

Modern Cannibals

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Modern Cannibals

by [Bavitz](#)

Summary

Z. Coulter's best friend Max is into some new thing called Homestuck. Like, freakily into it, and it's weirding her out. To get back on Max's wavelength, Z. engineers a road trip to a convention that Homestuck's creator, Andrew Hussie, will attend. But as they leave, a strange, permanently-smiling man begins to follow them...

Chapter 1: Something's Wrong with Max!

PART I: CITY OF CLOUDS

Chapter 1: Something's Wrong with Max!

When Z. Coulter (don't ask what the Z. stands for) got home from school, the *Faerie Endless* teaser had been live two hours. Two! What even was her life that she dwelled in abject ignorance while the internet teemed with rumors, hoaxes, fan art, flame wars—and why waste time listing it? She replayed the video five, six, seventy times, ingrained it frame-by-frame into her eyelids, scoured translations, parsed message boards, posted theories and scowled as they sank beneath a deluge of dumber theories ("Am I the only one who saw Calofisteri at 1:37?" No dipshit), mashed the refresh button, fell into apoplexy, rolled on the floor, upended her backpack, shredded her notebooks, gnawed her shoelaces and retched. The *Faerie Endless* website crashed due to traffic, the video no longer loaded.

She ricocheted into the hallway. Delirium and the lesser lords of Hell crept inside her flayed mind, she sang in tongues to the cobwebs. Her brother somewhere said: "Shut your bonobo mouth."

She tumbled into the living room, where the sports game played. "The colossus rises from its centurial slumber." Her arms, possessed by vengeful spirits, undulated. "Apocalypse approaches!"

"What a precious child," said her stepdad. "Do your homework."

Her mother's voice wafted from another room: "Yes honey, your homework is good."

Troglodytes—Infidels! Who were these golems scraping their knuckles across the tile? Senseless to the manna that dribbled down their befuddled pates. Like seriously? Maybe a teensy tiny itty bitty display of interest in the biggest event of the year?

Her stepdad, in a plot to ruin her social life, had the day prior confiscated her phone, so she took to the streets. At the end of a nearby culdesac, flanked by a vista of cloudy peaks, waited the house of Max Roddlevan. Max must be on the fritz, his encyclopedic poindexter brain had catalogued the entire *Faerie Endless* canon, he knew every infinitesimal factoid for each the franchise's twelve installments plus 90s anime OVA plus Shirou Katsumata's designer notes plus Z. expected he had already alchemized a theory from the teaser's tin bucket of images so she barreled through his front door and spilled into the foyer and scrambled for the stairway and then a television said—

"I ain't here to make friends."

She skidded to her knees. She clamped her heaving mouth.

"He think he know me—he don't know me."

Undeniable: Max's mother, definitely home, definitely in the living room, definitely watching mindless mom TV. Did she hear Z. open the door? No rustle of movement—Perhaps she lay in wait. Z. crawled toward the corridor that connected the TV room to the stairs. The light deadened save television effervescence that changed in incomprehensible patterns. To reach the stairs—and Max's room—she'd have to bolt past the couch where Mrs. Roddlevan surely seethed. (Three bounds to the base of the stairs, four bounds up the stairs, seven bounds total, at a rate of maths per second... The average human blinked in the span of one-sixtieth of a second—was Mrs. R an average human or an average reptilian?)

"For one of you, your journey ends today." The TV played a dramatic note and all calculations spiraled into oblivion, the moment of heightened tension served her lone window before inevitable commercial break so she compressed her seven-bound estimate into a frantic five, reached the top of the stairs, and rolled into the wall of portraits that chronicled Max's development from infant to young man. Before Mrs. Roddlevan ascended from her primordial ooze to harangue her with some stay-away-from-my-son junk, Z. skittered into Max's room and slammed the door.

"Cripes Max your mom nearly cooked me in a stew."

Max's room, like the living room, was dark save the dance of a screen's light—his computer, nestled in a corner opposite her. Max sat with his forehead against it.

"Time for the facts, Max." She stepped forward, her foot crunched a thing. "You saw Jolly's outfit right?"

Max failed to turn around or acknowledge her or do anything except peer into his screen. A vague halo enveloped his head. He skipped school that day (who blamed him), but maybe he was actually sick? A debilitating paralysis from the eyebrows down? Dammit if Max died who would she eat lunch with? She waded through the debris of his room—papers swirled everywhere—and seized his shoulders. She poked her head next to his and looked at his screen. Words, words, words, in the worst font too. Lines upon lines of snoozeworthy text on a plain gray background. No *Faerie Endless* trailer, no discussion forums, no information wiki.

"What's this junk?"

Max turned with a jolt. "Oh." He blinked, coughed. "Uh, what are you doing...?"

"What am *I* doing!" Z. knelt beside him and tapped her lower lip with a finger. "Have you not heard there's kinda this thing about a certain role-playing game called *Faerie Endless*?"

A pendulous pause. Max's gaunt face nearly translucent in the computer's luminosity. His agape mouth snapped shut and his eyes narrowed. "That's cool, I guess... I don't really play that game."

"Ha? Yeah you do?"

He faced the screen, clicked the mouse, and expelled air. "Z., that game panders to twenty-something men who enjoy ogling girls in short skirts. It provides no real value when you

consider things... holistically."

What prank was this? What bizarro dimension? She groped for a rebuttal while he clicked through more pages. He suddenly cared the girls wore short skirts? Well DUH, it's a *fantasy realm* women have certain forms of apparel that differ from what you might expect in a realistic environment come on Max that's super basic. Those words in that exact order whizzed through her brain and made perfect sense and Max would have no recourse but to concede to her logic and yet when she opened her mouth none of those words emerged. She said:

"What?"

A pause, and she rearranged her thoughts.

"Really Max, it looks sick, let's check the trailer right now." She reached for the mouse but his hand nudged her away. The screen had changed.

It showed an image of an eye, perfect and round and peering back at the Max and Z. who peered at it. The screen began to zoom toward the pupil, slowly, the whites vanishing, then the red iris. Details came into focus, features along the pupil's surface, until it stopped being a pupil and became a bubble instead.

"What's this?" said Z. "A new story or what?"

"Something like that." In the bubble floated a—a whatchacallit, sea unicorn. Narwhal.

"What's it called?"

"Uh..." His voice tapered into nothingness.

The screen turned dark. Silhouettes flashed across it—shapes with tentacles, wicked smiles. They whirred faster and faster, a pulsating vortex opened behind them, it flickered frenetic red-and-white, Z.'s eyes felt weird, epileptic, she averted her gaze.

"Come on Max, talk to me."

Max's hands curled around his keyboard as his immutable gaze locked to his monitor. The room seethed with strobe light, she blocked herself from it by hiding behind him. She poked him, with each poke his eyes squinted, his upper lip curled, like maybe he would break into a laugh, the charade would collapse. "Come on Max, come on come on come on come—"

His finger jabbed the keyboard and the screen stopped, the vortex stood still—it was the red eye that turned into a bubble. "Can you not see I'm trying to watch? Why are you even here? Who let you in?"

"Uh. The door was unlocked?"

"Normal people don't walk into other peoples' houses, unlocked or not."

"Well now that I'm here—"

He cut her off with a trenchant sigh. "That is not how it works. I'm sorry you don't understand."

No, she didn't understand, and it pissed her off when she didn't understand and asked for an explanation and people only sighed and said she didn't understand. To block hateful thoughts she said: "What's the eye-bubble story, Max? Tell me."

If he sighed again she decided to pummel his face, but instead he propped his head on a hand and fiddled with the mouse. "You wouldn't enjoy it."

"Try me, asshole."

Max's chair swiveled to face her. She stepped back to avoid his legs and bumped against his wobbly bookshelf. "It's called," he said, "*Homestuck*. By Andrew Hussie. It's a story about some friends who play a game."

"That's it?"

"Obviously that's not it," said Max. "Augh, no matter how I explain you won't understand."

"Is it good? That's all you gotta say. If it's good I'll trust you and read it myself and then we can talk."

Max gave a sad shake of his head, as though what she described were impossible, simply infeasible, an affront to basic human reasoning skills, because as everyone knew Z. Coulter was too doltish for enlightened entertainment.

"Z. Could you please... leave me alone? I don't feel like talking to you right now."

Oh.

Not even don't feel like talking, don't feel like talking to *you*. Alright, Z. understood. Z. could take a hint. Z. knew when she wasn't wanted.

"Right. Sorry, Max."

If the new story was somehow better than the old stories (skeptical, based on his description), why was he not ballistic right now to ensnare her in his world? Because she couldn't understand. Because Max inhabited a higher echelon of high school achievement than Z. Advanced Placement everything, Honors everything else. Inevitable salutatorian, eventual Ivy League. This *Homestuck* thing, whatever it was, she couldn't understand. Like when he toted that *Odysseus* book for a month but could only describe it in terms of its "unsurpassable impact on English-language literature" and its "status in the canon," whatever the hell a canon meant when *he* used it.

"Well uh guess I shouldn't bother you anymore?" With the question mark appended last-second to leave a hook for him to grab her, envelop her in his new discovery, but he didn't even hear her, his face drew closer to the computer monitor, the vortex pulsed again. Z. backtracked ponderously, in case he turned, in case he said something, even goodbye, see you later, whatever. He didn't.

