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1 – City of Teeth

“...And the battle for Ystets continues along the northern edge of the city,” the campervan's radio chirped, prompting the olive-skinned woman to shut it off. It was the same thing Maxie had been hearing for the last two hours, stuck in the middle of gridlock.

Ystets isn't a city anymore. It's a hive, she thought.

Military personnel bordered each side of the street, guiding civilians to a safe detour where the city hadn't been quarantined, protecting them from the threat of possible alien attack. Ever since volons had emerged in the neighbouring city of Miyatama, the beasts had rampaged en masse all throughout Ystets, devouring a frightening chunk of the city's remaining human population.

Maxie had seen glimpses of video coverage: for every soldier, there were at least five amorphous, shapeshifting apex predators with mouths as wide as their heads, filled with rows upon rows of pointed, yellow teeth. *Glimpses* was the keyword; she couldn't bear to watch the grim conclusion of the footage she'd found. It was rarely optimistic.

Volons were actively kicking humans off the top of the food chain, mimicking and consuming Maxie's fellow sapiens at alarming rates. But with armed forces pressing back on all fronts, clearly the humans weren't going down without a fight.

Unfortunately, it made for pretty bad traffic. Max was tempted to turn the radio back on for some sort of stimulation, but she decided to listen to her better judgment.

Should've known the roads were going to be crammed...

Finally, the vehicles ahead of her began crawling forward again. She was so close to the edge of Ystets; half a kilometre and she'd be free of the traffic jam.

Minutes later, she inched past a hastily erected barbed-wire fence that marked the end of the city, guarded by multiple armoured trucks and soldiers. A cursory glance told her that the army had converted the road into a one-way passage, only letting people *out* of the city. Max didn't fret, though – she knew of other routes to get back to her life in Miyatama, cursing herself for not taking one of them on her current trip.

Traffic gradually sped up as she passed the checkpoint, with a wall of evergreen trees to her right and a rocky field to her left. After she'd driven far enough for the city to be out of sight, she slowed down to make a right turn, transitioning from pavement to gravel as she entered the thicket.

“Ystets Lake,” a simple wooden sign on the side of the path read.

The surrounding forest was terribly dense, forcing Maxie to slow to a crawl down the bumpy, narrow path. At the very least, traffic was nonexistent leading to the lake, so it was a fairly relaxing drive in comparison to Ystets' gridlock.

Despite the overcast afternoon weather, it looked more like evening or night beneath the thicket. The canopy of branches and leaves above was overgrown to the point where light hardly shone through, giving the area an infamously eerie atmosphere. It didn't help that the lake's fluctuating temperature caused frequent bouts of fog to cover the area, and as the twisting gravel road slowly transitioned to dirt, Maxie's vision was slowly limited by a thin blanket of haze.

With visibility steadily decreasing, she instinctively flinched and ducked as greenery brushed against the windshield of her van. But as quickly as her vision had diminished, the road opened up into a sizable clearing at least five times as wide, and she saw the shoreline's warm hues approaching up ahead.

There was another vehicle already parked by the left side of the glade – a black recreational vehicle with tinted windows and flashy decals. She rolled her eyes at its gaudy decorations, but the RV was a very welcome sight regardless.

Camping for a night next to a volon infestation was the last option Maxie wanted to choose. But without access to safe motels in Ystets, the multiple commutes she'd have to make between High Miyatama and the lake was both prohibitively expensive and time consuming. Thus, she'd invited her reliable and adventurous friend to ensure everything went well.

Maxie parked her campervan on the opposite end of the clearing and stepped outside, stretching her limbs, breathing in the humid,

misty air. She waited patiently against the side of her van until she heard footsteps in the other vehicle. The door swung open a moment later.

“Max! What took you so long?” the globe-headed man exclaimed with open arms, shutting the door behind him.

“You would not believe the traffic in Ystets right now. I made a *huge* mistake going down one of the major roads,” Maxie grumbled.

“No kidding; haven't you heard the news? Ystets is exploding!”

“Yeah. Not my smartest moment.”

Maxie's friend was a pale-skinned man who went by the simple nickname 'Wire'. As opposed to Max's plain brown getup with rubber boots and a teal jacket, Wire wore a black sweatshirt covered in eccentric logos and text, striped monochrome slacks, and colourful running shoes that looked like a child had scribbled on them with rainbow markers.

Most notably, Wire didn't have a human head. Instead, there was an opaque black globe in its place with a subtle violet glow around the edges. He was a *remite*, an object-head with a human body whose internal workings were a well-guarded secret.

“I'm kinda glad you got here before me though,” Max continued. “I'd rather not chill out here on my own and end up dealing with stray volons without any backup.”

“Aw, it wouldn't be so bad,” Wire replied, dismissing her worries with a quick hand-wave.

“Think of it like a chance to see some real exciting shit!”

Maxie grimaced. “I don't know if I would call it *exciting*...”

Wire walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Trust me. We'll have a great time, you'll see!”

Reckless was the one of the first words that came to mind when Maxie thought of Wire, seconded only by *flamboyant*. Nevertheless, he was an excellent companion she'd counted on many times before, and with him around, her worries about staying lakeside overnight almost completely subsided.

“Well, let's get this started.” Maxie walked over and unlatched her van's trunk, revealing various camping supplies and an assortment of gadgets and tools she needed for her work: gauges, basins, metal stakes with tall antennae, a variety of handheld devices, and a big plastic tote full of other scientific bits and bobs.

It was a curious situation unlike anything she'd dealt with in the past. Modern innovations hardly required hydrologists to do much fieldwork, but Ystets Lake was an anomaly; its water level had been rising for the past two weeks, roughly one centimetre per day, with no logical explanation. At least, no explanation from any recent weather patterns or satellite reports. Therefore, it was a job that required a human's inquisitive eye (and the human's gaudy remite pal).

“Can you help me set up the awning and chairs and stuff?” Maxie asked.

“Only if you brought marshmallows.”

Max gave him an incredulous look. “You... you don't even have a mouth.”

“Yeah, but I've always wanted to try roasting marshmallows.”

“W-who said we'd even be making a campfire? I'd rather not attract every volon that might be lurking in the forest.”

“Joking, joking!” Wire pulled out a pair of folding chairs and got to work, mumbling, “she doesn't even want to roast marshmallows in the volon forest,” just loud enough for Max to hear.

She couldn't help but let out a chuckle.

Max walked over to the passenger side door. Lying under some rags on the seat was a holster and a lockbox containing her most important tool: a Kinrod-56 pistol, coupled with a suppressor and a box of custom incendiary ammunition. The gun and ammo were both legal – especially the ammo, given the recent revelations that volons were susceptible to fire – but the silencer was another story.

She wasn't in the business of hurting other people. But with the recent man-eater uprising, Wire had gifted the suppressor to her a few weeks ago, explaining that discretion was critical if she ever encountered any volons face to face. She knew the remite had some volatile underground connections in Miyatama, and the thought of getting anywhere near his shady goods

wasn't exactly appealing, but she couldn't deny that the accessory gave her peace of mind.

Wouldn't be very fun if a horde of those monsters bulldoze us after I announce where we are. Maxie bit her lip, hoping she wouldn't have to fire any shots at all. She doubted there would be many volons to contend with since there wasn't nearly as much food for them out in the wilderness, but she steeled herself in case things *did* go sideways.

Checking to ensure the pistol was loaded, she attached the holster to her waist and tucked the gun into it.

After briefly joining Wire to finish setting up her simple camp comforts, Maxie walked out to the edge of the lake and scanned what she could. Looking down the shoreline, she couldn't see any horrible, creeping monsters in the immediate area. The lake was totally still, and the surrounding forest was silent save for the occasional bird call.

It better stay like this.

2 – The Terrors We Know

It was hard to keep her eyes off the latest news with Ystets. However, reports from earlier that day finally had something positive to say. Veirr Heavy Industries, the planet's leading metal and robot manufacturing giant, was authorizing the deployment of several VESKY robots to help combat Ystets' volon infestation. Maxie was familiar with them; VESKYs were agile humanoid machines equipped with discreet laser weaponry. They also had a pleasant social side when they weren't involved in combat, often meandering around urban areas to help keep the peace.

Guess the lake isn't as important as the city. Wonder how much it'd cost to have a VESKY join us out here for protection. Billions, maybe?

