up with Janice in the middle of the room, next to a pair of countertops.

“I... I know, but...” She crossed her arms, hardly able maintain eye contact with Carson. “I knew better than to bring up Zev’s past. I didn’t mean to, but... I was panicked, I wanted to keep him distracted...”

“Now, now. Don’t go beating yourself up, Jan. While, yes, it was rather... distressing, the bottom line is we are both unharmed, which I am more than thankful for.” He took a sip of his coffee.

“I... ahh...”

“You did your best! *And we’re both okay*, Jan. Don’t go worrying your head off, now.”

“I guess you’re right. Thanks, Cars. I’m just sorry it got that close.”

“Jan, Jan... if it helps at all, I accept your apology.” Carson smiled.

“Thank you.” Janice returned the grin.

“Besides that, are you well this morning?”

“I’ve been better. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Carson hummed, taking another sip.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something else that happened last night. After we handled Zev.”

“Yes?”

“Well.” Janice recalled the lines she’d been rehearsing in her head. “I did some investigating last night, and I found a few archived e-mails involving Damien.”

“Did you, now?”

“Yeah, and I saw a couple between you and him, too.”

“Janice... that’s private business. You know that.”

“I-I know! I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to snoop through *your* e-mails specifically. I’m... more interested in Damien, ‘cause, well... you know.”

Carson grumbled. “I shouldn’t have expected much in the way of privacy at this place to begin with. Though it’s... to my disdain, did you find anything of note about him?”

“Well... uh, do you know what “TDV” means?”

With a hand on his chin, Carson tilted his head down. “Not that I can recall. Other than one crude e-mail Damien sent me two weeks ago.

TDV was the subject; I'm... assuming you saw that exchange?"

Janice nodded.

"Right." Carson sighed. "I still don't know what he was talking about."

"I'm guessing it's a name or initials, since he was clearly, uh... uhh... horny."

"Not much in the way of tact, that one." Carson shook his head. "I apologize. I shouldn't speak ill of him. Your guess is as good as mine; he did seem to have *someone* on his mind."

"Damn. It's the only lead I have..."

"Perhaps you could ask your other coworkers about TDV? Maybe it's someone who works here that he had the hots for."

"I don't know who I could ask. I'm... not really on goody-friendly-pal terms with anyone else here. The only other person I could think to ask is Anders, and... we..."

"No need to explain that one – I fully understand."

"And I'd need to schedule an appointment just to ask a question."

"Right." Carson walked over to the far end of the room, picking up a few papers. "Much to my regret, Jan, I don't think I can be of much assistance in this matter." He looked back over to Janice with a disappointed expression. "I'll keep my ears open, but I can't promise anything."

"That's okay. I'll figure out a way to get to the bottom of this."

“...And, even more to my regret, I have to boot you out of here for the time being – I have a psyche exam to conduct half an hour from now.”

“Oh! Sorry about that.”

“Not to worry! I just need to organize myself before then.”

“All right. I'll keep up my investigation.”
Janice enthusiastically clenched her fist in front of her chest.

“Do keep me updated.”

“Sure thing!” She headed over to the door, waving back at Carson. “Bye for now.”

“Be well.”

As soon as Janice closed the door behind her, her face drooped. She honestly didn't know where to go next; Anders was the only option she could think of, but she definitely wouldn't be around this early in the morning. Even then, Janice wasn't sure if it was a good idea to consult her about this to begin with.

Not only that, but she had no research assignments to assist with in the meantime. She'd done some exercises. She'd talked to Carson. Her lack of sleep was quickly catching up with her, and she found it prudent to sleep on the decision to talk to Anders or not, seeing as she was still unsure if it was a good idea.

On her way back to cell 33, she made an impromptu detour to the cafeteria to get one of those premade subs from the vending machine before napping. Early in the morning was the perfect time to avoid strange looks from unfamiliar coworkers.

Deciding which flavour to get was always one of the highlights of her day. Before she even reached the sandwich machine, she'd already made her choice. *Imitation honey ham with mustard and sweet onion sauce...*

She eagerly stuck her tongue out just a little bit as the sandwich was dispensed.

Janice power-walked back to her cell, unwrapping her meal as she went, and she found herself back in her room before long.

Her bed was more inviting than ever. Before lying down, she positioned her standing umbrella above the bed so the lights wouldn't be shining straight down on her.

She stretched her body, then flopped down onto the comforter, back first.

Damien. TDV. It was still all she could think about. *Maybe I just can't solve this mystery,* she wondered, still munching on her sandwich. *What if I just don't have enough clearance to figure it out? Or... what if I'm wrong about all it?*

She groaned out of frustration. *Damn, I hate this place.*

After finishing her meal, she curled up on her side, underneath the blanket. Tossing the plastic wrap onto the floor, Janice shut her eyes, fondly remembering her time in the forests, hardly connected to any civilization except for remote gravel roads that seldom led anywhere.

I'll go back someday, she vowed, slowly drifting off to sleep.

9 – ?

“Tenna? Abort.”

10 – Breakdown

Janice groggily opened her eyes. The room was still nice and dark... was it still night? For a fond moment, she found herself at peace, looking up at the night sky in the forest.

As she slowly came to, she realized something wasn't quite normal. She was still in her cell, but the lights weren't blaring down as always. They were... a lot dimmer than usual.

She heard a loud, automated voice faintly from outside her cell.

“Security personnel to ground floor. Non-combat personnel, initiate evacuation procedure. Security personnel to ground floor—”

Janice's eyes shot open. She tossed her blanket off the bed and jumped to her feet, stumbling as her body struggled to keep up with her sudden, frantic motions.

Evidently, nobody had come to tell her what was happening. She ran to the door and opened it with utmost haste.

Nobody was around downstairs, as usual. Janice rushed down the lengthy hallways and ran up the stairs towards the lobby, still nobody in sight. *Not* usual.

The ground shook for a brief moment, with enough intensity to force Janice against the wall to keep her balance.

What in the world is happening?

“Hello?!” she shouted, running towards Carson's lab. The door was unguarded; she yanked it open and surveyed the room.

Carson was nowhere to be seen.

*Evacuation... he's probably gone already.
What's going on?!*

A foreign thought occurred to her just then. *Evacuation... escape? Is this a chance at freedom?*

With nobody around, there was one place Janice had to go first. She quickly backtracked down the hallways, down to the volon cells.

This really is a risky shot in the dark. She found herself second guessing what she was about to do, fearing the repercussions of her actions should she be caught.