As she walked toward the door she noticed on his bed a mound of stuff, which as she drew closer transmogrified into papers, lots of them, mostly ripped. She snatched one that drifted in midair and squinted to read the minuscule typeface. She glanced at his bookshelf. It was empty except a few stray, overturned tomes.

"Max. Are these your—?"

But Max so solidly and rigidly failed to acknowledge her that she gave up midsentence and left.

Chapter 2: Kiki's Kind of a Bitch—But I Love Her Anyway?

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At lunch the next day, while Z. watched the poor kids take turns attempting to backflip off the monument to the 90s massacre, a hand tapped her shoulder. She turned and nobody was there but then a voice whispered from the opposite way than the way she turned: "Poor baby, all sad so alone."

"Kiki—the heck are you doing here? Doesn't Cal need you for something?"

Kiki Radney, Z.'s other friend, vaulted the waist-high brick wall where Z. sat and leaned against the dead kids monument, one leg crossed near the knee. She exhaled a terse puff to brush a purple bang from her eyes. "Cal can suck my pimple-covered dick. He doesn't need me to plot his next terrorist attack. But hey, I see a pretty girl looking sad, I cheer her up. You escape Max's clutches or what."

"He's absent today," said Z., "I visited him yesterday but he acted weird."

"Max, weird. No way." Kiki plopped her backpack onto her crossed leg and extracted a brownbag lunch, KIKI scrawled across in felt tip. "I refuse to believe it."

"Well it's true, and it pretty much sucks. The new *Faerie Endless* trailer came out last night and—"

"Really. How high the stockings go this time."

Before Z. could conjure a clever retort, Kiki bribed her with a banana. Finally! Z.'s mom was three days late on groceries, she peeled the banana and it was mushy and gross.

The poor kids moved to a new side of the monument and planted impressive landings while Kiki dug out things from under her fingernails and Z. related the previous night's Max encounter. "He was obsessed with some stupid new story, I forget the name—*Homestuck*, he said *Homestuck*—can I use your phone?"

"Fuck no you freeloader. The welfare state will be the death of America." Kiki tossed her the phone.

"You see because I wanted to check this *Homestuck* thing so I could talk to Max but I kinda forgot so..." Tap tap tap, Kiki had the best phone, it actually worked. First search result looked like a match: same gray background, same godawful font, but squished into Kiki's phone, and the homepage read MSPAINT ADVENTURES and below it *Homestuck*. At the bottom of the page was a column for announcements.

"What's the home stuck on." Kiki spat onto the dead grass.

"Huh?" The most recent announcement, posted by "Andrew" two days prior, began: *Hey guys...*

"Rock or hard place." Kiki fished her lunch, found a sandwich, plopped it next to Z. "Nah, that joke's no good. Subject change: how's your Adderall."

"You got a test?" *Thanks for all the support. Your letters, posts, and general appreciation mean more to me than my favorite unicorn painting. You know, the one with the football guy.*

"AP Chem, Friday." Kiki jabbed a finger so far down her throat Z. thought she might actually barf but she didn't.

As I'm an eternal slave to your whims, I've endeavored to attend a series of so-called "conventions" over the next month. Blah, blah. Z. maneuvered the phone with one hand while her other snuck into her pocket and tossed Kiki a plastic baggie of pills. Kiki leaned forward, tucked the compensatory greenback behind Z.'s ear, and kissed her forehead.

"Anyway," said Z., "Where was I? Oh yeah so first Max ignored me, then he got obnoxious and said stuff like I wouldn't *understand* this exalted new story, and in general acted like he didn't want to talk to me."

"Definitely abnormal behavior for Max Roddlevan."

"I know right?" Z. noticed an accumulation of Kiki's lunch items at her side and went for the prize of the cornucopia, the chocolate chip cookies.

"I've never seen him act like a snobby stupid jerk before," said Kiki. Z. almost muttered another agreement but stopped herself and scrutinized her dubious friend.

"Anyway," more trepidatious than before, "The weirdest part is he—Kiki are you listening? Kiki? Kiki?"

Kiki was watching the poor kids backflip. "Oh yes, do continue, I find your Max story absolutely riveting."

"So the weirdest part's he tore up his books, totally shredded them, the pages floated in his room, every single book."

"Really." The same dull monotone as everything Kiki said, but in her eye a flicker of real unmistakable engagement in the conversation instantaneously squashed when she followed up with: "Hitler did the same thing, halfbloods like you and I ought to watch out for his inevitable racial purity scheme."

Z. disregarded everything after the "really." "Bizarre right? I'm not overreacting right? Something's totally wrong with him."

Kiki contemplated a good five minutes (actually ten seconds), her body gradually settling against the monument and her limbs crossing together in intricate folding patterns until only one leg stretched to the ground and everything else became a snazzy purple knot, she pursed her lips and blew a breath to brush back her bangs... The pause lasted so long Z. checked the

phone again, the rest of Hussie's announcement contained a list of dates and locations—Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and in two weeks Las Vegas. Las Vegas FanCon—Z. knew that name. Had heard it recently, too, because—because!—it was where the creator of *Faerie Endless*, Shirou Katsumata, was going to promote the new game.

"Actually, I've seen this before," said Kiki. "Classic manic pixie dreamgirl setup."

"Classic what?"

The bell rang. The poor kids gave momentary pause to their backflips, but resumed once the signal subsided. Las Vegas FanCon, two weeks away... Shirou Katsumata, Andrew Hussie, everyone's favorites in one place... An idea sparked, Z.'s hair sputtered with static, she jolted upright as Kiki said:

"Manic. Pixie. Dreamgirl. You ever see *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, starring Kirsten Dunce?"

"Kiki—when's Spring Break?"

The words sailed through the translucent hologram of Kiki Radney and struck the monument's stone edifice. "It's a romantic comedy, except really it's Oscarbait bullshit, the one serious flick every comic actor does to prove he can actually act. This film's unfortunate funnyman is one *Jimmus carrius*—"

"But really when's Spring Break?" She flicked through the phone as though Kiki had an itinerary but all she found was a picture of the thirty-foot cobalt bronco outside Denver International Airport, the image labeled Important.

"—who plays a rather depressive fellow, a young white male subjugated by his humdrum environs, who cannot see the beauty of life behind the shroud of his ennui—"

Z. hailed the poor kids clique. "When's Spring Break?"

They twittered with glee. "Spring Break! When's Spring Break!"

She wheeled on the deluge of students crossing the thoroughfare on the other side of the waist-high brick wall. Her arms flapped akimbo at faces as she repeated her simple, earnest plea.

"—then he meets this girl, Kirsten Dunce, and she's fun and flirtatious but not in a bimbo way, in a way like she's also got this intelligent side, and she dyes her hair and teaches our hapless protagonist how to *live* with her *joie de vivre*. It speaks to my inner tortured bourgeoisie."

Z. waded halfway into the post-lunch commerce, repeating her plea ad nauseam, until a generic student said: "First week of April."

Despite the distance, Kiki's voice droned: "Kirsten Dunce is the manic pixie dreamgirl—the fun, idiosyncratic female whose only purpose in life is to resuscitate humdrum men. I

apologize, Z., but the power of tropes is undeniable. You have no choice but to sashay into Max's fetid life and *inspire* him."

Kiki's blather made it difficult to concentrate, already Z. had to stop and remember why she wanted to know the time for Spring Break anyway, then she noticed the phone in her hand, she swept away the bronco photo and brought up the screen with Hussie's announcement.

Monday April 2 through Wednesday April 4—Las Vegas FanCon.

Infallible! The goddesses of fortune conspired in her favor, destiny, kismet, whatever thesaurus Stegosaurus you named it, everything dropped her way, Z. tumbled back to Kiki and seized her threadbare wrists and said:

"We're taking a trip Spring Break."

Kiki missed zero beats. "You ever see *National Lampoon's Vacation* starring—"

"It'll be sick, you me Max, exactly the thing to fix him, if he's nuts for this Hussie goon and his stupid story then we give him the Hussie goon, it's great, and Shirou Katsumata—it's fantastic, I've saved everything."

"Not Christmas. They still say Happy Holidays."

Z., kinetic with her unleashed idea, astonished by her genius, dragged Kiki from the statue and revolved with her across the green. FanCon was immense, Z. knew about it even before Shirou Katsumata, internet chums blogged pics, cosplayers, booths and merch and celebrities. Everyone will find something they love, no lunches by herself, no squalid Spring Break twelve-hour internet video sessions alone in her room, everything back to before, when Kiki didn't hang around upperclassmen and Max gabbed about fantasy with her—phenomenal!

She said as much to Kiki, with less eloquence and some sentences jumbled.

"Sounds like the absolute best way to spend my Spring Break," said Kiki. "Three nights in nerdvana with Max Roddlevan."

"I know right?" Z. released Kiki's wrists and bounced off somebody and revolved her way back to Kiki. "It's been so long since you and Max hung out, everything will be great."

"Right." Kiki nodded and smirked, which Z. had trouble reading, was she on board? Where was her enthusiasm? Why did she have to be ultra dull sometimes, like this time in particular when Z. wanted someone to be excited with her so she didn't get excited by herself in the middle of the school pavilion?