After putting her phone back in her pocket, Max ambled to the van's trunk. Searching through the equipment tote by touch, she quickly found a familiar boat-shaped object. She pulled it and its remote control out of the tote, checking to ensure the miniature boat's sonar was properly attached.

“You have any VESKY friends?” Max asked Wire, who was reclining on one of the camp chairs next to his vehicle.

“They'd be out here with us if I did. Why?”

“Veirr is sending them to Ystets to clean up. Wishful thinking, I guess.”

“Fair, fair.” Wire nodded. “Whatcha got there?”

“Figured we could race RC boats around the lake for some fun. You mean to say you forgot yours?”

Wire simply remained quiet. His spheroid head lacked any sort of expression for Maxie to pick up on.

“It's a little sonar boat,” Max continued with a smile and a shrug, walking past her friend. “It's going to show me what the lake looks like down at the bottom.”

“Oh! Cute.” Wire stood up and joined her.

Max waded into the calm lake water, her tall rubber boots keeping her feet and shins dry. Once the water was deep enough for the boat to float, she lowered it into the lake, pressed a button on top, and gave it a push. She returned to the shoreline and stood next to Wire, turning to face the boat.

“I got it from work,” she began, squinting at the remote in her hand. “Its sonar is super fancy. I'll be able to see a semi-live feed of the lakebed on my laptop once the little boaty is farther out.” With the press of a few buttons, the boat slowly whirred away, closer to the middle of the lake. “Maybe our answers are down there.”

“Cool. Need any help?”

“Nah, I'll be fine. This won't take long.”

“I'll go gear up, then. Left my gun in the RV.”

Seconds later, Max heard the nearby *clunk* of Wire closing the door to his vehicle.

Nearby leaves rustled and distant birds sang as a soft breeze swept through the area. A minute or so of quiet RC boating passed as Max drove the sonar forward, positioning it reasonably far into the lake, but not so far that she wouldn't be able to drive it back later. By the time she expected to finish her initial setup, she figured her laptop would be ready with a fairly clear image of the lakebed. In the meantime, she ferried some more trinkets from the van to the shore – namely, a thin electronic stake and an equally narrow test tube.

Max held up the stake and plunged it into the soil where the water met the land. She shimmied it deeper into the ground and packed the dirt against it with her boots, checking from a couple angles to ensure the pole stood straight enough. She crouched down and looked at the point where the water touched the pole – 26cm. The electronics mounted near the top of the stake would automatically transmit the water level to her computer, but having a manual reference was never a bad idea.

Between the natural sounds of the forest, Maxie thought she heard something to her left, almost like gentle steps.

...Isn't Wire inside his RV?

She peered over to the side and gasped, barely suppressing a scream.

A ghostly white, many-limbed creature met her eyes, with a head of deformed teeth,

dripping with saliva. Hunkered down on all fours roughly two metres away, it began taking another step towards Maxie.

Heart pounding, she instinctively reached for her pistol and pointed it down at the beast's face, switching the safety off. As the creature's foot hit the ground and it prepared to pounce, Max pulled the trigger twice. A sharp pair of *clacks* echoed out from the gun, firing straight through the beast's mouth.

The volon staggered forward with a shriek, forcing Maxie to step back. An orange glow seared through its body, and its yowl quickly died down into a short-lived gargle as the beast flailed and squirmed, succumbing to its sudden ignition.

Wire ran out of his RV with a pistol of his own, pointing it at the burning fiend.

The monster rapidly decomposed into a fluid form as the flames rampaged through its body. The fire died down within seconds, burning the rest of the creature's blood until a thin black scab was all that remained across the surface of the dirt.

“Fuck,” Maxie panted, “holy fuck. Holy fuck.”

“So... about that campfire,” Wire remarked.

Max ignored him and inhaled sharply, gagging at the sudden smell of burnt plastic. She stepped away with a cough, eyes still firmly trained on the scorch mark.

“You good?” the remite asked.

“Yeah, I... yeah. I just can't believe it got that close.” Realizing she was still pointing her gun forward, Max lowered her weapon and took a quick look at her surroundings. Seeing no other volons nearby, she turned the safety back on and slowly holstered the pistol.

“Shit, well, nice work,” Wire commented. “But they're calling these things the new apex predator for a reason. You gotta keep your wits about you at all times, Max.”

“Yeah... yeah,” she panted. “Fuck. I was hoping this was going to be an easy job.”

Wire gave her a sideways peace sign. “I'll cover you while you deal with that stuff. That's what I'm here for, anyway.”

“Thanks.”

“I'd still be on guard if I were you, though. If there are any more volons around, I wouldn't be surprised if that inferno got their attention.”

“Very reassuring!” Max wiped the sweat from her brow. “You'd think they'd stay *away* from fires, not come towards it...”

“I got your back. Take a breather if you need.”

She did that, returning to one of the camp chairs with her back to the van, taking some long, deep breaths. As she waited for her heart to slow down, her thoughts bounced between, *how the hell are we supposed to stay overnight if volons are already finding us?!* and, *it's going to be all right. Wire is here, and that volon was probably just some wandering stray. It was just a small*

one, too. After some more breathing exercises, she calmed down enough for her to stand back up, ready to continue her work.

Taking a water sample was the last of the prep work that needed doing. Only then did Max realize she'd dropped the test tube when the volon showed up, but she easily found it after a quick survey of the shoreline. It was undamaged, so she scooped up some lake water and twisted the lid shut.

She looked from side to side every few seconds to keep her fears at bay, confirming for herself that nothing else was approaching. Wire was also keeping diligent watch of the area, slowly pacing around the camp area, reducing Maxie's paranoia every time she caught a glance of him.

“I don't see anything yet. You're good,” he assured her. “You'll know if I see anything.”

“Good, thank you.” Max returned to the trunk of her van and pulled out a fluid analysis device. The security of being inside a vehicle was too appealing for her to pass up, so she let her friend know she'd be doing some “sciencey stuff” before sitting back in the driver's seat of her vehicle.

Wire saluted her before continuing his patrol.

Max turned on the fluid analyzer, and it replied with a short beep. She adjusted the settings on the device and then inserted the test tube with the lake water sample. The display lit up with another beep after a few seconds of analysis,

showing a detailed list of the elements comprising the water sample.

Most of it was standard fare for natural water: hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, and other trace elements. But as she read the final element on the list and saw the water's pH level, her expression furrowed into a perplexed glare.

3 – And the Waters We Don't

The device was telling her the lake water had a deadly pH level of 1.2. Not only that, but it was also apparently 0.3% mercury.

Maxie exhaled through her nose, barely stifling a confused laugh. She mouthed the words, “what the fuck?” before removing the fluid tube and putting it back in again for a re-scan.

1.2 pH, 0.3% mercury.

That's absurd. She tried to look at the situation with a sense of humour, but the volon encounter from mere minutes ago still had her on edge. The device's obviously false readings weren't doing much for her peace of mind.

Max stepped out of the van, glancing over at Wire once again to make sure he was still keeping watch. With her sense of security temporarily restored, she walked to the vehicle's trunk and rummaged around her supplies, picking up a couple more test tubes and a second fluid sample analyzer. Notably, a different brand than the previous one.

Shutting the trunk and returning to the comfort of her van, she inserted the water sample into the new device, staring in anticipation at its screen.

And she stared and stared. After about fifteen long seconds, the device finally spat out the weird result of 100% hydrogen and 1.3 pH.

“Cool. Thanks,” she huffed. *There's no chance in hell that both of these are broken.* She picked up her water bottle from the vehicle's cup

holder and added some of its contents to one of the extra test tubes, inserting it into the first device with the same settings enabled.

It instantly displayed a very ordinary reading of the water's composition and its slightly alkaline pH. She did the same tests on the second device, which gave her similarly normal readings.

So it's the lake water. Something about that realization sent a chill up her spine; she'd encountered faulty equipment multiple times in her career, but never faulty *water*. With the volon encounter weighing on her mind and the lack of any explanation for the strange water, she couldn't help but wonder if volon activity was to blame for it.

Unwilling to trust the devices' readings, Max decided to triple-check the water's pH level with a foolproof method. She reached over into the glove box and pulled out a small box of pH test strips, promptly dipping one into the water sample from the lake. It was hard to tell the exact value from the strip's colour alone, but after a few seconds of waiting, it confirmed what the devices were saying. The lake was fatally acidic.