91, 92, 93, she counted. I can't get in trouble for something if there's nobody around to punish me, right?

Arriving at cell 97, she looked in through the door's tiny window.

Zev was right there, face against the glass, trying to look into the hall.

“Ah, ah! Janice...” Zev's voice was muffled by the door.

“Zev! Can you hear me?”

“Yes. Get me out of here.”

“I'm sorry for yesterday! If I let you out, will you cooperate?”

“If you're escaping, then *yes!*”

“Promise me that you'll—”

“JUST OPEN THE DOOR!”

“All... all right.” Janice took a deep breath. She placed her keycard in the door's scanner and slowly slid it through. The door's

mechanisms *clunked* before Zev shoved it open, nearly knocking Janice over in the process.

“FREEDOM!” Zev cheered as they ducked under the relatively short door frame, stepping out into the hallway.

“Shh, shh shh! Okay, let's go!” Janice had no plan, nor did she even know how to leave the facility, but she knew from experience that acting confident around Zev was crucial to staying on their good side.

“KyeH-heh-HAH!” Zev cackled, completely ignoring Janice's shushes.

“We have to be careful,” Janice began as she led a hunched-over Zev towards the lobby. “I don't know what's going on.”

“Don't care,” Zev snarled. “I just want out. Ooh, I'm hungry.”

Not the most comforting thing for Janice to hear from a huge monster tailing just behind her. On that note, it was unusual having a creature that formidable following *her* rather than the opposite.

She knew the “main” floor well enough to tell the exit wasn't here. She continued onward towards the staircase leading up to the next floor up, where she'd used the computer lab not too long ago.

Janice raced up the stairs two at a time, while Zev found it easier to crawl up on all fours.

“Ah, ah, hungry, hungry...” Zev stood up straight once they reached the top of the stairs.

Janice felt it necessary to check behind herself every once in a while, keeping a close eye on her new ally.

About halfway down the hall was a human sitting against the wall, staring down at Janice and Zev.

“*Fuuuck!* Oh god, fu-u-u-uck—” Seth cried out as he pointed at Zev, scrambling to his feet.

“Wait! Seth!” Janice called.

Seth was already running away.

“Kyeh-heh-heh!” Zev chased him down without hesitation.

“Zev! Stop!!” Janice shouted, trying to keep up with the giant volon, but there was no way she could run that fast. Seconds later, Zev grabbed Seth, holding him in the air by the neck.

“STOP!!” Janice screamed.

“Hrmm... ah! You, *I already ate you!*” Zev barked, inspecting Seth's face.

Seth struggled and choked, barely able to breathe in Zev's grasp.

Something down the hall caught Janice's eye. “Zev! Put him down!” Janice demanded as she yanked on Zev's coat. She hesitated for a short moment. “...E-eat that one!!” She pointed down the hall.

Zev took their attention away from Seth, looking down at the armed guard just turning the corner at the end of the hallway, no more than a couple dozen feet away. The volon carelessly dropped Seth to the floor and bolted towards the guard.

“You! Open fire!” the guard announced.
“Code white!”

With a sudden gasp, Janice went prone on the floor. Seth curled up in a fetal position.

The deafening *TSZ-TSZ-TSZ* of pulse rifle fire blasted through the room. Janice couldn't bear to watch.

Zev charged forward, roaring as loud as the gunfire. The pulse rifle stopped firing, and the pained, horrified cries of the guard rang through the hall.

Snapping bone and ripping flesh slowly replaced the guard's screams.

Janice dared to look up. Parts of the guard were lying on the floor, while the rest of him was still, presumably, held up in the air by Zev.

Violent crunching noises filled the air.

Janice crawled up to her feet, now that the coast was clear.

“Seth, a-are you hurt?” she asked.

“Are you— are you fucking kidding me? That thing just... it's... eating...!”

“It's... it's okay! Zev is... uh...” Janice quickly realized she had no way of painting Zev's actions in a positive light.

“That thing fucking... oh my god.” Seth stood up, stumbling, supporting himself against the wall. “Ahh, fuck, fuck,” he mumbled, hanging his head down.

Janice watched as Seth started drooling, moments before he vomited all over the carpet. She grimaced and looked away.

“Get that thing away from me,” Seth huffed before retching again.

“O-okay.” Janice cautiously ran down the hall. “...Zev?”

Zev turned to face her, quickly swallowing an armoured leg. “Ah, ah, variety, variety...”

“Are you hit?” Zev didn't seem to be injured from the gunfire, but there was far too much for the guard to have missed *every* shot.

“One human can't hurt me fast enough to kill me.”

Janice scanned Zev's body. There were no bullet marks anywhere that she could see. *Zev couldn't have regenerated that fast... could he have?*

Janice shuddered and pointed to Seth. “Don't hurt him, okay?”

“Why? I'm free.”

“I won't help you escape this place if you hurt him.”

“Threaten me again, Janice.”

“I... sorry! It's not supposed to be a threat! Just please leave him alone, okay? He's my friend.”

“Fine.”

“Seth! We're leaving! Get out of here yourself, evacuation procedure and all!”

“Get that thing away,” he repeated, feebly shambling away.

Janice looked around the corner as Zev continued chewing on the last remains of the guard. Diligently keeping her eyes off Zev's

horrible appetite, Janice spotted a sign listing directions on the far wall.

Just above three other lines of directions was a big red “← EXIT”. Janice's eyes lit up, and she beckoned Zev to follow her down the hallway once again.

The wall to her left was purely made of glass, showing off the fancy staff dormitories, dining room, and lounge. To her right was a solid, burgundy wall with a hefty door at the end.

It wasn't an ordinary door; it looked more like the entrance to a walk-in vault. Huge and entirely made of metal, it was sealed by a pair of horizontal bars raised across its width.

“NO ACCESS WITHOUT AUTHORIZATION. Failure to comply may result in immediate termination,” bright red text on the door warned Janice. Despite this, she couldn't help but notice the exit sign just above the door.

Pushing it did nothing, and neither did pulling.

There was no mechanism for a keycard anywhere nearby. She jostled the bars that kept the door locked, discovering they could be rotated to a vertical position with some effort.

Pushing the door did nothing, but with a strenuous tug, the door slowly swung open.

“Zev, get ready.”

Zev grunted.

Janice peeked around the door. Another staircase, only this time, there wasn't a semblance of comfort or decoration – just plain, grey

concrete with old-fashioned tube lamps on the ceiling. Nothing else in sight.