"What's wrong with you Kiki, why are you so boring?" She again reached for the wrist, Kiki's main weakpoint, but Kiki drew away and shouldered her backpack and turned toward her next class, AP European History, far away from Z.'s next class.

"Logistics, darling. How do you expect to reach Las Vegas when none of us can drive."

Kiki walked away.

Chapter 3: Cal Sucks.

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Bitchiness aside, Kiki had a point. Although Z. and Kiki and Max were sixteen, the age you could legally drive (or did it change recently?), none of them had a license let alone car, so during Ceramics Z. compiled a list of people she knew who could drive.

Z. knew nobody except Max and Kiki.

Then she compiled a list of people Max might know who could drive, but other than Max's brother who hated Max (and who knew if Frederick Roddlevan even drove, or existed in the terrestrial plane), Max knew nobody except Z. and Kiki. Z. got desperate and tried to think of people Kiki knew, but Kiki knew infinity nameless scenesters who existed solely as vague faces in Z.'s mental registry. Kiki did know one guy corporeal enough to remember (not that Z. wanted to):

Khalid "Lil Cal" Bhandari.

Two years their senior, Cal made ostentatious display of the motor vehicle he drove to school each day, and by ostentatious Z. meant he drove it. Plus Kiki knew him so he fulfilled the necessary qualifications. Fuck.

Neither Cal nor Kiki had sixth period, but they stuck around after school for band practice. After Z. escaped purgation she scampered through the tides of students and between the rows of classrooms toward the mesa at the back of the school where if you pattered around and kicked some dirt clods you might discover a track for running. Actually, surprise, someone had uncovered the track and some goobers in track uniforms ran on it, but she snuck past them to the row of trees along the chain-link fence past the corpses of creatures killed by cats to the utility shed behind the soccer field (a different field from the track field), the shed reverberated like somebody let the dinosaurs out and Z. slowed to a crouch as she inched toward the door. A voice rattled beneath the calamity, the tempo grew seismic, Z. hesitated, unsure of her strategy, the voice spoke:

Hey now, I come down on clowns

Who spout about moving pounds,

Shooting rounds, running towns.

Boy, you ain't run a thing.

No matter what you think or what it seem

In the end gov did print that green.

This super bored her so she wrenched the door open and launched her surprise attack. The rhythmic thuds ceased immediately, Kiki swirled to face her, Cal leaped back and crashed against tarp-covered junk. A dust plume arose and Kiki bent into a coughing fit while Z. teetered on the precipice of sneezing and not-sneezing.

"Are you mentally deficient?" Cal seized her, span her around, and throttled her shirt. Her head bobbed back and forth. "Could you not hear that we're practicing? Shall we play louder?"

Kiki quit coughing and brushed her clothes. "Decorum, Z. Knock first, *then* barge in."

"A good take, too." Cal relinquished her. "Ruined. I can't believe it. Perfect flow, it rode the beat like a glove. A *glove*. Now the mojo is lost. Lost, it's leaving me."

He paced within the narrow shed, made narrower with clutter, his motions precise to achieve maximum pace potential.

"Ever think of the mojo, Z." said Kiki.

"Who's this degenerate, Kiki," said Cal. "You know her?"

"Cal, come on." Z. scratched her nose, she still wanted to sneeze. "We met before like five times."

Cal scrutinized her. "Unmemorable."

"Please, Z.," said Kiki, "You're an hour early for our secret lesbian rendezvous. How am I supposed to keep my affairs in order if my myriad lovers cannot adhere to schedule."

"Lesbian rendezvous?" said Z. and Cal in unison. Kiki hissed and rolled her eyes.

"I'll *assume* that's a joke." Cal turned again on Z., his back straightened, he loomed above her until his head hit the ceiling. "As for you, abscond. Kiki and I are creating music."

Muuuuuuusic, she'd heard it all before. Everyone always creating something: music, literature, whatever. Babble about artists and labels and albums and genres, the perfect cesspit for flies of pretension to gather. Kiki didn't care about *music*, you could tell—bass guitar limp around her shoulders, apathetic meh etched into her slightly-pouty lips. Cal by contrast jabbed a thick and rigid finger attached to a thick and rigid arm attached to a thick and rigid Cal directly into Z.'s sternum and sent her reeling.

She retaliated with her wittiest barb. "You can't make freaking music with one guitar and a singer, that's *braindead*."

Cal harrumphed, his thick and rigid chest ruffled, he shored up his shoulders like a threatened animal, which was how Z. knew she struck a nerve. "A true rapper needs nothing but a beat and his or her voice. Those who conceal weak diction and uninspired ideas with grandiose orchestration are—hacks."

He swiveled on a heel. His arm, extended in a sideswiping Nazi salute, nearly decapitated Z. but she ducked. She braced for more but he no longer acknowledged her presence.

"The pioneers of the medium—did they accompany their bars with pipe organs and harpsichords? Did they chase novelty, gimmickry? Did they lean upon the latest trends in electronica to set their words to the rhythm of their souls? The sound is mere backdrop to their lyrical truths—That is the meaning of rap. Kiki, listening?"

Kiki, inspecting her nails, lolled her head. "If it's unimportant, can I go?"

Z. ventured a reentrance. "I'm not here to talk music anyway, I got a proposition for you."

"For me." Cal blinked.

"But Z.," said Kiki. "You said you'd be *my* wife."

"No marriages," said Cal.

"No, I'm not, ugh, you're, AUGH—I'm not asking to marry you, shut up for five seconds and let me talk!"

Their response pealed in disconcerting unison: "Then talk."

Z. opened her mouth and froze in sudden terror as she tried to remember what she wanted to say, the reason she came to the rumpus shed in the first place, she stalled with plentiful ums, uhs, and likes, she drilled her brain and retraced her steps: Ceramics, list of names, OH YEAH

"Cal please drive me and Kiki and Max to Las Vegas for Spring Break I'll pay you."

Cal exhaled. "Las Vegas."

Z. inhaled. "Yeah there's this thing called FanCon it's gonna have this guy named Andrew Hussie who Max is gonzo about so I thought it'd be cool if—"

"No," said Cal. "Kiki, five more takes of 'Untitled III' and then segue into IV. If time, we'll retread I and II, you're sloppy on them."

"I'm a very sloppy girl," said Kiki.

"I'll pay you," said Z., "Real money!" She scrounged her pockets for the money Kiki gave her at lunch and waved the crumpled bills in Cal's face.

He shoved her hand against her chest and propelled her backward into the cloud-drenched sun onto her butt. The soccer kids dribbled balls and the cars rushed past the fence. Cal followed her into the light, sharp shadows forged his features, crevices of eyes and pencil-shaded nose, color denuded, whitewashed.

"I am not a man from whom you can extort menial services." He blotted the sky, clouds encircled him. "Learn. To. Drive."

"Kick her," said Kiki.

Cal scowled. "I'm not going to kick her."

"Grind her bones to powder. Put her in a pudding."

"Get off my case." Cal turned toward her and more importantly away from Z. so she could scramble back to her feet. "I have no patience for ragamuffins who waste—"

"Ragamuffins," said Kiki. "Rascallions." She remained within the shed, a lavender smear in the dark, a wayward glint across her lacquered fingernails as she fiddled with her cell phone. Z. had no clue whether to thank her or hate her.

"Deride my vocabulary at your peril," said Cal, with that air like something doesn't bother him when it's totally obvious he's bothered. "Doesn't change the *facts*. For no reason will I squander my break on a drive to Las Vegas. Besides, we *have* plans for Spring Break."

"You do?" said Z. First she'd heard of any pre-established Spring Break plans, so she fully expected Kiki to don a surprised or more likely bemused facial expression to indicate the make-believe nature of Cal's "plans" but Kiki remained impassive as ever.

"Indeed." Cal faced the sky. "I've scheduled several ten-hour practice blocks for Kiki and I to hone our craft. We're on the cusp of technical competence, but we need more raw, unfiltered playtime. 'Untitled I' and 'Gobstoppers' are almost to the point of consistency. One day for those two, two days on II through V, two days on VI through VII with some exploratory revisions of 'Oliver'—" Unbelievably he continued, an endless fount of song names and schedules, except Z. physically shielded herself from his soundwaves and glanced through her arms at Kiki to exchange a telepathy session in which they silently derided stupid Cal but it took a long time to catch her gaze and when she did Kiki only shrugged. What does that mean! A shrug—confused, apathetic? Z. tried to gesture for help, like get off your phone get Cal on board with Vegastrip? Cal like, *knew* Kiki, so odds became non-negligible with her assistance. Why did Kiki even hang with him! Did she *enjoy* thrumming her stupid bass guitar! (Z. wanted to append extra exclamation points to that last question but Max had conditioned her to resist excess.) She wasn't even sure where Kiki met Cal, the guy was two years above them, and another thing—

Wait no Kiki *had* interrupted Cal. "—who else plays in Las Vegas."

Cal blinked and his gargle of words caught in his throat. "What?"

"I *said*, you know who else plays in Vegas, right."

"Who?"

Kiki gave Cal a look like he was the absolute dumbest dummy in the whole world. "Tsk. I thought you were a rap aficionado, guess you're a mere dilettante."

"A what?!" Definitely question mark-exclamation point (another excessive writing technique per Max).