This is beyond weird. Maxie furrowed her brow, trying to make sense of the situation. *Would the acidity have anything to do with the rising water level...?*

She tossed the used strip on the campervan's floor and set everything else on the passenger's seat, next to her laptop. She pulled the computer onto her lap and opened it up; it only took a few seconds to boot up from sleep mode.

Navigating to her sonar imaging program, she eagerly watched as the computer produced a 3D scan from the data the boat had already sent. As Max suspected with such acidic water, the scan showed almost no signs of life floating around, not even vegetation growing along the lakebed. However, the lack of life had the side effect of giving her a clear view of the form and layout of the lakebed. It was pretty standard fare; the lake became rocky and jagged near the bottom, gradually sloping down to a large patch of perfectly flat ground about 460 metres deep.

The flat area was peculiar enough for her to raise an eyebrow. After rotating the 3D scan to get a better look, she concluded that the sonar *was* working properly and the flat area wasn't another water glitch; every 10 seconds, a new scan would come in, and Max could see tiny details shift around – most likely from the boat changing position by minuscule amounts. Nevertheless, the flat area remained intact. Even though the water was doing weird things to her fluid analyzers, she doubted it could mess with sonar technology in such a way.

She stared at it for a while, waiting to see if anything would happen. To her dismay, the lake stayed the same, no matter how many times she spun the 3D scan around.

Disappointed, she minimized the sonar program and opened up another. This one read data from the stake she'd placed in the ground, displaying a line graph tracking the water level

over time. It hadn't been long since planting the stake, so the graph had very little to show, aside from tiny fluctuations in height from the gentle ebb and flow of the water.

But that was okay. Maxie was pleased that *something* was working normally without making her question the state of her equipment.

Now for the fun part. Waiting.

She put the laptop back on the passenger's seat, stepping out of the van to join Wire. Quietly walking around with her friend for several paces, she confirmed that the area was clear, allowing herself to breathe a sigh of relief.

"What, don't trust me?" Wire ribbed.

"No, nothing like that. You try keeping your nerve after getting snuck up on by a volon."

"Eh. Understandable."

Max leaned back against the driver's door of her van. "So, this lake is fucked," she announced.

"Huh?"

"Not only is the water glitching out my sample readers and telling me it's loaded with *mercury*, but the lake's pH levels are so low it's akin to battery acid," she explained. "And the sonar shows almost no signs of fish or plant life underwater. Which checks out, if it's that acidic..."

"Mercury? Battery acid? How is that possible? I've been here before. I was even *in* the water and I didn't die."

"...What? When?"

Wire paused, leaning their head to the side. "Maybe... a couple months ago?"

“*That recently?*”

“Yeah. I came out here with a couple friends for a swim before all this volon shit blew up. The water was fine. Last I checked, my friends are still good too.”

Max didn't take Wire for a fibber. But it was either that or allow the creeping realization that something was very wrong with this lake to worm its way deeper into her mind. There was no sane explanation for the body of water becoming that deadly in such a short period, unless she missed an obvious incident regarding the lake. But she'd looked up everything she could prior to the trip, and there were very few notable mentions of the area. Nothing online had anything relevant to say about the conundrum in front of her.

She shook her head. “This is weird. You got any theories?”

“Mate, I'm the bodyguard, not the scientist.”

“Yeah, fair. I've just never seen anything like this before. I have no idea what to make of this.” Max sat down on one of the camp chairs, racking her brain for something she might've missed.

No rivers or streams nearby... no significant sources of pollution in the area... no abnormal weather patterns... and no explanation for the rising water. I could take a trek around the shore with Wire and see if anything is running into the lake, but I'd rather leave this mystery unsolved than risk my life any more than I already

am. If we get jumped by another volon, I am out of here. If my boss doesn't like it, he can suck it.

She was starting to give more credence to the idea that volons had something to do with the lake's mysteries. The alien fiends were still poorly understood, and they were most certainly present around the lake. Were they infecting the water? Filling up the lake somehow, for some reason?

I'm starting to think this is beyond my pay grade.

“Max. Come here. Quickly, Max.” Wire's voice was hushed, but his tone was urgent.

She stood up and power-walked over to Wire's side, looking out at the water.

“Look.” He pointed to the left, several dozen metres down the shoreline.

Max saw it right away, her mouth ajar in apprehension. Shambling across the nearby shoreline was a humanoid figure, too shrouded in mist to identify. Their gait was unnatural and twitchy, staggering towards the water.

“It's another volon. It must be,” Max whispered.

“Yeah, probably.”

But why isn't it coming for us?

Despite the creature's relatively close proximity to them – close enough where it would *surely* be aware of their presence – it just kept lurching towards the water. They both continued staring as the silhouette waded into the lake, deeper and deeper, gradually submerging itself until it was totally underwater.

Where's it going...? Maxie's eyes widened as she realized something. “Wire, keep watch. I'm going to check the sonar.”

4 – Alternative Sustenance

Maxie cursed the sonar for not updating faster. She saw the small blip where the supposed volon was walking down the lakebed, but the scan updates were about 10 seconds apart. However, she could still tell it was heading to the middle of the lake.

It's definitely a volon. No human could walk down the bottom of a lake like that without drowning. Can those things breathe underwater? Do they even need to breathe at all...?

As another 10 seconds passed and the sonar scan updated, she noticed something else. The volon was heading directly towards the big flat patch of ground at the bottom of the lake. Max watched with bated breath; every sonar update showed the blip moving closer and closer to the flat area until it reached the strange patch of ground, and then...

...Nothing. The blip vanished.

“What? Huh?” She waited for another update, and there was still no sign of the creature. Another 10 seconds – still nothing. It was completely gone.

“The hell...?” she mumbled, watching to see if anything else would happen. But half a minute went by and the sonar showed nothing new.

Max put the laptop on the passenger's seat with a sigh. She stepped back outside to look for Wire, but he hadn't returned to camp. Curious,

she walked within sight of the area where the volon had appeared.

Wire was still standing there with his gun aimed forward.

“Hey?” Max whispered.

“There's another one,” he answered, just as quietly.

Max carefully walked forward until she, too, could see it.

Another figure, stumbling and staggering, just like the last. Only this time, it was moaning and flailing, swinging as if it was trying to strike itself. Max could make out details of the silhouette; it looked like a volon stuck halfway between shapeshifting to a human form, dripping and oozing white fluid that covered at least half of its body.

What the fuck is that?! Max gripped her pistol and prepared to aim.

The creature kept convulsing into the lake, splashing about as it struggled against itself, flinging bits of white liquid around. Soon, it disappeared into the water like the volon before it. The ripples in the water gradually calmed until the lake was still once again.

“Wire, are you good for a sec?”

“Go. I got you.”

Maxie dashed back to her van. Once again, she got in, opened the laptop, shut the door, and watched. The new blip on the sonar scan did the same thing as the last, creeping closer to the flat section of the lake, albeit slower than the previous volon.

Once the blip reached the flat spot on the lakebed, it remained in place for a full sonar update. 10 more seconds passed, and the blip shrunk enough for it to hardly be visible. Another 10 seconds, gone.

What in the world am I dealing with here? Is that place a portal? Some sonar-deflecting barrier for a secret volon laboratory? Although she quickly discounted the second idea, a reasonable explanation for the strange phenomenon continued to elude her. Unusual volons forcing themselves into an acid lake only to disappear, somehow causing the lake's water level to rise...?

...Wait a sec. She thought back to her theory of the volons filling up the lake. *If we've already seen three volons, two of which seemed more interested in the lake than coming after us... could there really be enough volons entering this lake to raise the water level so quickly? Surely not... it would take thousands of volons to fill the lake up that much... right?* There were still several details that didn't add up, but it was her best guess regardless.

Frustrated and confused, she left her van to see Wire leaning against the side of his RV.

“Any more?” Max asked.

“Doesn't look like it. We're clear for now.”

She walked beside him. “So, as if this lake wasn't weird enough already, I watched those volons on the sonar. They walked straight down to the bottom of the lake where there's this strange

flat area on the lakebed, then – *poof*. Disappeared without a trace.”

“...Huh. Maybe your sonar is glitching like your other stuff was.”

“I doubt it. I can see them perfectly fine until they reach the lakebed.”