The building shook once again, though not as severely as before. Janice could hear an explosion, just faintly.

“I don't like this,” Zev remarked.

“Neither do I...”

The two continued forward, ascending to the next floor. At the top was a smaller, ordinary-looking door, seemingly unguarded by anybody.

More guards' voices could be heard as Janice approached the door. She pressed her ear against it; screams, gunfire, and inhuman roars all mixed together in an aggressive flurry of sound.

Janice stepped back. “Shit... what should we do?” She'd hardly been through the dormitory floor below, let alone this ominous vault passage.

“Move,” Zev commanded.

“Hm?” Janice stepped to the side.

Zev positioned themselves a few feet away from the door, directly in front of it. They raised up their right foot and slammed it into the door, breaking it off its hinges, sending it flying into the next room.

Without an ounce of caution, Zev scrambled under the human-sized door frame and bolted forward.

“Zev!” Janice shouted, running after them.

They found themselves at the back of an enormous lobby, perhaps a dozen feet behind a reception desk. Everything was sleek and pristine, from glass staircases leading up to the second

floor above them, to fancy pillars engraved with various patterns. Perhaps 50 feet in front of them was a wide open entrance to the corner of a city street.

A slew of human bodies – only a few still intact – were scattered around, countless blood splatters and smears of viscera painted the floor, and at least 20 stark white, gangly creatures with huge claws dotted the room, standing anywhere from Janice's height to Zev's. Some of them were actively consuming the corpses littering the room.

Volons, unmistakably.

Janice's breaths quickened as she stared straight ahead, largely disregarding the carnage around her. Just beyond those doors was freedom like she had before. No more containment. No more unwilling work. No more gross looks from unpleasant people. No more human guards to tell her “no.” She could leave and be free, and all that stood between her and the open door was a horde of volons.

“Oh my god.” Janice froze as several of them looked straight at her and Zev.

Zev responded by transforming their arms into a pair of axes, assuming a combat stance, grinning wildly.

A few of the volons scampered towards the two; Janice was tempted to run, but she steeled herself and remained still. To her surprise, Zev didn't attack. They simply stood ready to fight, emitting a quiet growl.

Two of the volons walked up to the opposite side of the reception desk with their

mouths open, rapidly inhaling and exhaling. *They were sniffing the air.* Janice felt considerably less tense; if she was a human, she knew full well she'd be dead within seconds.

However, as she expected, the approaching volons gradually lost interest as they realized neither she nor Zev was edible.

“Let's... leave,” Janice suggested, hardly able to believe the words she was saying.

Zev calmed down, relaxing their stance. Their arms remained in axe form, though.

The two quietly walked through the bloody lobby, trying their best not to disturb any of the other volons. The ones that weren't feasting were just standing around idly for a reason Janice couldn't figure out.

Her pace gradually slowed down. She'd definitely heard gunfire and shouts, so where were all those soldiers? A glance around the room told her that *some* of the dead humans were guards, given their hefty chunks of armour lying around. *But a facility this big would surely have tighter security, wouldn't it?* Something didn't feel right.

The wide open door to the neon-lit city streets was just before her. The carnage continued outside; as Janice stepped through the exit, she spotted several more corpses, all of which were armed soldiers (or, parts of them).

The surrounding area was ruined with small craters, explosion marks, and a few small fires that Janice steered well clear of. Off to the left side of the road was a black semi truck, and a pair of volons with nearly identical heights to

Janice and Zev, the shorter of which was armed with a ballistic shotgun.

“They're like us,” Zev remarked.

“H-hello?” Janice dared to speak up.

They both looked over to her; the overtly female shotgun volon did a double-take.

“You're not from the group,” a sickeningly sweet voice came from the shotgun volon. “Wait, are you Janice?” she asked.

“Yes, that's me. What's going on? Who are you?”

She beckoned Janice over. “We're here to break you out! Let's go, now, before reinforcements arrive! You too!” she ordered, pointing at Zev.

“Whoa, whoa, what do you mean? Who are you?!” Janice didn't know anyone who would want to rescue her, let alone this armed volon.

“The name's Tenna! We're on your side! Now let's GO!” she barked, running over to the semi truck.

Thoroughly confused, Janice followed her as Tenna led her to the back of the vehicle.

“Hah! You think I'm going to be kidnapped again?!” Zev roared.

“We're not kidnapping you, we're *rescuing* you! Now get the fuck in!” Tenna yelled. “Glenn, start the truck!” she continued.

Janice glanced down the street to see several flashing lights approaching. Distant sirens slowly became audible. Not police sirens, but *military sirens*.

“Come on, Zev!” Janice shouted as the semi's engine revved to life.

“Kyeh-hah-hah! Not a chance! I'm free!!” Zev cackled. Before Janice could fit in another word, Zev eagerly ran down the opposite side of the street.

“Zev!” she screamed. “Come back!”

Her words fell on deaf ears.

Tenna opened a latch on the back of the semi and flung the door up. “Get in! Go!”

“I— damnit, Zev!” Janice cried before hesitantly following Tenna's instructions. She climbed into the back of the semi as the sirens grew dangerously close.

The Zev-sized volon followed her in and sat down against the front of the freight container, and Tenna herself jumped in shortly after. She pulled the door down and locked it with the same latch mechanism from the inside.

“Floor it!!” Tenna yelled. “Go, go, go!”

Janice fell against the back of the truck as it abruptly accelerated forward. “Where are we going? Are we going to make it?” she frantically asked.

“Just hold on! Anywhere's better than here!” Tenna replied.

11 – An Unruly Trio

The flickering lights attached to the top of the cargo container were just bright enough to give Janice a glimpse at who she was dealing with.

The huge volon at the back of the container had two eyes just like Zev's, but slightly uneven in position, and a head of spiky, black hair. They wore nothing more than a pair of black boots, matching cargo pants, and a dark red bandanna across its face. Tattoo-like markings and flowy, circular patterns covered their chest, and a huge maw stretched across their abdomen with yellow, clenched teeth.

Tenna's eyes were two crosses – again, just like Zev's – positioned above one another rather than side by side. She wore her lengthy, black hair in a ponytail, and she wore a pair of platform boots, short skirt, and trenchcoat, all matching in colour (or, lack thereof).

“We're getting the fuck out of Miyatama, bottom line,” Tenna said. “Probably head back to Ystets if we can shake these fuckers.”