"Dilettante. Amateur. *Hobbyist*. What true hip hop head would not already be rabid at the mention of Las Vegas, knowing full well that Dennis 'Malkwon' Toombs performs there every—"

"Malkwon," said Cal. "Dennis 'Malkwon' Toombs."

"My parents say I mutter, maybe you misheard me."

Cal did an unusual thing and stopped talking. Even Z. had heard of Malkwon, one of those omnipresent names that seep into the cultural consciousness and you simply comprehend it through osmosis or communal telepathy. Not that she knew whether she ever heard a song by him, and actually without the conversational context she probably wouldn't be sure he was a rapper—but the name was enough.

And because the name was enough, Cal started saying a bunch of crap that wasn't the name. "Born 1971, merely nineteen years old at the release of his breakout record *African Daimyo*, known for his vivid imagery and gritty depiction of inner-city New York, the flagship artist on the Don Corleone label, with which he released his stellar 1996 sophomore effort *Unlawful Imprisonment*, dubbed 'King of the 917' after his brutal dismemberment of rival Mixmatch Records on his famed diss track 'Staten Profilin'—*that* Malkwon?"

Kiki shrugged. "Probably."

"In Las Vegas?"

"My phone may deceive me. Can't trust machines, you know."

Cal crossed his arms and closed his eyes and... pondered? With quiet murmurs and twitches of his upper lip that kind of unnerved Z. but mostly she was glad Kiki actually did a good thing that didn't suck. Z. tried to catch her eye from around Cal's stupid body and during the brief moment they made contact Kiki winked.

"Plenty of hip hop titans perform every day," said Cal.

Z. knew the answer to this one. "But nobody ever comes to Denver, Vegas is closest you get."

"Come on Cal," said Kiki, "You always say we should learn from the greats."

"Please please please." Z. got on one knee and clasped her hands. "I will literally pay you to see Malkwon in Las Vegas, no better deal anywhere else."

Cal peered down at her, made shadow by clouds. Black shapes crept across the field, consumed the soccer players, consumed the shed, plunged Kiki into total blackness, and left only Z. in the grass and Cal above. He rubbed his wannabe beard, murmured more with his twitchy lip, glanced into the shed and finally clicked his tongue.

"Fine."

Z. sprinted all the way home, shouting I love you Kiki over and over.

Chapter 3x: Andrew Hussie Lives in... Massachusetts?!

Chapter 3x: Andrew Hussie Lives in... Massachusetts?!

With Kiki convinced and Cal and Cal's car convinced, Z. needed only Max convinced. But Max's school attendance grew sporadic, when he did attend he slouched around with extreme lethargy that drove Z. batty. He nodded in response to conversational hooks, he made polite excuses and mentioned illness, but nothing fooled Z.—she knew one wind from another. The sickness he suffered was *Homestuck*. It leeches his quintessence, drained his pallor, sunk his eyes into his skull until he looked like his brother Frederick (who Z. and Kiki agreed did meth).

When Z. held the *Homestuck* bait, he bit. He said he'd go with them, a glimmer of vigor in his eyes, and Z. boogied all Ceramics class. Then two days later—he missed the day in between—Max said he was looking into "alternative transportation" to Las Vegas. Whatever that meant! He said he was sorry, nothing against Z. personally, but he felt a daylong car ride with Kiki and her abrasive guy friend would be too "depleting." She got on her knees, begged, pleaded. A few days later, he acquiesced.

She spent the remainder of the time until Spring Break boning up on *Homestuck*.

Well, she intended to. Instead the *Faerie Endless* hype cycle sucked her into its vortex, interviews with Shirou Katsumata in Japanese gaming magazines hit the web, fan translations provided precious details on characters, storyline, mechanics, release date, the forums raged and Z. raged with them, she penned whirlwind diatribes that left her fingers locked into hooks. She refreshed pages on loop, she festered and screamed, her brother pounded the wall and told her to shut up.

Once, guilt-ridden (after Max first talked about "alternative transportation"), she attempted to read *Homestuck*. The name said it all. It was about a kid who wanted to play a game with his internet friends, the only complication being he was stuck at home with his weird dad for reasons not properly explained. The kid made plodding progress toward rectifying his situation, however, and by page fifty he only managed to wander around his room fiddling with random, inconsequential objects that did nothing and were stupid.

So yeah, Z. gave up. Not a matter of comprehension, a matter of BOREDOM.

Still, she felt bad for flaking and tried to find a plot synopsis so she could at least pretend familiarity around Max, wrangle some burro of connection, don her gaucho pants and lasso the bucking beast. But online summaries confused her, they were always appended to topics titled "I dare you to summarize *Homestuck*", they differed irreconcilably. Nobody agreed on the main character, the unassuming protagonist she followed in her fifty-page foray only sometimes featured. Various forumgoers depicted labyrinths, unicorns, interplanetary warfare, transdimensional warps, time shenanigans (always a bad sign), magic, Gnostic iconography, famed American actor Nicholas Cage and his magnum opus *Con Air*, JPEG file compression, cult Nintendo classics, multimedia, mayors and civic responsibility, post-ironic

paradigms in post-post-modernism (?!), anthropomorphism, leprechaun Mafioso, intergalactic frog cancer, evil clowns, giant spiders, dog angels, eldritch abominations, bubbles.

She popped an aspirin.

Some summaries helpfully recommended intrepid new readers start at the story's halfway point. She went back to Hussie's site, found an archive, learned *Homestuck* spanned literally eight thousand pages. Not an exaggeration. She picked a page at random, the text and images were incomprehensible. Words were (intentionally?) misspelled, text changed colors at random, letters became symbols and numbers. She discovered animated videos and interactive games. A horrible thought emerged: Maybe she *wouldn't* understand.

Max being right pissed her off despite him always being right. She switched tactics and assaulted instead the enigma of Andrew Hussie, the story's creator. But Hussie was bizarrely difficult to research, by which Z. meant she had to go to the *second* page of Google results for anything relevant.

The relevant thing in question was an obituary for one Andrew Hussie, Senior, posted several months ago. From the obituary she learned that Hussie lived in Massachusetts. Nothing else told much better.

Chapter 4: Denver

Chapter 4: Denver

She had a dream one night and she knew it was a dream while she dreamed it except it wasn't a lucid dream because she couldn't control herself, mostly because she had no self in the dream. The dream displayed a unicorn as it galloped across an ethereal forest landscape and she recognized the unicorn—the landscape—immediately, from *Blade Runner*, a movie she saw a quintillion times with Max and Kiki during elementary school, supremely boring film, but Max and Kiki loved it so they watched it over and over. The movie starred Indiana Jones as a FUTURE detective in Neo Los Angeles tasked with hunting robots that looked exactly like regular human beings, but the big twist, which Z. didn't know was a twist until Max spelled it out for her, was that the whole time Indiana Jones was actually a robot himself and didn't know it. The movie revealed the twist in a super oblique way by having Indiana dream this recurring dream about a unicorn, exactly the dream Z. had right now, and at the end of the movie his detective partner (who did nothing the whole movie by the way) folded an origami unicorn that according to Max revealed that the partner knew about Indiana's dream? Which meant he was a robot? Z. didn't get it and it didn't matter anyway, could she please wake up?

Please?

The unicorn galloped, the landscape never changed.

Z. jolted out of bed. In her bedroom window a monstrous face rose to greet her—Kiki! Z. rubbed her eyes and blinked and still Kiki in the window—What was she doing? What time—What day—

She flipped out of bed and tangled in the blankets and kicked them off and rolled on the floor grasping at clothes as she crabwalked for her backpack she needed uh money that's right funds procured via liquidation of pharmaceutical assets shoveled into backpack pockets alongside socks and shirts Gameboy! needed Gameboy and the Gameboy charger and portable *Faerie Endless* games uh and shoes fumbled her feet into them and knotted the laces. She bounced off the hallway wall and shook the whole house and her brother shouted: "Go to sleep you orangutan!" Her head hit a thing as she wobbled into the kitchen and to the front door, shafts of light crept through cracks, her hand extended for the knob, seized, rattled the lock—Key? No, latch—which way turn? The complex mechanism clicked and the door swung open and dawn socked her in the face. Vibrant glow radiated from the vast blue sky and all the clouds of the city contorted into a crudelosphere around a lone jeep idle at the end of the driveway. Cal and Kiki posed like a 90s album cover, Cal with an impudent arms-crossed lean and Kiki surveying the distant mountains with a hand to shield her eyes.

Cal uncrossed his arms to raise a wrist and jabbed a finger at the watch wrapped around it. "Six forty-eight!"

Z., sucked of all urgency, ambled down the driveway.

"Unconscionable." Cal wore a camouflage jacket and aviator sunglasses. "Eleven hours to Las Vegas, we make it *today*—no exceptions. Had half a mind to abandon you..."

Abandon her! The trip was *her* idea, dumbskull! He seized her shoulder as she reached for the jeep door. An expectant, upturned hand emerged. The hand wore a fingerless glove.

"Cool your jets for half a millisecond?" Z. swung her backpack around and fished the pockets and slapped a wad of bills in Cal's hand. "Happy?"

The money disappeared, as money is wont to do. "I'll say satisfied. Now move!"