“Maybe there's some sort of sonar shield down there. I don't know.”

Maxie shrugged. “I kinda wondered the same thing. That seems pretty far-fetched though.”

“Well... I don't know if it's going to help your lake investigation much, but you should see what that last one left behind.”

“Ah? I don't like the sound of that...”

Wire led Max around the RV towards the spot the volons had emerged from the forest.

“Check that out.” He gestured to the shoreline where flecks of white fluid dotted the soil. Among the lumps of liquid on the ground were some solid chunks, one of which looked like a severed human finger – despite the lack of any crimson fluid.

“Oh, oh god.” Maxie put a hand over her mouth, staring at the finger. “Did that twitchy volon... dismember itself?” She glanced into the forest to ensure no more monsters were coming. For the moment, they were safe.

“Shit if I know.” Wire walked closer to the splotches on the ground. “You ever seen a volon act that way before?”

“No, I was going to ask you the same thing.” Max kept her distance, content to let Wire take point.

The remite leaned down and picked up the lone extremity between two pinched fingers. “Ew. It's squishy.”

“Wire, what the hell are you doing?!” Max hissed, scowling at her friend. “That thing could be dangerous!”

“Naw, don't sweat it. It'll be fine.”

“Dude, this lake trip is turning into a horror movie and you're messing with the freaky alien monster shit! What are you even doing with that?”

“Getting a closer look.”

“What? What for?”

“Let me show you something.”

“Oh boy...”

After a quick scan of the area, Wire holstered his weapon and retraced his steps back to the camp, holding the severed finger away from him. Max followed close behind as her friend led the way to his RV, pausing at the vehicle's door.

“It probably goes without saying, but... keep what you see in here between us,” Wire said.

“All right?”

Wire opened the door and led the way inside. Max was immediately greeted with bright white lights and equally sterile furniture and travel appliances. As she followed Wire to the back of the vehicle, her eyes met what looked like lab equipment – a microscope being the only piece she could immediately recognize – alongside

neatly organized bricks of hardware she couldn't hope to identify.

The remite placed the severed finger under the microscope before washing his hands in a nearby mini sink.

“What is all this?” Max asked. “You literally said you weren't a scientist earlier.”

“I'm not, but, well...” Wire shuffled around in place, slipping his hands into his pockets. “I'm interested in expanding my *other* line of work into biotech rather than just electronic hardware. My clients would probably be happier with me that way. So, I picked up some stuff that might help with it.”

Max stayed quiet, opting not to continue that particular line of thought. She pursed her lips and nodded in approval after giving the microscope a quick inspection.

“I'm way too curious about this thing. Maybe I can convince you to keep watch for a few minutes while *I* do the fancy research this time,” Wire suggested, putting a palm on his chest.

Max frowned before reluctantly agreeing. “I guess there isn't much else for me to do while my stuff gathers data. Unless you want to do a lap around the lake to investigate with me.”

“Yeah, I think I'll do this for now.”

“I thought so. Give me a shout when you're done looking at that thing. I don't exactly love the idea of being alone out in this place.”

“No prob. I doubt I'll be too long.”

Max patted Wire's shoulder and left the RV, stepping back onto the soil. She briefly considered retreating to her campervan until Wire finished up, but ultimately decided she'd feel better knowing the campsite was safe.

She began pacing the same way Wire had, power-walking during her first lap to ensure the immediate perimeter was clear – which it was. Afterwards, she put most of her focus on the area left of camp where the volons had been emerging. Max heard nothing but faint sounds of nature; she quickly scanned the area upon hearing rustling leaves from the canopy above, not interested in having more feral creatures sneak up on her. Once she confirmed the local area was safe, her mind began wandering.

That finger... maybe it's shapeshifted volon flesh. It probably is... yeah. She kept telling herself as much, despite having another more unsavoury theory in the back of her mind, the implications of which sent shivers throughout her body. *It's just a theory,* she reminded herself. *I've been wrong before. Maybe I'm wrong about this too.*

After a few minutes of patrolling, the RV's door opened.

“Hey,” Wire beckoned from the vehicle's entrance.

“Hey.” Max walked over to him. “That was fast.”

“I checked out that finger under the microscope.”

“And?”

“Max, I don't think that thing was a
volon. You might want to come and see this.”

No... please say it isn't so.

5 – Wriggling

The sight of Wire's globe-head pressed against the microscope's eyepieces was amusing, but the feeling was short-lived. Maxie knew she wasn't going to like what the remite was about to reveal.

“Take a peek,” Wire instructed, stepping to the side.

Max took his place and lowered her face against the microscope's lenses. She wasn't sure what she was seeing at first, but when her vision adjusted, her stomach churned.

The white goop covering part of the dismembered finger was an expanse of living, microscopic blobs, endlessly wriggling and crawling over each other. Sharp protrusions would jut out from the amorphous entities upon encountering one another, piercing and absorbing mass from neighbouring globules, only to suffer the same fate moments later. They had no rhyme or reason; they just squirmed in every direction in an eternal cycle of sentient static.

Yet Maxie couldn't look away. The grotesque, alien display mesmerized her. It was horrible and all too captivating.

“I don't know much about biology and such,” Wire said, interrupting her trance. “But that doesn't look normal to me. What's more – look at the part where the white stuff connects to the finger.”

Max moved her face away from the eyepieces and watched Wire nudge the tray the

finger was resting on. With the transition between “human” flesh and volon blood now under the scope, he double-checked the microscope before letting Max take over again.

The undulating blobs shot out even more spikes as they jolted across the surface of the finger, gradually enveloping more and more of the human skin until pure, squirming whiteness was all that remained under the scope. Whether the detached limb was really human flesh or just shapeshifted volon blood was a question Max couldn't answer, but she couldn't help but fear the worst.

Looking away from the microscope, she turned to Wire. “Do you think it's really a human finger? Like... it couldn't have possibly been a human that we saw, right?” she pleaded.

“I don't know, mate.” Wire crossed his arms. “I've looked at pictures of what you guys look like under the lens, but I've never seen human skin super close in person before.”

“Does it look like... that?” Max asked, pointing to the finger.

“...Yeah, kinda, I guess...”

Those four words strengthened Maxie's tunnel vision on a terrible hypothesis, sending a shiver through her body. She sat down on a nearby mini sofa with a hand on her forehead, drawing a deep breath.

“It was a human, wasn't it?” she mumbled. “It was a human covered in... *volon*. And it controlled them and forced them into the

lake.” Her lips began quivering as the theory turned into reality in her mind.

Wire's usual bombastic attitude was nowhere to be found. He remained uncharacteristically quiet and reserved.

“How could they have lost a finger just by swinging around? Either... it *was* just a crazy volon... or it really was a human in the middle of being taken over by a volon. A-and if that's the case... it must have been breaking down that person's body somehow, some way, for them to straight up lose a limb, even if it was just a finger...!”

“Hey, snap out of it, mate,” Wire interrupted, crouching down beside Max. “We have no idea what these things really are, but we *do* know they shapeshift and mimic people, right? That's an easy explanation for what's going on here. I totally know you're the analytical type, but try not to think too much about the weird aliens while we're here.” He put a hand on her knee.

“Easier said than done...” Max took another deep breath. “But... yeah, I'll try. In case it wasn't obvious, I'm getting a *little* freaked out by this place.” She forced a smile, putting on the strongest face she could for her friend.

“I don't blame you. It's creepy as hell out here. Why don't we chill in here for a while? Take the edge off.”

“Yeah... actually, that sounds pretty nice.”

“You have any snacks in your van? I could bring you some,” Wire offered.

“Ah, you're a real one, dude. I have some stuff in the trunk if you're willing. Thanks a ton.”

“No worries. That's what friends are for!” Wire promptly left the RV.

Max felt a pang of guilt from relying on Wire so much. With his reassurances, protection, and simple kindness, she began questioning if she'd be sane and unharmed if he hadn't joined her on the lake trip. Even *he* could tell she was beginning to obsess over the terrible possibilities of these strange volon revelations; if Wire wasn't there to snap her out of it, no doubt she'd be curled up in a ball out of fear.

But some more long, deep breaths brought her further mental clarity, and she remembered this nightmare trip wasn't her fault at all. Her company and boss were the ones to blame for sending an ordinary human to alien hell, knowingly or not. When she got back to the office, she'd be demanding some extra compensation for the dangers she faced.