Janice looked at her quizzically.

Tenna met her gaze with a head tilt. “...Do you even know where we are?”

“Not a clue!”

Tenna slowly looked away. “Goes to show the treatment you got in there.”

“W-what about all those volons in there! Who were they? How did they get there?!”

“They're mine. I brought them here.”

Janice's mouth slowly opened, unsure if she was feeling disgust or fear. "And... and you just let them kill all those people...?"

"They're just humans!"

Janice slowly let out a deep breath. She bit her tongue.

"What?" Tenna continued, "don't tell me you sympathize with them."

"Uhm... I..."

Tenna grumbled.

Meanwhile, the sirens blaring outside the truck were increasing in both number and intensity.

Shit, I don't want to die like this! Or get sent back to that place...

Tenna spun around to face the door. "Damn, those motherfuckers are here in droves. Eckire, spot me. Don't let me fall out of this thing if Glenn swings this sucker around."

The big volon in the back readied itself to grab Tenna if necessary.

Tenna unlocked the truck container's door.

"Whoa, whoa!" Janice exclaimed, holding on to the floor as best she could.

With the door ajar just enough to see outside, Tenna aimed her shotgun at the nearest pursuer.

She opened fire. Explosive shotgun blasts blended in with the cacophony of hot pursuit.

The armoured vehicle Tenna shot began swerving haphazardly across the narrow road,

repeatedly overcorrecting until the vehicle skid sideways and slid onto its side.

The truck's container jerked around as it made a sudden turn to the left; Eckire reached forward and grabbed Tenna's arm, but she managed to keep her footing. Janice held herself against the wall.

"Thanks, big guy." Tenna shut the door and locked it. "Yeah, that should slow them down."

"This is madness!" Janice shouted.

"I'll give you that one. This is the most fun I've had in months!"

Once again, Janice bit her tongue.

The sirens gradually lowered in density as the truck chugged along. Given the lack of any windows in the cargo container, Janice had no idea where she was or where she was going.

"How... how do you even know me? Why are you rescuing me?"

"I have my sources." Tenna smiled at Janice. "As for you, you're rare, you know that? Real rare! It's not easy find stable volons like you on Hallow. When I found out humans were keeping you prisoner in there, ooh... *ooh*, I was pissed."

"They weren't... exactly... i-it wasn't really a *prison* so to speak..."

"You're the worst case of Stockholm I've ever seen! No *wonder* you never escaped on your own."

"Uh, no...! That's..." Janice halted herself, realizing that, yeah, it was somewhat refreshing to

be anywhere but that facility. The back of a semi truck wasn't entirely better, but it was an improvement.

“What about all those people down there? Humans aren't beneath us!”

“You have an interesting sense of humour. We didn't kill *everyone*, just enough to get in there and extract you! Well... turns out we didn't even need to, since you just walked out the front door right as we were about to get in there.”

“I only got out because of what you did.”

“Perfect! Then it all worked out.”

“Fuck...” Janice mumbled, “I... I had friends down there. Carson... Seth, too, I guess—”

“Oh, Carson's fine.”

“What?!”

“I said, Carson's fine.”

“H-how do you know that? Are you screwing with me?”

“Come, now. I just rescued you from prison. Why would I suddenly fuck with you?”

“So then how do you know about Carson?”

“Oh, you cute little thing. You still don't know, do you?”

“Wh... what are you talking about?”

Tenna didn't offer a response, aside from a giggle and a little smile.

Another sharp turn sent the group against the left wall, pinning Janice between Eckire and the wall.

“Oof!” Janice gasped.

“Sorry.” Eckire moved back to his spot once the truck stopped turning.

“You guys couldn't have brought better escapee accommodations?” Janice asked

“We don't make a habit of getting into cop chases! I expected them to come, but not even I know how they got here so fast.”

“Those aren't cops, they're *military* vehicles!”

“Even better! Fuck if I know why we got cops 2.0.”

Despite the significantly quieter sirens in the distance, they were definitely still present. Janice struggled to keep still; not being able to see outside anywhere didn't help her discomfort.

The truck tilted upwards with a huge bump, presumably moving up a ramp of some sort.

“We're screwed, aren't we?” Janice whimpered.

Tenna casually smiled again. “You think I didn't come prepared for this? Come on, who do you take me for?”

“I-I've never met you!” Janice gave Tenna an incredulous leer.

“Just relax and hold on. Give it 30 seconds. We'll be fine.”

Janice glanced towards the back of the truck's container. She didn't know what she should be expecting, given Tenna's definition of “fun,” but she steeled herself to be prepared for anything.

“Aaany second now,” Tenna mumbled as the seconds ticked by.

A huge crash exploded out from outside the truck, presumably behind the vehicle. It slowly became evident that the sirens had stopped entirely.

“Yes! Got 'em!” Tenna cheered.

“Wh... what...?” Janice stammered.

“I always have a backup plan.” She stuck her tongue out at Janice. “Some kingpin I’d be otherwise!”

“...Queenpin?” Eckire shared his thoughts.

Tenna looked over at him. “Queenpin. *I like that.*”

Janice remained quiet. She didn't have the stomach to ask what Tenna had just done. With the sirens gone, her heart finally started slowing to a more reasonable pace. She curled her knees up and rested her head against them in a feeble attempt to drown out the situation around her.

I'll get answers from these crazy people, or so help me...

She tried her best to ignore the small talk between Tenna and Eckire, focusing on the *whirr* of the truck's powerful engine. Despite her best efforts, every minute felt like five in the back of the semi.



About 20 minutes later, after the insanity of the truck chase, the vehicle eventually slowed down to a halt outside of some unknown destination.

Tenna stood up and stretched. She opened the truck's hatch and hopped out; Janice joined

her, cautiously taking in her surroundings, before Eckire hopped out behind them.

The area around her looked like an abandoned street in a somewhat old-fashioned city, definitely different from the kinds of buildings she saw outside the Maroon facility during the short time she was out there. Lots of monochrome buildings with stark black and white colours, and a few high-rises visible in the distance from where Janice stood.

“Where are we?” she asked, breaking the relative silence that'd been looming over the group after the pursuit ended.

“Ystets city.” Tenna shut the container's door. “The best place you could be.”

A man stepped down from the semi truck's driver's seat. Seemingly not a volon, just an ordinary-looking Caucasian man with short black hair, a business suit sans the jacket, and a pair of sunglasses coupled with a deadpan expression.