They tumbled into the jeep in a haphazard half-military operation that ended with Cal and Kiki up front and Z. squished in the backseat beside a cacophonous agglomeration of musical equipment. A trombone wheezed in her face as the jalopy gurgled to life, the tires screeched and they careened around the culdesac at centrifugal speed. Duct tape on the seat crinkled against her back, the window at her side wasn't a window but a sheet of plastic draped where the window should be.

"What is this stupid car?" said Z.

"This vehicle has been passed down the Bhandari family for half a generation," said Cal. "Treat it with the dignity it deserves."

Z. tried to shuffle the instruments and amplifiers so she could sit better, but they only tumbled atop her. The jeep turned onto the main street and Z. forgot the music crap because she remembered something more important. "Wait wait wait wait WAIT!"

Cal slammed the brakes and they went sixty to zero in two seconds flat. "What."

An amp bounced off Z.'s cranium. "We forgot Max."

"Great catch," said Kiki. "Wouldn't want to leave without the most important guy."

Cars on the street honked and circumnavigated. Cal's hands kneaded the wheel. "Who, pray tell, is Max."

"Her pet lizard," said Kiki. "(Don't tell her it's dead three weeks.)"

"No reptiles allowed."

"He's not a reptile, he's a person, we talked about this remember?"

"Nobody mentioned a Max."

"I did, I know did, I said Max was coming. I paid for him, I gave you double, did you even count?"

Cal retrieved the wad of cash from wherever he stashed it and rifled through the bills.

"Where'd you get this money?"

"Prostitution," said Kiki.

"Drugs!" said Z. "Does it matter?"

The traffic on the street got progressively angrier until finally Cal tsked and whipped the car around the median. "Where's this reptilian live?"

They veered onto Max's street. Before Z. could unearth herself from the instrument graveyard and indicate the correct house, the jeep again screeched to a halt and Kiki's bass guitar clanged on Z.'s upturned face.

"Augh fuck," she said, "Can you make a smooth stop once in your—"

She shut up because a dark figure in a black hoodie stood before them in the middle of the street. The figure toted a tremendous duffel bag and stared them down without a flinch—Weird, because Cal had needed to brake real quick to not turn this loon two-dimensional. While Cal shook his fists and ranted and did your usual Cal ensemble.

"Who's this school shooter looking guy and why's he standing in front of my car." Cal flung open the door, assaulted his seatbelt, staggered into the sunlight.

Kiki picked at a nail and propped her feet on the dashboard. Her omnicolored shoes twinkled in windshield-filtered lightbeams. "Cal dahling, you mustn't assault the homeless, it only encourages them."

While Cal spewed vitriol, the weirdo who happened to be Max hoisted his duffel bag and strolled past him to the back door. The door opened and Max scalped a scion of seat for himself among Z. and the instruments. He perched the duffel bag on his folded legs, but because it was a stupid big duffel bag it also landed on Z. and sealed her into cryonic stasis.

Cal got as close as possible to seizing Max by the collar of his grody hoodie without actually touching anything. His hands continually made a grabbing gesture but drew back as though his fingers were magnetically repulsed.

"Out, out, out. If it's money you want, here's a dollar—buy a sandwich." He dropped the bill on Max's lap.

Max plucked the dollar. His idle hands twisted and folded it, then he perched it on his palm as an origami equine. "Z., this is why I'm hesitant to come..."

It took exertion to speak because the duffel bag was literally the heaviest thing in existence and she could barely wiggle enough to decompress her lungs but she managed to wheeze: "He's not actually homeless Cal, he's Max."

"*This* is your friend? Nope. No, no. No. Out right now."

A weighty chunk of duffel bag settled on Z.'s ribcage and forced her beneath the debris. She floundered an upraised hand for help. The trip was already a disaster and they hadn't even hit the freeway, she awaited Cal's final proclamation to prohibit Max from the car combined with highfalutin ironic insults to showcase his superior vocabulary, intelligence, and wit, plus

asides from Kiki, then they'd hurtle into the mountains with everyone having forgotten the entire purpose of the trip which was to rehabilitate Max from his laconic stupor via the joys of a three-day fantasy convention with all their favorites in attendance and Z.'s life would spiral into despair and destitution shit fuck shit. She had to fight! She forced all her might into shoving the instruments, the duffel bag off her, poised for an epic emergence to confront Dark Lord Cal once and for all, except all her might wasn't enough to even budge. The mire absolved her. Doom compressed her torso.

She waited... But Cal's irrevocable NO never came.

Perhaps a caprice of fortune, perhaps the heap of instruments had also settled on Max and rendered him too immutable—didn't matter. Cal flung up his hands and said: "Fine! We've wasted enough time, we'll only waste more arguing."

The jeep revived, furious. Its sudden acceleration jammed Max's duffel bag into Z.'s torso and bifurcated her cleanly. The air heimliched out her lungs, but despite the gagged gasp in her throat, she grinned because the trip was salvaged, Max beside her, car on the road, Vegas a mere eleven hours near. Crushed against the cushion, Z. gazed out the sunroof at the clouds overhead and imagined the adventures that awaited them. The jeep blazed forward and not a single obstacle stood in their path.

Golden

PART II: CITY OF SAND

Golden

Not a single obstacle except the nine million cars everyone wanted to drive on this particular morning. It took an hour to escape Denver.

"Anyone ever see *Escape from Los Angeles* starring Steve Buscemi," said Kiki.

Nobody had seen that movie starring that actor.

"Hollywood is a machine," said Cal.

Aaaaaand the conversation died. Max took out his phone and tapped the screen at sporadic intervals. After much fidgeting and straining, Z. managed to return to a sitting position, although a sharp strip of duct tape chafed against her back below her tangled shirt. The duffel bag situation prevented Z. from seeing what Max did on his phone.

Traffic went stop and go, stop and go, stop and go. Every time they stopped Cal's infinity musical instruments slammed against her stomach and she exaggerated a hurk noise in the vain hope someone pitied her eternal torment. Nothing worse than traffic. Cars are bad enough, but traffic amps the fuck factor fivefold. Z. swore a pact that if she ever became a wage slave salaryman who commuted to work every day she would disembowel herself.

Every so often Max tapped his phone. She asked, "Are you reading *Homestuck*?"

"I'm not reading anything," said Cal.

"I wasn't TALKING to you doofus." She wriggled against the duffel bag, failed to budge it. "Also can you turn on the air conditioner?"

Cal instead rolled down the front window, but no air came because they weren't moving.

Nobody spoke, nobody did anything, nobody even seemed miffed by their squalor. Did only she suffer? What did they think, what did they feel, how could they be statues?

Claustrophobia seized Z. and she considered bolting out the door through the gridlocked freeway over the barrier into the oblivion below. Sweat trickled down her face, her throat constricted, her lungs seethed, what was she doing here, how had this gone so wrong?

No, she had to focus, nothing was wrong—Max and Kiki, her friends, were here. Things were awkward, uncomfortable, but not insurmountable. The problem was, if she thought about it, if she tried to calm down, the problem was SHE HATED DOING NOTHING, immobility stifled her, if they escaped the city—if they reached an open road—the sensation of eighty mile-per-hour death charge—revivify—disperse clots—loose blood rivers—natural and harmonic procession—to restore equilibrium in Z.'s mindstate.

Through the plastic sheet window, nebulous forms drifted.

The jeep accelerated.

"Finally," said Cal. "Had to be an accident. No other reason for Saturday traffic. Some imbecile speeding."

"They wanted to see Malkwon too," said Kiki.

"We're an hour behind, but I planned for that. Malkwon doesn't start until ten, I allocated plenty of reserve time for missteps."

The stagnant air sprung to life, fed by the jeep's velocity. A blast whipped through the front seat and buffeted Z. in the face. The haze faded, she mustered strength to push the duffel bag away (she failed).

A road sign read: NOW LEAVING GOLDEN, CO. The next moment, civilization around them plummeted off the edge of the world. Two vast mountains rose on either side of the highway like sentinel towers, behind which stood more mountains, behind which stood more mountains, behind which stood more mountains. Someone had sawed off their slopes to accommodate the road that wound between them.

Cal jabbed a button on the radio.

"Pulled the glock and shot, BLAH, his dead ass drop."

Genesee

Genesee

The mountains continued. Mountains upon mountains. More mountains, endless mountains, peaks above peaks. Z. had seen these mountains her entire life, she hated these mountains, so boring. Mountains: lumps of rock and sand.

"Now that we've finally embarked, we'll put the eleven hours ahead of us to good use," said Cal.

A pause as the cognizant passengers contemplated the ominous foreboding of his words.

Well, Z. did at least. Kiki did that thing she does with her nails (look at them). "Cal, just because we're in a vehicle doesn't mean we're not in public."

"What's that mean," said Cal. "Actually I don't care, don't answer. It's important to enter the Malkwon concert with the correct mindset. To glean insight into how he constructs his soundscapes, we'll conduct an analysis of his selected discography, carefully collated in physical form—"

"The point," said Z.

"—for our trip today. While it may seem logical to begin with Malkwon's first studio record, *African Daimyo*, a more representative introduction to his technique comes in the form of his sophomore output, *Unlawful Imprisonment*. Here's the album's opening track, 'Grand Prix'." He lulled his soliloquy long enough to hit another button on the radio. A new song played, it sounded exactly like the previous, a heavy thump-thump-thump.