Wire returned to the RV shortly after Maxie finished tidying up her thoughts.

“Bacon crunchies and iced white tea?” He held the refreshments in the air for her to see. “Sounds like you've got good taste.”

Max cracked a smile. “The crunchies were just some random snack I picked up. I've never actually tried them before.” She paused as her friend handed her the goodies. “White tea, though – that's my favourite.”

“Well, *I wouldn't know*,” Wire chuckled, tapping his head. “But it *sounds* delicious. I'll let my imagination fill in the blanks.”

The two relaxed with each other while Maxie enjoyed her snacks. The moment of respite was well needed after wrapping her head around way too many strange occurrences at once.

“So, what's next on your list? Just waiting for your stuff to collect data?” Wire asked.

“Well, as I said earlier,” Max began, finishing a mouthful of bacon crunchies. “unless you want to roam around the lake to look for clues about its weirdness with me, pretty much.”

“Yeeaaaah, I'm cool with protecting you and all, but that doesn't sound like a good call right now.”

“Fine by me – I don't particularly feel like doing it either. I'm not getting paid nearly enough to risk my life more than I already am for this crap. I'd rather not do it and say I did.” Max took a sip of her iced tea.

“Does this mean we just get to vibe out here for a while?”

“Kinda. I wouldn't mind finding another place to rest for the night, but Ystets is even worse than this place, and commuting to and fro Miyatama multiple times for one job would really hurt my bank account.”

Wire hummed in acknowledgment.

The two made small talk while Max finished the rest of her snacks, discussing how they'd been doing before the lake trip, what they'd be doing afterwards, and frequent checkups on

Max's mood. She felt a fair bit better after their chats, and food always helped soothe her anxious thoughts. She took a moment to look around the RV's interior, admiring how sterile the place was – aside from the big stacks of various hardware in the back corner.

Hold on a sec. Max squinted at the microscope. “Did you toss out that finger?”

“No? Why do you– oh.”

The dismembered limb wasn't there. Max scanned the counter, only to see a few tiny drops of white goop leading to the edge of its surface. She looked down to see the small glob of volon mass writhing across the floor towards them – no finger in sight.

“Oh god!” Max cried out, standing up from her seat to get away from the glob. She pointed down at it, dropping her empty food containers on the sofa. “Dude, that fucking thing is alive!”

“Shit!” Wire stood up too, looking around for something to use against the crawling mass.

“Sh-shoot it?!” Max suggested.

“In here? No way! Fuck, uh, help me find a container or something!” Wire shouted, hopping over the blob. He began rummaging through a cupboard beneath the lab equipment, rattling various objects around.

Max jumped over the glob and crouched down with the remite, looking in the adjacent cupboard. Vial racks, unfamiliar lab supplies, a nearly empty box of glassware–

That's it! She moved the remaining glassware from the box and pulled it out of the cupboard. She looked back towards the blob – it was still inching towards them both.

“Wire, got a box!” Max said, handing it to him.

He grabbed it and slammed it over the squirming mass, trapping it in the box. “Okay, uh, so,” he faltered, standing up. “Now what?”

“Maybe get a surface to scoop under the box? Like when you're putting a bug outside.” Max described the actions with her hands as she spoke.

“Sure, okay, but what do we use for that?”

Max looked around and saw very little they could use to slip under the box. Thin glass panels were available in the cupboard, but they were far too small. However, mounted on the wall was a broom and dustpan; Max rushed over and grabbed the dustpan off the wall.

She bent down and repeatedly steeled herself to scoop up the box in the dustpan, but couldn't muster the courage to do it.

“Here, let me—” Wire spoke up, taking the dustpan from her. He swiftly scooped up the box and its contents.

Max ran over to the door, opening it for Wire. As he power-walked past her, she could see the volon glob breaking down the side of the cardboard container, trying to escape.

“Wire, it's eating the box!” she cried.

He held up the pan and box at a better angle to see it. “Ah, fuck!” He started running to the lake until he reached the shoreline, at which point he hurled the box, dustpan, and volon blob into the lake. *Splloosh*.

Max walked towards Wire at the lake's edge, keeping her eyes peeled for any other threats. After confirming they were volon-free, she approached Wire and looked out at the ripples in the lake with her friend.

“...I figured it was worth saving a bullet over,” Wire muttered.

“I swear to god,” Max whimpered, “if one more fucked up thing happens out here, I'm gone. This isn't worth it. I'll take the bank hit.”

“Okay, yeah. Fair, that's... yeah.”

6 – Mercury

Max wasn't exactly optimistic about her time remaining at the lake. With the frequency of scary incidents so far, she seriously doubted she'd end up staying the night, so she prepared to drive out of there at a moment's notice in case some other unnerving event occurred.

Wire was back pacing beside his RV while Max packed up the camp chairs she'd set down beside the van. It only took her a few minutes; afterwards, she leaned against her vehicle and grabbed Wire's attention with a wave.

“Do you need me to go clean up my snack garbage in your RV?” she asked.

“Nah, that's no problem. I'm more concerned about the remnants of that *thing* I just threw out.”

The volon blob crawling inside Wire's RV had left some small droplets of white blood in its wake. If those could also become sentient...

“Yeah... that could be a problem,” Max admitted.

“I'd better get in there before they crawl under something and I can't find them,” Wire sighed. He stopped patrolling and headed inside.

“Wait,” Max called out.

Wire spun around and faced her from the doorway.

“I think I have an idea. I... yeah. I want to try something.” She fought against her curiosity to dismiss him and say never mind, but after a few

seconds of frantic debate in her head, her curiosity won. “Give me a second,” she said.

Max shuffled over to the passenger's seat and grabbed an empty test tube and one of her fluid analysis devices – the first model that had given her the 0.3% mercury result with the lake water. She then walked up to Wire and hesitantly held up the vial to him. “Would you... be willing to?”

He took a moment before speaking. “Are you sure?”

“I'm just... I gotta know. I want to see if my machine can tell me what it's made of. If it might bring me any closer to figuring this mystery out...”

“Are you gonna be okay if you test that stuff and it tells you that this is pure 'I'm gonna kill you goo' or some dumb shit? What if it comes to life?”

Max chuckled. “The machine couldn't even get the lake water right, unless this place really is filled with mercury. I don't think it's going to give me haunted results. As far as becoming sentient...” She couldn't lie – the idea was frightening. If it could eat through glass like it did cardboard, she'd be in for a nightmare scenario.

But then something occurred to her. The fluid on the “finger” didn't eat through the glass panel beneath the microscope when it was resting on it. Either it had *consciously* eaten through the cardboard, or it couldn't get through glass.

Whatever the case, she felt comfortable enough to let her fervent interest win again.

“Maybe,” she continued, “we can just get a tiny bit. Just enough for the machine to pick up on it. Maybe it won't start moving that way.”

“All right, well, it's your call.”

“And you're okay doing this?” Max double-checked.

“Yeah, I mean, I'll be fine with it until it comes to life again.”

She shut her eyes and gave Wire a slow nod before handing him the test tube. As he walked into the RV, she felt compelled to follow him and watch. *As long as he's the one putting it in there, and as long as he's willing... there's no need to feel scared or guilty.*

After closing the door behind her, Max peeked around the corner to get a view of the scene. For a moment, she almost felt embarrassed for being apprehensive – aside from the small mess they made while dealing with the big glob, the residual volon fluid was nowhere near as scary as she expected. Not only was it all completely still, but there wasn't as much as Max thought there would be.

Wire knelt down next to the cupboard and looked around, eventually picking out a small glass panel. He leaned over the counter where most of the monster blood had dripped, positioning the tube next to the edge of the surface. He delicately used the glass panel to scrape some of the liquid towards the vial.

Although it was quite viscous, it wasn't squirming or otherwise moving unnaturally.

Bit by bit, the white fluid dripped into the test tube. Max locked her gaze on it, waiting for the tiniest sign of sentience to show itself. But even as the vial filled up almost a quarter of the way, it didn't burn through the glass or begin wriggling.

“That's good,” Max declared. “That should be more than enough.”

Wire held the tube in the air between them. They both watched it for a quarter minute; once they determined the fluid was not moving, Max took the vial with a ginger grip.