“Props to you for shaking those assholes!” Tenna commended him. “Now that we actually have a moment, Janice, this is Glenn.”

As Glenn approached her, she hesitantly held her hand forward.

“A pleasure,” he remarked with a surprisingly smooth voice as he shook her hand.

“...Likewise.”

“Our big fellow here is Eckire,” Tenna continued, holding her hands out at him as if she was presenting him to a crowd.

He grumbled in response, looking down at Janice.

“Hi...” Janice greeted him.

“And me...!” Tenna placed a hand on her chest, which was gratuitously exposed now that she'd loosened the chain keeping her trenchcoat shut, revealing she had nothing on beneath it. “The name's Tennadeirovaein. Just call me Tenna.”

Janice's eyes widened for a moment as she attempted to recite Tenna's full name in her head. “Tenna it is.” She tried to avert her gaze.

In front of them was a run-down building with chipped white paint, dents in the walls, and weeds growing around its cracked foundation.

“No time like the present! Let's go.” Tenna led the group into the dilapidated building, looking more like a ruin than a home. With Glenn and Eckire taking up the rear, Janice followed right behind Tenna.

As they moved deeper into the building's tight hallways and empty rooms, the darkness slowly crept around them. Not a light bulb in sight.

“We keep it like this to divert attention,” Tenna explained.

“...What about the jet black semi truck just outside?” Janice questioned.

“Sshhh.”

It was only a few more seconds of walking before Tenna stopped in front of a wall. She leaned down and flicked something near the

floor, and a pair of sliding doors opened in the wall, well camouflaged in the derelict space.

“Ta-dah!” Tenna cheered.

The light poured out from the next room, revealing a foyer lined with pale brick walls. All sorts of tools and equipment were neatly arranged the place, either hanging from a shelf or leaning against the walls, and a double-decker bunk bed filled with colourful pillows and comforters stood in the corner of the room.

Glenn and Eckire brushed past Janice as she stood still, taking it all in. “Wow. You guys are pretty serious...”

“You don't know the half of it,” Glenn commented.

Janice felt considerably anxious stepping foot inside the hideout. “I'm... am I going to have police looking for me? Or... Maroon?”

“Oh, love,” Tenna began, placing her shotgun on a rack just beside the bed, “you're in Ystets now. Any human with a decent head on its shoulders would stay ten miles away from here even if their life depended on it.”

“Wh...?”

“You really did live under a rock in that place.” Tenna walked over and pressed a button on the wall beside the entrance, closing the door. She stepped back and started inspecting Janice. “Eh, I guess I can't blame you. Have you at least heard of the “paranormal activity” and “strange disappearances” here?”

Janice shook her head.

Tenna smiled. "You're in for a treat. This is the volon capital of Hallow. At least, I'm pretty sure it is. Maybe a tenth of the population is comprised of volons, and the other 90% are clueless humans ready to be preyed on. The best part is the humans have no idea what's going on here."

"How could that many people be clueless about something widespread like that? Wouldn't humanity freak out about alien life?"

"Because volons are hunters. Assassins who kill for sustenance. We don't make big public displays when we hunt, we do it with stealth and tact."

"Uh, yeah, like what just happened at Maroon."

"Sshhh. Besides, that was different. I'm talking about when we hunt to eat, not when we're on a wild rescue mission. Though, I guess the humans will probably have to publicly acknowledge us volons after finding the aftermath of that display. Whoopsies~"

Janice was suddenly reminded of Zev after hearing Tenna's comment about how volons are apparently stealthy assassins. Zev was definitely an exception to that, and so was Janice herself.

Are Ystets volons really that different? How... how could it be true that nobody knows about them?

"Hellooo. You look lost." Tenna waved a hand in front of Janice's face.

"Ah! Sorry, I'm just... thinking."

“What's on your mind? Come on, you can tell me.”

“I... no, I need a bit. This is too much to take in.”

“Okay, if you say so. Feel free to get cozy on my bed. Probably a lot comfier than standing around.” Tenna turned heel and power-walked off into another part of the base. “Don't touch my gun!” she shouted. “I'll know!!”

With a million questions buzzing around in her head, Janice took up Tenna's offer and sat down on the cushy bed. Glenn and Eckire had already left down the hall Tenna just stepped into, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

What the hell is going on?

12 – Kin

It was peculiarly quiet. The jarring shift from hot pursuit in a massive semi truck to total stillness in an unfamiliar room was uncomfortable. Not to mention it was sort of cold, but she wouldn't dare mess up Tenna's bed to curl up in a blanket.

Okay... breathe. They're... benevolent. No need to be scared, for now. Janice lied down on the bed, focusing on steady breaths. Zev is fine, probably... he probably ran off somewhere, yeah. Damn it, why didn't he come with us! And... Tenna said Carson is fine; how did she even know? Damn it, breathe, breathe...

Again, she tried to focus on the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

She looked forward, gluing her eyes to the base's hidden entrance. She could just... leave, couldn't she? Simply being allowed to roam free was such a foreign concept that she had trouble registering that she was no longer a prisoner of any sort.

“You're not doing so hot, huh?” Tenna's sickly sweet voice pierced the room's silence.

“Wh— how long have you been there?!” Janice looked over to see Tenna nibbling on a chocolate bar, leaning against the far wall to the left of the bed.

“Long enough to see you writhing around in stress.” She walked over and sat down on the bed beside Janice. “Want a piece?” She handed the chocolate bar to Janice.

“No thanks.” She *was* hungry, but accepting food from Tenna didn't sit right with her.

“More for me! So, anyways... I have some business to take care of with Eckire shortly, but if you have any questions, now's your chance!”

“I mean... I sure do... I just... need to think.” Janice tilted her head to the side and placed a hand on her forehead. “Who are you? Not, like, Tenna... but all three of you. Who are you all?”

“You picked one of the only things I *can't* fully explain to you. Too sensitive! As far as you need to be concerned, we're a group of volon advocates who want stable volons like us to be free to live as we see fit.”

On the surface, it matched Janice's moral compass completely. But she knew full well that Tenna's version of “living as we see fit” meant freely preying on humanity, so she opted to drop the question. At least it got her free from Maroon.

“Right... and... what do you know about Carson?”

“I know that he and Damien are both easily manipulated by a gorgeous body~”

“You—”

Janice cut herself off. Several things clicked into place with that statement. Those e-mails, the ones between Damien and Carson, about some attractive woman... the subject “TDV”...