"Kiki, pay attention to the bass, especially how it keeps rhythm and doesn't randomly tangent every few bars. How it complements Malkwon's flow rather than contradict it. However, I want to pay particular note to the *lyricism*."

"This is the dumbest thing ever in history," said Z.

Kiki's forehead flattened against the window. "But Z. Pay attention to the *lyricism*. Pay attention to the *rawness*. Pay attention to the *flow*."

"You a ditch digger nigga / I pull trigger if I even hear a snicker / Sunsplash lollipop avenger got dengue fever"

Cal rubbed his hands together but quickly returned them to the wheel. "Classic Malkwon— Catch that? Lemme play it again. For starters, the rhyme. Notice how the rhyme begins straight, n-word with digger and trigger, but then incrementally slants. First we get snicker, which is an almost phonetically perfect rhyme, especially how Malkwon's accent renders it. But the next line's where Malkwon flexes his lyrical muscles. Avenger is a total slant rhyme, but then dengue fever is a slant rhyme *of that slant rhyme*. The rhyme scheme has completely

corrupted from its original phonetic pattern and yet the transition was so smooth you wouldn't be liable to notice unless you paid specific attention to the scheme in the first place. Now, that's all fine from a technical standpoint and indicates a rapper capable of breaking the singsong pat rhymes of his mainstream contemporaries. But Malkwon goes a step further—"

"This is the worst. Ever," said Z.

"—and weds the rhyme scheme to the semantic content of the lyrics. Notice how the first two bars tell a standard hoodlum street scene, laced with that powerful Malkwon braggadocio we all know and love. This parallels the standard rhyme scheme. But in the third bar, Malkwon transforms into full-scale stream of consciousness wordplay, conjuring an almost dreamlike scene with his idiosyncratic vocabulary. At the exact same time, the rhyme heavily slants, causing the surreal technical aspects of the bar to correspond to the surreal *meaning* of the bar."

"Nnh," said Z.

"But has the meaning truly become strange, i.e. nonsensical, or has it simply become more abstract? In the previous two lines, Malkwon asserts his willingness to kill anyone who 'snickers' at him, which we can assume to mean anyone who talks negatively about him. Let's break apart the third line with this context in mind."

"No," said Z. "No, no, no no no no no NO!"

"But Z., he hasn't even explained how the allusion to dengue fever is a veiled comment on the third-world conditions that afflict inner-city African-Americans," said Kiki.

The enormity of the phrase "eleven hours" weighed on Z. like a giant duffel bag.

It pushed her back on the panic side of the precipice, her eyes roved in her head, it wouldn't work, something was going to happen. She flitted side to side. Cal's voice enveloped her—breath control he said, assonance he said—her own breath went out of control, something seized her esophagus, she rasped. Help! she didn't say. Drowning! she didn't cry. Max lolled his head and cast an askance glance at her, she flung a hand at him, he turned away. Her head throbbed, her lungs wheezed, Max tapped his phone, something sharp jabbed her gut, shitty rap music UGH, everyone an especial asshole, a whole shit smorgasbord served her, the cannibals forced her to swallow—she died.

Then she sighed in relief when the jeep burst into flames.

Idaho Springs

Idaho Springs

So the jeep didn't burst into flames. Sue her. But with no warning a big blap of white smoke erupted from the hood, something metal squealed high-pitched enough to drown Malkwon, and the car veered under the guiding hand of Cal's fingerless gloves. Nobody screamed except Z.

They cut across five lanes of interstate highway awash in the honks of a thousand horns as near-calamity after near-calamity rocketed into their whirling dervish sphere. They left the smooth rumble of asphalt and entered the rough rumble of gravel, the jeep grinded to halt with surprising efficiency and a (disappointing) lack of explosions and/or vehicular manslaughter. Smoke filled the cabin as doors on both sides opened and people staggered out coughing. Z. mustered that superhuman strength you hear people sometimes muster when a car drops on their progeny, and even then she couldn't move the duffel bag. But the door on her side opened and Kiki shoved the bag off her and dragged her out of the jeep.

She scrambled away nursing vain hopes of an awesome inferno but by the time she and Kiki reached Cal at a safe distance for survey the smoke had thinned and no chance of disaster remained. Rats!

Max, who had stayed in the car, eventually slid his phone into his pocket and meandered after them. "You know," he said, "You can take buses cross-country."

Cal yanked his sunglasses off his face and folded them into a pocket. He brushed imaginary soot from his shoulders and crossed his arms for a veneer of authority. "Ridiculous, simply ridiculous."

"I know right," said Kiki. "Nobody even died."

Cal hazarded a step toward the car, it belched another plume of smoke. The fizzling and squealing died enough for Malkwon's voice to become audible.

"I bet your stupid music made the engine kersplat," riposted Z. But her interest in the conversation waned instantaneously and she instead appraised her surroundings. Omnipresent mountains towered over them. They had stopped in a sliver cut into the side of one, its slope buttressed by stone slabs. A row of trees formed a shady copse near the shoulder's edge, a pond or creek twinkled between the lower branches. A handful of lonely houses stood on stilts above and down the sidewinder highway lay a sprinkled collection of structures somebody might bother to call a town.

Cal finished a longwinded rant about how music doesn't cause an engine to overheat and probably decided he won the argument. He harrumphed his way to the jeep and prodded the hood.

"Drop kick the pop fly," said Malkwon, "Hop skip and drive by."

Cars zipped past. Kiki slipped her phone out of somewhere and tapped it, while Max rolled his head on his shoulders and caused his bones to crack. Which left Z. to chew the scenery and wonder what to do with her hands (into pockets they went). She tapped a foot, she watched Cal figure out how to open the hood.

She had to use the bathroom. She noticed zero restrooms in the vicinity but the copse at the end of the shoulder had promise.

"I'll be right back."

Kiki kept her eyes on her phone. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"I'm gonna use the bathroom it'll be five seconds, no way Cal fixes his stupid engine before then."

"Z., you ever see *Friday the Thirteenth* starring Kevin Bacon. Do you fail to recognize the perfect slasher horror setup."

"Kevin... Bacon." Sometimes Z. thought Kiki made up these names.

"I'd even deign to call it textbook. Four kids on a trip into the wilderness... unexpected breakdown... one wanders off to take a leak... The killer strikes—Machete to cranium." She karate chopped her phone for emphasis.

The small cluster of trees did not appear to house any masked murderers. "I'll be fine."

"Normally the first victim is the unpleasant ethnic guy, in our case Cal, so maybe you have a chance. Of course, other than Max we all got something, plus I wouldn't stake my life on Hollywood racism. Sometimes they make the black guy die second-to-last to prove a point."

As usual, Z. had no clue what the hell Kiki was talking about, so she ignored her and went to the trees and did her business and nobody killed her. When she returned, Cal started shouting at the engine. He kicked a tire and rubbed his imaginary beard.

"Drag that bitch into the kitchen," said Malkwon. "Cut her with a knife."

Things got boring immediately. But Z. remembered her arms were no longer pinned by a duffel bag, she could retrieve her backpack and her gameboy. What incredible foresight to pack her best games! *Faerie Endless Gaidan II: The Shimmering Forest* oughtta hit the spot. Shirou Katsumata's finest work from a purely technical standpoint and the famed Japanese game developer had quite the library to compete against. Few of the plot holes that marred other installments, no agonizing tutorial, no wonky difficulty curve, plus it thrust her favorite character Jolly into the limelight. Perfect to murder eleven-plus hours.

Before she flipped the switch Max said:

"Yeah, this doesn't seem like it's going to work..."

The excitement Z. had mustered for her seventeenth playthrough crumpled. She knew that pathetic tone—defeatist, mopey, and abominable, and worse yet she knew how fast its

contagions spread.

"No, no Max." She rushed to his side, grabbed his wrists, leaned close. "It's fine, totally fine, Cal will fix it, I bet the engine got too hot, it'll cool down."

Max's eyes seemed so sorrowful. For a moment they overwhelmed her, enough for him to interject: "It's not the car, Z. It's this whole..." His arms spread as if to indicate something, but what he indicated Z. had no clue. "I don't know. It just won't work."

What did *that* mean? The generality of his language infuriated and distressed her, she scampered beside him as he moved toward the back of the jeep. "It's Cal, right? Nobody likes Cal, it's fine, only eleven hours, then we don't have to deal with him, then we hang out together and it's great."

He wrenched his duffel bag from the heap of instruments, some spilled out the jeep and onto the gravel. "It's... more than that, Z."

"Tell me, please tell me, whatever it is I promise it'll be fine. Once we reach Vegas—We'll see Hussie, Max! Isn't that awesome? It'll be great, I swear."

His bag snagged on something. He tugged and fought against it. All the while his face retained that sad expression, or maybe not so sad as... tired. His features drooped, his eyes blinked more than normal. He kept expelling formative yawns, or maybe it was the exertion of trying to free his bag. Z. wanted to help him, wanted to do something for him, but if he refused to tell her the problem what could she do?

"Did you read *Homestuck*, Z.?"

She bit her lip. "I started."

Max nodded. With a final twist he extricated his bag and heaved it onto his shoulder. "I'll hitchhike the rest of the way."