She slid the sample tube into the fluid analyzer and pressed the button to scan it. Her heartbeat accelerated, anticipating some kind of huge reveal that would crack the mystery wide open, until—

The scan finished. 99.9% mercury, among other trace elements.

She stared in disbelief. It took her a few moments to process what she was seeing, but she soon came to the conclusion that only one of three possibilities could be true:

-The scanner was glitching and totally unreliable for information.

-The scanner didn't know what to call volon blood and erroneously labeled it as mercury.

-Volons were actually made of mercury.

“What's it say?” Wire asked.

Option 1 seemed unlikely with the level of precision the device gave the other “normal” elements, even when she'd tested the lake water. She didn't know enough about mercury to say whether option 3 was plausible or not, so her mind gravitated towards option 2.

“Max?”

And from option 2, another theory formed in her mind – a simple connection she was surprised she hadn't already made. *If it's labeling volon goop as mercury... And the lake water is apparently 0.3% mercury...*

She managed to stop herself before she went down any more thought spirals. Instead, she looked up to her friend.

“Wire,” Max said, “I need your opinion on something.”

“Ah?”

“The lake water scan said it was 0.3% mercury earlier, right.”

Wire hummed affirmatively.

“And this scan right now just said this volon stuff is 99.9% mercury.”

“Whoa. Well, if you want my opinion, I think your scanner's wrong. I've seen mercury, and it's not... *like that.*”

“Okay, but riddle me this. If the scanner is calling this stuff mercury, and it's also saying the lake contains a high volume of mercury, what is the *first* thing you conclude from that?”

“...The lake... is part volon?”

Max exhaled. “So I'm not crazy.”

Wire hummed and hawed before answering. “No, you're not crazy,” he mumbled. “It makes sense to me, I think?”

“It's getting really tempting to leave and tell my boss 'the lake is a volon and that's why it's rising. Please don't assign me to any more nightmare jobs.’”

“I don't blame you. If I was in your shoes and I was sent here alone, I probably would have fucked off the moment I realized volons were active here. But, strength in numbers, I suppose!” Wire patted her shoulder. “Although I'll admit, I've kind of been enjoying the thrill.”

Maxie sighed. “That makes one of us. I'm going to go check on my other stuff and make a judgment call from there.”

“Want me to resume patrolling while you do that?”

“I'd really appreciate that.”

“Your wish is my command!”

Wire's chipper attitude was always welcome in uncomfortable situations. Max led him out of the RV and she hopped in her van once again, leaving Wire to secure the area.

She opened her laptop and looked at the water level graph, not expecting much to have changed. But Max felt a cold sweat jolt through her body upon seeing the stats – the lake's water had risen substantially in just the last hour. Before coming to the lake, it had taken about 24 hours to increase by a centimetre. Now, it had risen multiple centimetres in just *one hour*; and the graph showed no signs of slowing down.

Max peered out of the van's windshield to look at the electronic stake she'd placed at the water's edge. As the laptop said, it was now clearly deeper than when she first placed it.

“Oh no,” she mumbled.

She opened the sonar scan window to check its status. Immediately, she noticed the strange lakebed. It was way higher than before, even though she last checked it not even an hour ago.

Max dragged the mouse cursor back and forth along the timeline bar beneath the sonar images, scrubbing through all the scans the boat had taken since it was deployed. Three more blips – volons, presumably – had walked down to the lakebed from the other side of the water. And, in plain view, the flat area below the lake was rising, pushing up massive heaps of sediment.

Whatever was down there, it was emerging, and fast.

She unrolled the van's window. “Wire!” she called out.

“What's up?”

“I'm getting out of here. Something below the lake is rising up and I'm *not* going to be here to find out what it is.”

“Uh oh. What about your gadgets out there?” Wire asked, pointing to the lake.

“It's company property – I'll tell them we barely survived a volon attack and we didn't have time for it. Seriously, dude, I have a *bad* feeling about this.”

“A-all right. Do you want me to follow you out of here?”

“Probably a good idea!” she shouted.

Something huge below the lake is pushing the water level up, Max concluded. *Good enough for me*. One instinct her curiosity could never trump was her sense of self-preservation, and it was on red alert after seeing the bottom of the lake grow like that. She entered the five-digit code to start the vehicle's ignition, and her van whirred to life.

As if prompted by the vehicle's rumble, an immense, ghastly moan rumbled through the ground.

“What... the *fuck*... was that?!” Max panted. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Wire bolt into his RV, clearly spurred on by the monstrous wail.

She drove the vehicle around to face the exit, hearing the RV chug to life nearby. After pointing her van at the trail, she peeked at her laptop on the passenger's seat. The water level graph had spiked up way further, and the sonar scan showed a very different, lumpy shape emerging from the lakebed.

Max pressed her foot down on the accelerator pedal.

7 – The Rising Lake

Max accelerated into the narrow forest path, plowing past misty tree branches that felt as if they were closing in on her. The van rumbled and shook, driving as fast as she could handle, intent on getting as far away from the lake as she could.

The sound of crashing waves surged from behind her. She glimpsed at the laptop screen. The water was *receding* at an unprecedented speed – the graph had dropped straight down.

Silhouettes blurred past her headlights on the forest's edge. White figures of all shapes, flickering in and out of view, staring at her with cross-shaped eyes.

“Fuck! Where did they all come from?!”

No time for this – just go!

Up ahead, two– three– no, *five* amorphous fiends had shambled onto the road. With Wire's RV speeding behind her and volons everywhere else, she pressed her foot down, sped towards the monsters, and braced for impact.

The first and second volon smashed against the front of the van, spewing pale blood over the windshield, lifting the front wheels in the air until Max had cleared them. But the other three malformed beasts were far larger. She held onto the steering wheel with a white-knuckle grip, driving as straight as she could.

“Come on!” she screamed through clenched teeth, flooring the gas pedal.

The white masses splattered across the vehicle, completely drenching the windshield in an opaque screen of viscous fluid as the van chugged through the trio of volons. Her visibility was gone. The windshield wipers only helped to smear the thick coat of white blood around.

She took her foot off the gas and braked – but it was too late. The vehicle slammed to a halt with a piercing *crash*, sending Max lurching forward along with everything else in the vehicle.

Shock jolted through her body. The seat belt and airbags had done their jobs, but her old vehicle model lacked modern safety technology. The van had shut down completely, leaving her stranded with no visibility.

Behind the vehicle, the RV's horn blared.

“Fuck! Ah–! Ah, damnit!” Whether from shock or adrenaline, she felt almost no pain from the impact – her mind was far more concerned about something else.

Locating the pistol still hooked to her waist, she unholstered it and turned the safety off. She looked out the side windows, checking for incoming volons. Several of them stared at her from within the shrouded forest, and some were fast approaching.

“Wire!” she screamed in desperation.

Behind her creaking vehicle was the sound of metal and hinges shifting. A door?

Three sharp *clacks* pierced the air, followed by shrill yowls and the crackle of flames.

“Wire!” Max groaned, looking behind her. The remite had parked his RV behind the wrecked van and was fast approaching on foot, illuminated by the flaming volons he'd just shot.

“Max! *Max!* Are you okay? Can you move?!” he shouted, pointing his gun into the forest before checking on her.

“I-I think, yeah, I can try!”

“Get in the RV with me! We need to go NOW!”

Max's body ached in protest as she shifted towards the door. Wire opened it and pulled her out, keeping her balanced with a firm grip.

“Come on, come on!” he ushered her.

Fires sprung to life along the forest's edge where Wire had taken out the volons, igniting some of the surrounding trees and vegetation. Bordered by flames, there was still a clear path from Max's van and Wire's RV; the two hobbled back to the RV while the other nearby volons were cut off by the growing inferno.

Wire guided her up the vehicle's steps and shut the door behind them. “Can you move? 'Cause we gotta go!” he exclaimed.

“Yeah, I can! B-but the fire! It's going to burn this whole forest!”

Wire had already scrambled over to the driver's seat. “Fuck the fire! The lake, Max, it's alive! It's... i-it's fucking *alive!*”

Max ambled towards the front of the vehicle. Wire reversed the RV just as Max reached

out for the passenger's seat, managing to keep her balance.

To the left of the wrecked van was a wall of flame, and to the right were volons of all shapes and forms approaching the vehicle. Some had already begun clambering against the side of the RV, clawing at the windows.