“It's you,” Janice looked at Tenna. “Damien and Carson... they were working for you.”

“Not bad! I'm impressed.”

“That's how you knew about me.”

“A lot more than just you. But, seeing as you were the only stable volon in there worth rescuing, you were our only priority.”

“That's not true. There was another.”

“Zev?”

“Y-yeah! And now he's just out there roaming Miyatama!”

“We considered Zev, but they were too much of a risk to bring back here. Granted, when you stepped out with them, I wasn't about to say *no*, but they clearly had other plans.”

Janice sighed.

“By the way, Zev is genderless. They're not a guy,” Tenna explained.

“Oh. Sorry. Did you learn that from Carson too?”

“Actually, no! That's where Damien came in.”

“Wait, don't tell me... he was a hacker, wasn't he? That's how he had access to all those files...!”

“Ehhh... I *guess* you could say that? Well, no, not really. He was just really good at getting access to things he wasn't supposed to have access to. Among the files he uncovered, he found a bunch of logs documenting Zev during their short time in there.”

“And they're just gone out there in the city now. Zev's going to kill so many people...”

Tenna shrugged. “It's win-win as far as I care. A mostly stable volon is now free from their prison, and I don't have to deal with the risk of someone so volatile.”

“Could you at least pretend to care about humanity?” Janice huffed. “You know damn well they're just as intelligent as us.”

“Tell me, Janice, do you ever feel the urge to hunt? Have you ever killed before? Have you ever tasted human flesh?”

Janice remained silent.

“Just as well as I know humans are smart, I know the answer to all of those questions is yes.” Tenna poked Janice's shoulder. “You're a volon. Our *purpose* is to consume. Your willpower might be strong enough to fight off your natural desires – hell knows why you would want to do that – but you can't deny that *we* are on top of the food chain.”

Oh my god. She really lacks any level of compassion. Janice suppressed a glare, trying to remain calm. “We'll just have to agree to disagree.”

“Oh, you're such a cutie.” Tenna ruffled Janice's hair. “You have anything else to ask?”

“Don't... do that.” Janice tried to straighten her hair out. “So... Carson's okay?”

Tenna waved her hand dismissively. “Unless he was dumb enough to come into work today, there's no reason he should be hurt.”

“That's not exactly reassuring... you said he was fine when we were in the truck.”

“*He* was the one who pulled the plug and called us in. I seriously doubt he even left his bunk after giving me the signal.”

“There's no way that's true,” Janice blurted.

“Why's that?”

“Carson wouldn't have called for the deaths of so many people like that. No way.”

Tenna looked down at Janice with a tiny smile. “How come you say that?”

“Because he was friendly! He was kind, respectful, reassuring... he was one of the only people I trusted in that place.”

“Does that mean he's not capable of committing atrocities?”

“Well! Someone who's... who's so nice wouldn't do something like that...”

“You sound like you're trying to convince yourself.”

Janice locked eyes with Tenna, visibly displeased.

Tenna shrugged. “Sorry! I call it like I see it, sweetheart.”

Janice turned her head and rolled her eyes.

“I saw that!”

“Whatever!” Janice puffed.

“Anything else before I go get ready to leave?”

Tenna's overbearing disposition didn't lend well to Janice thinking up important

questions on the spot, but there were two more burning questions on her mind.

“So, I can leave, right?”

“You're free, love. You can walk out that door and we won't bat an eye.”

Wow. Those words were too unfamiliar.

“And, on the other hand... can I stay here, if I need a bit of time?”

Tenna placed a finger on her chin and tilted her head. “Mmm... dunno! A couple days, if you need to. I don't see why not. But don't go overstaying your welcome!”

“O-okay. Thanks...?”

“Anything else?”

“Just... one more thing, I think. How come you're openly telling me about Carson and Damien... isn't that sensitive information? Like...what if I told someone?”

“I know you have nobody you could tell that would believe you or listen to you in the first place.”

“Geez! Mind being a bit more sensitive?!” Janice scowled at her.

“Honey, you were a prisoner in a society that detests us. If you can't handle honesty, you might not be a good fit for these parts. So, anything else on your mind?”

“Uh, no! Not that I can think of!”

“Perfect. In the meantime, I've gotta get going. Glenn's in the back room watching some TV. You're free to join him, if that's your thing. Straight down the hall.”

“Okay.”

“We can talk more when I'm back if you want.”

“Okay.”

Tenna walked past Janice and picked up her shotgun off the wall rack. “Money's on the counter, pizza's in the oven, no parties while we're gone!” She flashed a little smile.

Janice opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“See you!” Tenna stepped down the hall, finally out of sight.

Janice breathed a sigh of relief. She flopped back down on the bed and tried to relax.

Thank god. Damn, though... a couple days... should be long enough to get my bearings...

She took her time alone to go over her options and try to make sense of everything. Janice still had trouble believing what Tenna said about Carson. But, on the slim chance that it was true...

She remained still, trying to process this information and emotion overload.

I have to find out if he's alive or not. And... maybe I could find Zev before it's too late.

She looked back up at the front entrance again. Something could be faintly heard from down the nearby hallway – presumably, the television Tenna mentioned – which sparked a thought in Janice's mind. Perhaps she could use it to gain info about the nearby world.

After glancing between the hallway and the front door several times, she slowly rose to her

feet and walked down the narrow, branching hall. Straight ahead, as Tenna described.

Janice peeked into the room. Glenn – still wearing his sunglasses – was idly sitting on a wide, leather couch, watching TV, in a room almost identical in shape and size to the “lobby.” The only pieces of furniture were a small coffee table in front of the couch, the flat-screen television set, and a mini fridge next to the couch.

“Howdy,” he greeted Janice.

“Hey.”

“Don't be a stranger. Take a seat.”

First impression: he didn't seem so bad. Hesitantly, Janice entered the room sat down beside him.

“Don't mind Tenna. She can come across pretty strong,” Glenn reassured her.

“Yeah... yeah.” She looked at the TV. Glenn was flicking through the channels, looking for something to watch.

“Need a drink? Something to eat?” Glenn reached down to the fridge and pulled out a canned beverage.

“Ah, I'm okay, thanks.”

He cracked the can open and took a sip.

“Um, may I ask... are you... human?”

Glenn laughed. He leaned over to her, faced her, and lifted his sunglasses. “Hardly.”

Past his meticulously airbrushed face, Janice immediately noticed his eyes. *Cross-shaped pupils. He's a volon in disguise.* She slowly nodded.