"What?! Max, that's crazy, it's dangerous, Max please!" As he walked toward the road, she sank to her knees and threw her arms around his legs. "Tell me the problem, I'll fix it. If you leave, everything falls apart."

"Let him go," called Kiki from afar. "He's not worth it."

The past two weeks, only the knowledge of the impending trip had sustained her through the Maxless days, where she sat alone at lunch and watched the poor kids play hackeysack or calculator games at the dead kids memorial, while Kiki ditched her for Cal. A month, a year, a lifetime by herself? Nobody to talk to, nobody to share with, nobody to reflect on? She had nobody else, Max—Kiki—

"Please," said Max, "Get off me."

Z. tightened her grip. She dug her knees into the ground, sand sprung up around her. With two gliding motions Max stepped out of her grip, his long legs unexpectedly lithe and slippery. Without his support she flopped face first in the dirt.

She spat soot and scrambled on four limbs after him. Before she got far her shirt collar snagged on something, she jerked back, it was Kiki.

"Clingy is a bad look for a modern woman, Z. Haven't you heard. Feminine independence."

"Get off me get off me get off!" She windmilled her arms, contorted her body, and wriggled free. As soon as she began to crawl, Kiki's hand seized her kicking ankle, so she kicked it again and caught Kiki in the thigh or knee or something and Kiki loosed a restrained wince but did not let go. Z. rolled in the dirt and did everything she could to break.

"I won't let Max leave, I won't let him hitchhike, that's dangerous, don't you even *care*!" Of course not, Kiki cared about nothing but whether she looked cool, no room for Max or even Z. in that existence. Had to hang out with an upperclassman at lunch...! Ditch her...! Idiot, idiot, idiot! She kicked at Kiki's hand, kicked at the perfect purple nails and hoped to break them, her shirt tightened around her body, her legs tangled together, she started to suffocate, she reached for her neck but nothing was there, the dust she stirred forced horrid hacks from her throat.

At last Kiki released her. Z. took off in a direction, unraveled herself, and lurched upright. Her sense of direction rolled in her head, she placed her hands against the jeep to reorient herself. A strange silence settled upon them, no cars zipped along the road, no Malkwon babbled on the stereo. The sand hung suspended; settled. Her body tingled, she sneezed. She sensed blood dribble down her nostril, she wiped and on her hand was only dust. She sneezed again.

A new voice spoke:

"Girls girls girls no need for anger no need to kick each other to pieces ha ha ha ha ha."

Z. turned.

Before them stood a man, less man than statue, a figure of utter gold from his gold hair to his gold smile to his gold suit. The light that snuck over the mountaintops struck his radiant being and sparkled like a paranormal romance vampire. Paranormal romance was where this—thing—belonged, he shimmered with unreality, could have been a mirage if not for his undeniable voice and the red sports car parked on the shoulder behind him (or a regular car designed to look like a sports car, Z. knew nothing about cars).

"Who the hell are you mister," said Z.

The golden man straightened his golden tie and broadened his irrepressible smile. The only part not gold were the lenses of his sunglasses, two black voids upon his eyes.

"Excuse me how rude to make my presence known without proper introduction I didn't mean to sneak up on you but I thought if I didn't say anything you two would hurt yourselves I hope I'm mistaken but yes my name I am."

One smooth gesture flicked a card out the cuff of his blazer and a second launched the card into the ground at Z.'s feet. One corner stuck in the soil and the rest fluttered in the breeze. Z.

watched the man carefully while she bent down and retrieved the card.

MAXIMILLION ACKERMAN

Agent

Boston, Massachusetts

Plus a phone number she didn't register beyond the fact it was a phone number.

"FBI agent?" said Z.

"Chemical agent," said Kiki.

"Girls I hate to disappoint but my true profession lacks such glamor and intrigue I am a mere literary agent I serve as a helpful middleman between authors and publishers representing my clients to the best of my meager ability ha ha ha ha ha." He didn't laugh so much as say the word "ha" five times.

Z. and Kiki exchanged a glance.

From the front of the jeep, Cal emerged. "Who's this guy."

"Maximillion Ackerman, world-famous literary agent," said Kiki. Maximillion Ackerman gave a respectful bow.

"Get lost, guy," said Cal with a note of finality before he returned to the engine.

No change in Maximillion's smile. "My apologies I happened to notice your vehicle on the side of the road motor troubles I do presume and such nice kids too I thought I ought to lend a hand so to speak."

"How quaint," said Kiki.

"Kids always struggle when they try to do anything the world conspires against them it's unfair in my opinion so anything I can do to ease the pain." All the while his stupid grin remained like he knew how bonkers he sounded but kept at it for sheer obnoxiousness.

"Firstly," said Cal, "I am a legal adult, not a 'kid'. Secondly, I asked—"

"Mister?" Max manifested from beyond the jeep. "Mister, which way are you headed?"

"As you kids surely know this road is a rather desolate winding journey through peaks and valleys it goes only one direction of note and that is that great American direction of west to Grand Junction to Salt Lake City and to my personal destination Las Vegas."

That confirmed it, he was an alien, he came to abduct them, he could read their thoughts. He continued:

"In fact I suspect you kids have the same destination in mind I bet you wonder how I know it's simple really as I sped down the road I happened to notice the design on the hooded sweatshirt your friend with the duffel bag is wearing and I know what that design means ha ha ha ha ha."

Z. checked Max's sweatshirt, which she ignored before. Plain black, a nondescript white spiral in the center. Hnngh? It looked like nothing, one tier above utter featurelessness. But Maximillion's words worked upon Max like an incantation. A change spread over the sullen features, the sunken eyes. The skin brightened, rejected the light that previously pierced it. He stepped forward.

"Take me with you, mister. Please."

"Max what the hell?!" said Z.

Maximillion smiled. "A generous offer I am a solitary traveler whose journey spans many miles and company is a sparse facet of my existence so your request is a quite friendly gesture and I appreciate it greatly but I wonder wouldn't your friends who probably love you very much wouldn't they prefer if you stayed with them they would enjoy your company far more than I would."

"Take him," said Kiki, traitorously.

"Take him," Cal added.

"I'd offer to take you all because my wonderful vehicle technically seats five but I've reserved one seat for my golf clubs which are very important I wouldn't want them for instance sustaining damage if they were allowed to slide unattended in the trunk—"

"Please mister." Max slouched toward the red sports car.

Could these proceedings possibly exist? Could she be dreaming a dream that wasn't her dumb unicorn dream from *Blade Runner*? The image of Max and his duffel bag, it didn't register, even as Max raised a hand toward the grinning man, thin gangly fingers outstretched, and Maximillion's soulless sunglass eyes regarded the hand and grinned.

Snap went a switch and she blitzed into action, sought the first bludgeoning object in view and it was Kiki's bass guitar perched on the jeep's backseat. She seized it by the neck and hoisted it overhead and charged Maximillion, weaving past Max while she shouted:

"YOU. CAN'T. TAKE. HIM!"

Swoosh went the bass through the air through the glittering mirage Maximillion who took one step back and evaded it entirely with no change to his posture or demeanor and one swipe was all she got before Kiki's arms clenched around her saying not her guitar not her guitar and no matter what Z. did she couldn't fight Kiki's grip as they wrangled in the sand that rose in a plume. They revolved in an awkward dance that took them straight into Max and bowled him over and they fell in a giant heap. Kiki wrenched the bass from Z.'s hands

and hoisted it overhead free of the writhing mass of limbs. Maximillion's gold sheen reflected off its lacquered surface.

"See this is what I meant the worst thing is to shatter friendships although I appreciate your offer young man I'm afraid I must decline very sad so sad but do not worry I'm certain we'll meet again as that westward convention beckons to us all."

The word came so close to the abrupt full stop Z. had to reflect a moment and confirm to herself he indeed said "convention". It plunged her into bafflement, she could believe Las Vegas, this road only went one way, but for this random man who stopped for them on the side of the road to be heading for the exact same convention—there could only be one—and for him to stop because of Max's sweater? Alien, had to be—or—

"You're Andrew Hussie." The business card remained crumpled in one of her hands, she reread it. "Massachusetts—Andrew Hussie is from Massachusetts—it has to be you!"

Max closed his eyes. "No, Z."

"I think it's actually Maximillion Ackerman," said Kiki. She disentangled from Z. and clutched her bass guitar to her chest.

"Correct the name is Maximillion Ackerman thank you young lady for remembering sometimes nobody remembers and they don't call me the correct name anyway you flatter me truly but I am not Andrew Hussie nor do I represent him not that my particular talents in the literary world would do much for his internecine pursuits of medium."

"But you know him," said Z. "You know him, you know him!"

"All know Hussie nowadays." Maximillion backed toward his car without his legs apparently moving, he simply receded into the background, or had always been there, a trick of depth perception. "Now I should leave I apologize for causing such distress I didn't mean to intrude but I wouldn't well I mean I don't think you should think poorly of me I am nothing to think poorly of I mean if you want I'll make it up to you I'll fix your car yes that's what I'll do I'll fix your car yes."

"You're not touching anything, you guy," said Cal.