“Dude, pull back, they're climbing on us!” Max yelled as she fastened her seat belt.

“And back up into *that thing?!?*”

“What thing?! Just ram through, then!”

The opening between the van and the road's edge was far too narrow for the RV. The volons were piling against the windows, clawing and snapping at their surfaces.

“Fuck! There's no way we can get through that!” Wire cursed again and pushed down on the gas. The engine roared as the vehicle accelerated backwards away from the disaster in front of them.

“There's another path behind where I parked my RV!” he continued. “Max, just... just don't look out the windows! Trust me!” He accelerated the vehicle back out from the path, rattling various objects in the back of the RV.

“I can handle seeing some volons, dude!” she groaned.

“Max, do *not* look out the window! I fucking mean it!”

As the vehicle entered the clearing they'd camped at, Wire spun the RV around to face where he'd initially parked. There *was* another path there.

Then, another harrowing roar swept through the area, so loud it shook the ground underneath them, forcing Max to cover her ears.

She craned her head to the passenger's window.

“You know when you said the lake was a volon, Max?! Just take my word on this! You were right! Don't look—”

Too late.

Towering white flesh. Mangled, unnatural limbs extending from the lakebed to the sky. Flesh melting and dripping into itself. Undulating mouths of clustered, jagged teeth snapping at the air. Transient, gelatinous anatomy shifting form with every passing second; where one torso began, twisted limbs reached out into themselves with ravenous maws until they melted away, and the leftover torso was just another shrieking amalgam.

The lake had risen. At that moment, Max understood her place in the world. Humans were no longer king.



She was speechless. Her heart pounded. Chills swept through her body. She stared at the impossible leviathan, mortified and awestruck. Nausea churned through her gut as her face tensed, tears threatening to leak from her eyes. How long had she been holding her breath...?

Wire said something. It didn't matter what it was, though. Did anything matter anymore? What was the point?

Foliage and leaves began obstructing her view of the unthinkable colossus. Oh – the RV was moving. Wire had driven into the other path away from the lake.

Max craned her head around to face her remite friend. "I'm scared," she muttered.

"Snap out of it, Max!" Wire shouted. "I'm getting us out of here, come hell or high water!"

As the titanic volon left her vision, reality returned to Max, and her situation became clear again. They were in danger – mortal danger.

"I'm here, I'm here," was all she could think to say.

"I hope to god that thing can't see us through the trees," Wire prayed.

Max looked forward to the forest path in front of the vehicle. "More volons up ahead!" she called out.

Two more shambling white masses stood on the road ahead. To her surprise, one of them jumped out of the way as Wire blared the horn.

"Brace yourself!" he shouted.

A muffled thump echoed from the front bumper as the volon disappeared under the hefty vehicle, jerking the cabin around.

Another long, piercing scream blasted through the air, rising in pitch until it was hardly audible. The vehicle's chassis crashed and bent behind them as a massive white pillar slammed down through the back of the RV. The vehicle trembled before it came to a screeching halt.

“Fuck! Oh, god!” Max cried.

Wire yelped all the same.

Leaves and branches surrounded the windshield, whizzing down past the vehicle. Seconds later, they were in the sky above the forest.

“Hang on!” Wire yelled.

Max closed her eyes and screamed. Everything tilted backwards. Her seat belt kept her in place, but the world was spinning, contorting her body as the vehicle flew through the air.

Another otherworldly howl shredded through Max's ears.

She struggled to get air in her lungs as the RV lurched backwards, accelerating faster than she could handle. She gripped the seat, desperately trying to remain in place.

The world began falling. Max wailed in abject terror as everything plummeted back towards the ground. The vehicle crashed around, jerking in every direction as it fell.

But then their descent slowed. The giant monster's screams became muffled and quiet. Max

opened her eyes to see... nothing. It felt as if the RV was suspended in the air, hanging from its front end.

I'm dead, Max concluded. *I'm dead.*

Seconds later, Wire turned on the cabin light. Max glanced around with blurred vision, struggling to sit up in her crooked seat. Wire had a hand on his left shoulder, also trying to find his bearings.

“What just happened?” Max whined. “Are we alive?”

“Did the lake grab us?” Wire quietly suggested.

“W-what *else* could have done this...?”

The vehicle shifted from side to side, slowly and rhythmically. Max craned her head up to look through the windows – her gaze met nothing but inky darkness.

“Where the hell are we?” she moaned. Then, after listening closely, Max heard something beyond the RV's interior. “Hey... Wire, I can hear something. It sounds like... waves? Can you hear it?”

A long moment of silence.

“I can hear it too,” he replied. “It's... nice. It's... warm.”

“We're probably not underwater,” Max thought aloud, denying the obvious answer as to what really happened. “We flew underground. We crashed into a hole somewhere in the forest.”

“Max...” Wire began. “M-Max...”

“Hmm?”

She looked around. The interior seemed softer than usual, metal bending and folding down as though it was a natural phenomenon. Viscous fluid seeped through the gaps in the vehicle's walls, floors, and ceiling, crawling to them from every direction.

“We're not underground,” Wire said.

8 – Report

Giant Volon Emerges Near Ystets, Potentially Catastrophic Consequences

The volon-infested city of Ystets is now under siege by an enormous volon beast, the likes of which nobody has ever seen before. Estimated to be roughly 700 metres tall, military officials deployed in the city are referring to the beast as “VOCATH” (**Volon Catastrophic Threat**).

Witnesses describe seeing VOCATH emerge from the forests north of Ystets, where Ystets Lake resides. Some speculate the giant volon came from the lake, but this claim is currently unconfirmed. No definitive evidence has been publicly released regarding VOCATH's origin.

VOCATH has most recently been observed in the northern districts of Ystets where it has begun a rampage, demolishing critical infrastructure and buildings alike, and either killing or consuming anyone it comes across. Currently, VOCATH's death toll is between 20,000 to 24,000 – the exact number is unknown, and it is unclear how many of those casualties are military, civilian, or disguised volon in nature.

Widespread panic has spread throughout Ystets' remaining population, sparking an urgent evacuation order from local military forces. Over half of the city's populace has left Ystets and many fugitives have taken refuge in Era, Lower Miyatama, or Karma's Gateway. While both

Miyatama and Karma's Gateway have been inundated with humans and genofexians respectively, Era's mayor has announced the opening of a refugee camp to provide relief from the VOCATH crisis, generously sponsored by Veirr Heavy Industries.

If you have been displaced from your home in Ystets, consider making your way to Era for the best chance at finding some respite.



Martial Law Declared in Ystets, Heavy Artillery Deployed, Flamethrowers In Effect

Ystets has turned into a total war zone in light of Vocath's devastation in the area. Few civilians – if any – remain in the city, and local governors have declared martial law as military forces occupy the entire area.

Video feeds from our helicopters have captured footage of streams of fire launching at Vocath from long distances to ignite the giant. Although volons are known to catch fire to an invariably fatal degree, Vocath's sheer size has caused it to resist the fires, even with sustained barrages from the flamethrowers. The footage shows Vocath burning in several different areas while still causing widespread chaos in Ystets. See below for live footage – viewer discretion is advised.

[...]

The giant volon's death toll has risen to over 60,000; exact numbers are still unclear at this time. Citizens anywhere near Ystets are advised to

move as far away from the area as possible. Vocath remains a serious and unpredictable threat to civilization as a whole, and should be avoided at all costs.



Vocath Subdued in Ystets City Centre

The giant volon ravaging the city of Ystets has finally been subdued near the city centre after constant barrages of military ordinance. It is yet unclear whether Vocath can be considered “deceased” due to its foreign biology, but its rampage has ended for the time being.

Its strength (and, by extension, its ability to shapeshift) seems to have been diminished by the constant flamethrower assault. Although volons are notably susceptible to fire, Vocath seemed to possess a high enough level of intelligence for it to effectively smother the flames with its own shapeshifting anatomy when ignited. However, during the past few hours, it has lost cohesion, decomposing into a pile of flesh nearly a kilometre in diameter. At this time, it does not appear to be able to move, but it should still be considered extremely dangerous until a public statement is issued on the matter.

“At this time, we *believe* Vocath has been neutralized,” stated one of the military officials deployed in the city, “but we are still unfamiliar with that thing's biology. For all we know, it could get up and begin terrorizing the city again at any moment. We can't say for sure.”