Glenn sat back in his seat. "It's far easier to get around this way."

"I guess it would be. Tenna told me that humanity doesn't "officially" know about volons yet, but how can that be true...?"

"Manipulation of televised media and payoffs to high ranking government officials capable of widespread censorship. Not on our part, but that's what I've picked up through the grape vine."

The scale of this trio's operations became much clearer to Janice with that statement.

"But we – as in, volons – we're everywhere, aren't we...?" Janice asked.

"Eh." Glenn shrugged. "Not as ubiquitous as you might be led to believe. You just happen to be where most of us conglomerate, either in this city or down there in Maroon's bowels." He smiled and took another sip of his drink. "I suspect things will start changing pretty damn soon. Cat's well out of the bag with that catastrophe Tenna left at Maroon. No amount of censorship is going to hide that."

"No kidding! Is that what you're looking for on here?" Janice glanced at the television.

"Suppose so. I'm mainly hoping to see some updates on the genofexians."

"Hm?"

"You don't know of them?"

"Not a clue!"

"Hahah. We're not the first aliens to arrive here on Hallow. 'Bout a week ago, the tube was lit up with emergency alerts and civil broadcasts

about some first contact with alien life in the form of a mothership on a course straight for this rock. Meaningful updates are surprisingly scarce, given how paramount this is for just about everybody's life."

Janice's eyes lit up as she looked back at the TV. "Other aliens, huh..."

"We know they call themselves genofexians. That's as far as the public's knowledge goes."

"Are they peaceful?"

"We ain't dead yet."

"Yeah... that's a good point."

Silence briefly lingered between the two as Glenn continued surfing the channels.

"Mind if I ask just one more thing...?" Janice asked, lowering her voice.

"I reckon you just did."

The smile on Glenn's face prompted Janice to chuckle along with his remark. "You guys are awfully hospitable to me... I... guess I still don't get why?"

"Stable volons like ourselves are few and far between. We're an exceptionally small minority out of the entire volon species, the rest of which is comprised of feral fuckwits that rely purely on instinct and have no discernible levels of intelligence." Glenn peered over at Janice from beneath his shades. "We like people like you. Don't get me wrong – we can't keep you here for long – but you're a breath of fresh air in this wretched cesspool."

“Thanks, I think...” Janice hardly knew how to respond. “Also, uh... on that note... didn't Tenna say that those feral volons at Maroon were *hers?*”

Glenn shook his head. “She raises them like animals. I'm just a driver. I want no part in it.”

“*Raises* them?!”

“Trains, raises, whatever word you want to use. It's weird and uncomfortable.”

“Y-yeah... very.”

“Hot damn, here we go.” Glenn leaned forward, finally parking the TV on a news channel.

A slick robotic news anchor appeared on-screen, with a smaller screen in the upper right corner showing the ruined entrance of the Maroon building.

“BREAKING NEWS: Assault on Miyatama Maroon compound by unidentifiable creatures,” the ticker running across the bottom of the screen read.

“Yup. This is it,” Glenn continued.

13 – Finale

“We have breaking news coming from Lower Miyatama's southwest district. An alleged terrorist attack on the local Maroon branch was just carried out approximately an hour ago, leaving the surrounding area in chaos, with several confirmed dead. Dozens of the unidentified assailants are still inside the building's lobby; both military and police forces are on the scene. Artos, over to you.”

The screen transitioned from the pristine news room, to a familiar, tumultuous scene outside a familiar Maroon building. Another robot, very similar in appearance to the news anchor, stood behind several parked emergency vehicles, microphone in hand.

“This is the scene on Miyatama's 89-57 street right now. Directly in the middle of 88-57 is an ongoing firefight between armed authorities and the unidentified beings currently occupying Maroon's lobby.”

“Boy, oh, boy,” Glenn commented as he clasped his hands on his lap, “I can't wait to see how they describe us.”

“We don't know the motive or means behind this attack, nor do we have information on the biological identity of the assailants, as they are confirmed to *not* be human in origin. Police are currently investigating the appearance of a black semi-truck seen briefly at the front of Maroon's entrance, which fled the scene as military respondents arrived. It was engaged in hot pursuit

for almost half an hour before authorities lost sight of the vehicle, and the chase resulted in multiple damaged or totaled military cruisers, leaving three dead and five others in critical condition.

Citizens in the Lower Miytama area are advised to avoid streets between 86-55 and 90-59 until the situation has been resolved. Traffic updates and active detours will be coming in the following report.

Updates for the current situation are coming by the minute, so stay tuned for more.” The screen transitioned back to the news room.

Glenn smirked. “Guess that was my fault.”

“I... guess you did get us away from them.” Janice was visibly upset.

“Hey, I’m not big on killing humans either. Live and let live, the way I see it. But the moment they get involved in our business is when we have to take action.”

She eased up hearing those words from Glenn. “Zev better have gotten away from there in time...”

“Zev?”

“Ah... Zev was the volon who escaped with me.”

“Yeah? I didn't get a chance to meet them.”

“Maybe for the better... Zev is a bit unstable at times. But he – sorry... *they* – have the same outfit as one of the bigwigs at Maroon, and they clearly have high levels of intelligence. We

were trapped down there in that facility together...”

Glenn resumed flicking through the channels again as the news reporter started its traffic overview. “Tell me more.”

“Uhh... Zev is huge. About as big as Eckire. They wear a black outfit with purple scarves around their neck and on their hat, which is really big and wide, too. They also... eat people. A lot.”

“Is that the instability you mentioned?”

“Yeah... they're constantly on a hair trigger. Say one wrong word and they could just snap on you. Often, that results in... you know.”

“I know.”

“I saw it happen to a security guard when we were escaping.” Janice's voice was laced with regret. “There was almost nothing left by the time Zev was finished with him.”

“Sounds like Zev might get along nicely with Eckire. Except, relative to your description, Eckire can at least handle himself quite decently. Hmm... tough call. Maybe they wouldn't play so nicely.”

Janice exhaled sharply. “I have to find them.”

“Yeah?”

“And I... I have no idea why! Zev doesn't even think humans are worth caring about, so why do I even bother? Do I really care that much about what they have to do with someone at Maroon...?”

“I can see how unlikely bonds might form in a prison environment.”

“I mean... aside from me, Zev was the only other volon in there even remotely stable. Maybe I just... oh, this sounds silly... but maybe I just wanted a friend? Another volon I could relate to, you know?”