Ystets has been completely quarantined from outside society; civilians are not allowed to enter the city under any circumstances and are advised to stay far away from the area if possible. According to local officials, rescue efforts will begin once they are completely confident that Vocath is no longer alive.



Maxie shambled into her workplace's bright lobby a couple days after being assigned to Ystets Lake. Everything looked... fuzzy. Unfamiliar. Humans went about their days, walking to and fro, but she felt a distinct lack of belonging after the rise of Vocath. Why was she even here...?

To give a report, an errant thought blinked through her mind.

To give a report. And to do that, she needed to see her boss. And to see her boss, she needed to take the elevator. And to take the elevator, she needed to walk forward and to the left. Things were starting to make sense to her.

So she did just that. Max walked forward and to the left, passing by the reception desk without a word. The grey door leading to the elevator was right in front of her, and with the press of a button, the doors opened to reveal an empty chamber.

Max stepped inside. What floor was her boss on, again?

Three, her thoughts echoed.

"Three," she said aloud, pressing the respective button. After the doors closed, the

elevator rose to the third floor, and she found herself looking down a corridor with doors on either side.

Her boss's room number?

302.

302, she remembered.

After stepping out of the elevator, room 302 was just to her right.

Knock, knock.

“Come in!” a masculine voice answered.

Max turned the doorknob. Inside the little office space was a human sitting behind a desk. Upon seeing her, its eyes lit up.

“Max!” it exclaimed, standing up. “Y-you're here! I thought we'd lost you when I heard about Vocath in Ystets, and you weren't answering our calls!”

“Yeah... sorry,” Max said.

“No no, I should be saying that to you!” it replied, looking both shocked and apologetic. “I had no idea the lake was going to be so close to that huge thing.”

“It's okay,” Max said, followed by a long silence.

“...Um, so? You're okay? Unharmed?” it continued, surveying her body.

“Yeah,” Max said.

“Good... so, uh—”

That was when it realized. The human went totally still, staring at her with a wide-eyed, horrified gaze.

Maxie opened her mouth.

EXTRA – Underbelly

Enormous thumps quaked the bunker just under Ystets' surface. Power had been completely cut off as Vocath trudged through the city above, destroying and devouring everything in its wake.

An ordinary, pale-skinned man with short black hair and casual office clothes sat on a couch, surrounded by darkness, illuminated only by the glow of his phone. Although he couldn't see much without power, two other volons were just to his left, one of whom was sitting on the same couch as him. He didn't mind.

“Hope my trucks are still intact,” the ordinary man named Glenn said.

“Oh, they'll be fine. We've dealt with worse,” a sickly sweet, feminine voice replied from the other end of the sofa.

“I don't know if we've dealt with anything worse than this,” Glenn responded.

“What a party pooper!” the woman responded. She scooted closer to Glenn on the couch, revealing the silhouette of a curvy, scantily clad woman with deathly white skin. When she looked at Glenn, he only saw two black crosses aligned vertically, and a little grin beneath them.

“It's about time something happened to the humans' grip on this place,” the woman – Tennadeirovaein – sang. “Or, what remained of it,” she finished with a giggle.

“They're saying the death toll is over 20,000 already. It's most certainly going to reach six figures before the humans manage to kill it.

Your food supply might be pretty scarce if this keeps up.”

Tenna produced a coin from the pocket of her shorts. “Wanna bet on its final kill count?”

“No.”

“Come on,” she whined. “How about you, Eckire?”

Her question was answered by a quiet grunt from the darkness. Eckire, the crew's great volon, was seldom talkative.

“Well, I see this as an opportunity,” Tenna explained. “Volons are going to outnumber humans in Ystets by, like, 20 to one after this is done. I already have dozens of ferals trained and ready to gnash at a moment's notice. If we got more forces mustered, we could take over this entire city.”

“What's *left* of this city,” Glenn remarked, listening to the titan's footsteps continue off into the distance.

“Details, details! My point is this could be a window for us to really make an impact in this world. I, for one, am tired of being cooped up in this tiny shoe box. Besides, stealth has never been my image. Just imagine... Queen Tennadeirovaein, the fearsome ruler of Hallow! I'd sit atop my throne of skulls with human servants fawning over me,” she finished with a dreamy sigh. “What do you think?”

Glenn slowly nodded. “Yeah.”

Tenna nudged him in the side. “You could at least *pretend* to be inspired.” Another

sigh, not so dreamy this time. “I wonder what that girl's up to.”

“...Janice?”

“That's the name! Yeah, she was a cute piece of work. I wonder how hard it would be to bring her on board.”

Extremely hard, Glenn thought, suppressing a chuckle.

“Do you know where she's at? Don't think I haven't seen you chirping around at her, you little flirt~!”

“Miyatama, last I heard.” It was a lie of omission; Glenn knew full well that Janice didn't want anything to do with Tenna, but staying in his boss's good graces was his best chance at getting by until Vocath was dealt with.

“You wouldn't be holding out on me, would you?” she suggested.

“Janice and I talk every now and then, but it's not daily. I don't know what she's up to right now.”

“Okay, then. I believe you~!”

With no power, the bunker was starting to grow cold, but it wasn't anything his species couldn't handle. To pass the time, Glenn looked down at his phone to see yet another impromptu news story about Vocath on the website's feed.

“Oh, they're spraying it with fire now,” he explained. “Think it'll work?”

Tenna chuckled. “I've given this kind of thing some thought before. You said earlier that it was constantly shapeshifting – if *I* was that big and *I* lit on fire, I would smother the flames with

my own body. Drag the burning flesh into myself so the flames can't breathe. I imagine, at that size, you could probably do it faster than the fire could spread. At least, that's what I'd do. So, I guess it depends on how deliberate its flux is. Ooh, ooh! And if the humans manage to start winning against me, and I struggled to get around, I would 'play dead'. Let them think they'd won. I'd stay in one place and keep putting out the fires with my body as best as I could, and then... I'd start seeping into the ground beneath me. Nobody would even notice that I was secretly planting the seeds of another elder volon underground!"

It was unnerving when Tenna dropped the ditzzy act. Glimpses of her true intelligence were swift reminders of the reason the trio had become as influential as they were, even if an elder was smashing the entire city above them. If Tenna had thought this much about a hypothetical elder's survivability, Glenn assumed there was more wit behind her whims of establishing a new world order than she let on.

"You have any plans after Vocath is dealt with?" he inquired.

"Why? You looking for some action, cutie?" she sang.

Glenn rolled his eyes at the return of the ditzzy facade. "No."

"Hmph. I don't have plans... *yet*. Military and rescue efforts are going to be everywhere once Vocath either leaves Ystets or dies, so we'll probably be stuck down in here for weeks *yet*."

The big question is whether the humans are going to try to save the city or let it crumble.”

“I’m guessing you’ve planned for both scenarios.”

“You know it~! If there’s not enough human life here, and the surface ferals keep picking humans off, something tells me reconstruction is going to be fairly low on their list of priorities. Perhaps then, we could finally establish a real foothold here, even if we’re working with the scrapped remains of this city. And if that goes well, I have plans for... *elsewhere.*”

“Hm?”

“I’ve been keeping a close track of missing human reports and volon sightings across Hallow. If the humans can’t figure out how to fight us off as a whole, the ferals are going to do our job for us, and I hypothesize there’s going to be a lot of immigration to their space colonies to escape. Like that ring world. And if *that* happens... well, I shouldn’t spoil the best part!”

Glenn pursed his lips. “And if they try to rebuild Ystets?”

Tenna sighed. “We stake our claim on the city. Not us three specifically, of course – the surviving volons on the surface will definitely keep the humans occupied. We’ll just have to take advantage of all the ferals I’ve trained and continue our subterfuge. Humans are *adorably* easy to corrupt.”

“Noted.”

Glenn still wasn't sure where his role would fit into her plans – or how he felt about it. She certainly would have planned around his specialty as an expert driver and mimic, but whether he would still be a part of her crew by then was still unclear.

What *was* clear is that Vocath's arrival marked a turning point for everybody – volons, humans, robots, and genofexians alike. If there was one elder volon on Hallow, there were certainly more elsewhere, and it was blatantly obvious the humans weren't even ready for a *single* elder.

Unless they act fast, Glenn mused, these coming years are going to be rife with devastation.