“Doesn't sound all that unreasonable to me.”

“Ah – I'm sorry. I shouldn't be venting at you like this.”

“Don't stress. It's not an easy life.”

“I'm... glad you get it.”

“I often think this intelligence is a curse. Companionship is a rare luxury among us.”

“I can see why you're a part of this group, even if you don't see eye to eye with Tenna.”

“Hmm... probably not that far off with your hunch. Never really thought of myself as the lonely type, but it'd explain some things, I reckon.” He finished off his beverage.

Janice stared straight forward, focusing intently on a resolve quickly forming inside her.

“I need to go back,” she declared.

Glenn looked at her quizzically. “Back... where?”

“To Miyatama. That's where you rescued me from, right?”

“Mhm.”

“I need to find Zev... Carson... maybe Anders too,” she continued, lowering her voice as she said Anders' name.

“Other friends of yours?”

“Vaguely. Carson's a friend. Anders... I think she had good intentions.”

“You're an anomaly, that's certain. Outstandingly peculiar. Don't know if I've ever met a volon like you before.”

Janice didn't know whether that was a compliment or not. “I can't just sit around in Ystets when the only people I ever cared about might be hurt, or worse...”

“Even though you just got here?”

“I mean... soon. I'll make the trip back there soon. I still need to get my bearings.”

“Not the greatest idea to head back there right now when everyone's on high alert, anyways. How do you plan to make the trip?”

“Uh... well, I'll figure that out, I guess.”

“You have anything to your name besides the clothes on your back?”

Janice shook her head.

“Hmm.” Glenn prodded his cheek with his tongue and stood up, heading into another room. “Wait here.”

“A-all right.” She had no idea what she was waiting for, but Glenn had her full attention, even as he walked out of view. She remained staring down the hall as she waited for him to return.

Janice faintly heard some clanking electronics and drawers opening and closing, until the sounds were replaced by Glenn's footsteps.

“Catch,” he called out from the hallway. A small device arced through the air.

“Woop!” Janice barely caught it in time. She gave it a quick inspection as Glenn took his seat on the couch again.

“It’s a phone.” He clicked his tongue. “Stay in touch.”

Stay in touch. Those words echoed in her head, and her heart followed suit with a brief pounding sensation. *Did I just make a friend?*

“Thank you!” She looked down at the phone’s screen. “But... how do I use it?”

“Oh, man.” Glenn laughed. “Push the button on the side to turn it on.”

Janice did just that. The screen lit up, and after following the simple unlock instructions on screen, the main menu appeared.

She only had a rudimentary understanding of cell phones, but the colourful and clearly-labeled touchscreen buttons made learning quite easy.

Phone: obvious enough.

Messages: like e-mails, but shorter.

Settings: again, pretty obvious.

Music: this thing can play music?

Games: it plays games too?!

“Glenn, how many features does this thing have?”

“Pretty much the same as most other phones.” He tapped his fingers against each other as he listed things off. “Call and text people, it’s got internet access, GPS, uhh, you can download executables and play music and videos—”

“And you’re just... giving this to me? For free?!”

Glenn smirked. “Welcome to human culture. Almost everybody has one, and that there is one of the simpler brands, too.”

And Maroon kept me in the dark about all this the whole time...? Well, my eyes are open now!

“Open up the phone's contact list,” Glenn instructed.

“Uh, sure.” Janice scanned the buttons on the screen, looking around for anything resembling a contact list. She found a notepad button, so she opened that. “Okay, done.”

“Type this in.” Glenn listed off a 12 digit series of numbers to her. “If you're ever in a pinch, give me a call.”

“Thank you...!” Janice repeated, smiling cheerfully.

“I don't know how much time it has available on it for calls, or if it's on some timed plan, but I do know it's active now. Best use it for calls sparingly.”

Janice squinted. “Do I want to know where you got this...?”

“Probably not.”

“Ah...”

“Don't sweat it. Really.”

“If you say so.” She slipped it in her pocket.

“We have internet available here if you want to hook up to it for a while.”

“Ah, sure! In a while, though... I still have to process all of this.”

“Fair. No pressure.”

Glenn resumed flicking through channels, occasionally returning to the news channel where the Maroon report had just come through, but they

were still working on traffic advisories. Meanwhile, Janice relaxed in her seat, her gaze drifting towards the ceiling as she considered her options.

“I'm going to, uh... step outside.” Janice hesitated, expecting some sort of backlash.

“I'll be here. Don't let anyone see you come in or out.” He was unexpectedly calm. No outburst of any kind.

Janice almost gasped from surprise, just from the fact that she really was allowed to wander as she pleased.

“Thanks!” she shouted as she skittered down the hall before Glenn changed his mind.

She took a deep breath as she entered the main room (Tenna's room?) once again, eagerly heading to the entrance. For several seconds, she held her finger over the button next to the entrance. Eventually, with a burst of courage, she pressed it.

The entrance slid open, revealing the interior of that run-down building the base was attached to. Janice stepped outside and crouched down next to the door again, trying to find the button on the other side of the door to shut it. The ambient light from inside the base made it just barely possible to make out a square button near the floor; she pressed it, and the door closed behind her, shutting out the light from inside.

She was free.

Janice navigated through the pitch-black ruins, until light from the sky crept its way in, and she soon spotted the exit.

When she stepped through, it was like she'd entered an entirely different world.

Ystets. The hazy, light blue sky beamed down upon the cityscape around her, illuminating the clusters of shiny buildings neatly lined up in rows against the streets. Very few people were in sight, save for a few pedestrians minding their own business on the paved sidewalks, and the occasional car driving by.

Those people... I wonder if they're human.

Inhaling through her nose and exhaling through her mouth, she took a slow breath of the outdoor air; it wasn't nearly as fresh or pleasant as the forests she longed for, but it was leagues better than some stuffy prison laboratory.

Just beside the ruined building was a small lot, overgrown with weeds and tall shoots of grass, dotted with chunks of brick and concrete. She meandered over to the little field and gently swung a foot through a patch of grass.

Wow. Something about it felt serene.

Eyeing a large chunk of concrete, Janice walked over and sat down on it. It wasn't particularly comfortable, but she didn't mind. She shut her eyes, taking in another deep breath of air, sorting through her thoughts.

Though it took her several minutes of meditation, she finally made her mind up.

I'll stay here for a couple days.

Remain on Tenna's good side.

Get my bearings...

...and go back to Miyatama.