It didn't matter anyway because despite Max mumbling another sad plea Maximillion had already materialized into his sports car, only a faint glow behind the all-encompassing tint of his windows, which by the way tinting your front windshield is totally illegal (at least that's what Z.'s stepdad said), but Maximillion paid no heed to esoteric traffic violations as he reversed onto the highway, lulled a split second on the road, and blasted down the winding trail past the town and out of sight around the next mountain.

Nobody spoke. Max's outstretched arm fell and his face degenerated.

Cal's jeep rumbled to life.

Downieville-Lawson-Dumont

Downieville-Lawson-Dumont

"What a fruitcake," said Z.

"Two hours behind schedule," said Cal.

Georgetown

Georgetown

Into the briar patch they tumbled. Cal rolled up the windows and turned off the air as though any sliver of coolness in the cabin would divert it from the engine. He moderated his speed on upward inclines but took downslopes even more recklessly to compensate. The duffel bag now filled the space where feet go, so Z. had to fold her legs under her chin to fit, but at least her purgation beneath its weight had ended.

Misery now, but in Las Vegas—everything would be great. FanCon would have something for them all, even Kiki, it wasn't only Hussie and Shirou Katsumata. Writers, directors, animators, developers—FanCon! A celebration of fantasy. Fantasy entwined them, her and Max and Kiki. Six-year-olds new to school in shirts and skirts and no mother to sing them to sleep, a single question formed a friendship: Do you like *Faerie Endless*?

Speaking of which. No longer deprived limb function or distracted by inanities, she whipped out the Gameboy. Flip the switch, bask in the jingle—ignore reproach from Cal—delete previous file, start new game, skip intro cutscene—

"I said turn off the sound," said Cal. "It clashes with Malkwon."

"Maybe turn off Malkwon."

"Who owns this car?"

"Yeah but nobody wants to hear your stupid rap."

"How do you know what anyone other than you wants," said Cal.

Z. glanced at each of her friends in turn, registered their dull faces, and turned off the sound.

Silver Plume

Silver Plume

Faerie Endless Gaidan II: The Shimmering Forest opens in unusual fashion: the eponymous woodland is already under siege from the forces of Calofisteri, queen of the Unseelie court (usually you suffer an extended tutorial before anything good happens). As Faerieland falls, the Seelie queen Melusine sends the young fae paladin Rel on a quest to retrieve the five sacred seeds enshrined throughout the forest. The sacred seeds nourish the lifeblood of the trees, which in turn nourish the faeries and the other woodland creatures—basically, if Calofisteri gets hold of them, real bad shit happens.

Rel embarks for the first seed temple near the Great River, alongside her best friend Lu and her perennial frenemy/rival/chief romantic prospect (at least according to the fandom) Jolly. One grueling dungeon crawl later, the trio reach the inner sanctum, where they fight the everlasting protector of the sacred seed: Sylph! Newbies usually struggle with Sylph and her Silence+++ spell that makes Jolly incapable of casting Firebrand, but if you open with Lu's Arcane Barrier it's prestochango easypeaze. Of course, it turns out Calofisteri has been waiting for you to dispatch Sylph the whole time so she could steal the sacred seed for herself. (The game never explains why Calofisteri, who is like fifty levels higher than Sylph, needs Rel and friends to finish her.) Calofisteri then disposes of our intrepid heroes by teleporting them to the Hell dimension.

In Hell, hope seems lost. Jolly and Rel get into a big fight and Jolly flies off in a huff. Lu tries to reassure Rel that things will be okay, but Arch Hellgod Beelzebub arrives and devours Lu in a single gulp. Rel, who has no chance against Beelzebub, flees. Next comes the hardest segment in the whole game. Your party consists only of Rel as you wander through the bowels of Hell, beset by dangerous Succubus and Heretic enemies. It's worse if you don't know what you're doing, but Z. had memorized the exact route to find Jolly—

"Anyone ever see *Alive*, starring Ethan Hawke." Kiki spoke from an ethereal outer plane, perhaps the Hell dimension, her words divorced and incomprehensible.

Jolly rejoins the party, her typical bitchiness abated once she learns Lu's fate at the grubby claws of Beelzebub. Jolly's NegaFlame Aegis+ absorbs most hellspawn attacks, so random encounters thereafter are no problemo. After swiping the swaggiest loot in lower-tier Hell, Rel and Jolly confront Beelzebub upon his throne of skulls. Quality repartee ensues as Beelzebub taunts the duo about Lu's delectable taste, then the battle begins. Far more complicated than the Sylph fight—

The lights went out. Z. looked up (her Gameboy's backlight broken since her brother spiked it into the floor) and wondered who put out the sun. Only the jeep's headlights and Max's cellphone illuminated the void.

"When'd it get night?"

"Tunnel, idiot," said Cal.

"Tunnel." She saved the game on muscle memory, leaned over Max, and pressed her face to the window only to remember it was a plastic sheet so even if she could see she couldn't see. "Underground? Under a MOUNTAIN?"

"Yes, Z.," said Max.

"We're returning to the mothership," said Kiki. "Sorry Z., but we're aliens. Brace for anal probing."

They had tunnels that went under whole mountains? Ginormous ones too! She leaned between the front seats in case getting closer to the window would extend her vision, but it didn't and Cal placed a fingerless glove-palm to her forehead and pushed her back. She turned and tried to look behind them and surprisingly two round lights greeted her. They formed a cone on the road.

The tunnel disappeared around them and the full bask of daylight blotted her sight. She blinked and her vision adjusted as the car behind them burst out the tunnel too, and it was a red car.

A red *sports* car.

"Oh," she said. "Oh *fuck*."

"Don't worry," said Kiki, "We won't consume your brains until after the vivisection—Eh, what's that?"

Z. sank in her seat until only her eyes peeked over the headrest. It had to be—how many red sports cars were trekking westbound from Denver?

"What," said Cal.

"Maximillion." Z. forgot his last name. After nobody panicked, she added: "He's behind us."

"So?"

"So?!" So! "He left *before* us, he should be *ahead* of us, why is he following us now?!"

"Exclamation marks, Z." Max twisted a finger in his ear.

"Let me think," said Cal. "Could it be that he stopped for gasoline or food at any of the innumerable mountain towns we've passed thus far? Lunacy. More likely he's a psychotic serial killer."

"You're right," said Kiki. "Ever see *The Hitcher* starring Sean Bean."

"Sean Bean is not a real person you stupid IDIOT!" said Z. "Don't act like you don't think it's weird, Kiki. Because it's weird!"

"You're being shrill, Z." Max tapped his phone. "I think he's a—"

"Look, Cal. There's an easy way to test your theory. Let's pull over a second, let Maximillion pass, and get back on the road."

"We're already late."

"Pulling over five seconds won't change whether we see Malkwon's stupid concert!"

"I refuse to feed into your stoner paranoia."

Z. slammed her head against the amp perched beside her and groaned, she looked to Max as if to say *can you believe this bozo*, but Max looked back like he couldn't believe *her*.

"Kiki, back me up here," said Z.

"Meh."

Unbelievable, simply unbelievable, who were these people, where did they come from, what realm did they inhabit to not find it freaky that Maximillion "Creepiest Guy Award" Forgotten Last Name (checked his card—Ackerman) tailed them in his bright red douchemobile, especially when Z. knew Kiki did find it creepy even though she concealed it with a clay mask of apathy because when she first saw the car she used a real question mark a telltale lifting of inflection to denote INTEREST—or—or CONCERN—who cares what word—Kiki cared and to act like she didn't—?! And Max! Wanted to go with him! With Maximillion! Asked for him to take him. Because of a sweatshirt?! Because of a connection with Hussie? The disdain in his stare envenomed her. An illness tumbled in her gut. Exclamation marks, Z. You're being shrill, Z. Did other people exist? Or were they mere automatons programmed to confound her, the sole real human?

"Just..." She gulped for air. "Pull over, Cal. Five seconds tops."

"It might not even be the same car."

"Five seconds... Five."

Cal's hands wrung the steering wheel, a loud breath expelled in a gradual hiss. His fist slammed the knob on the radio that had become such a persistent drone that the sudden absence jolted her.

He pulled onto the side of the road. Maximillion zoomed past. He zipped around a corner and disappeared. "Wow," said Cal.

"Amazing," said Kiki.

They continued.

Silverthorne

Silverthorne

Spiteful, Z. went silent. But Z.'s stomach reminded her she never ate breakfast. "What snacks we got?"

"The human body can survive thirty days without food," said Cal.

"Wow Cal, we don't live in a third-world country where we have to wait for wheat to fall from planes, where are the snacks?"

"We have no snacks."

"Kiki where are the snacks?"

Kiki's head lolled back and to the side until her eye peeked over her forehead. "I already asked about *Alive* starring Ethan Hawke, did I not."

"What?"

"In harsh alpine winters, we have little recourse but to cannibalize our dead." Kiki blew back her purple bang, it floated in the air before settling onto her face. "Start with Max."

"If you must put something in your mouth," said Cal, "Water is under the seat."

Water beat nothing so Z. shoved aside the instruments and squeezed past the duffel bag and extracted a single half-drunk bottle. Z. tried to decide she wasn't thirsty, but failed. The water tasted dry.

Frisco

Frisco

Malkwon returned. "Unreal ghetto sublimity / Gentrify homes with gentle divinity."

Z. considered *Faerie Endless* but Beelzebub was always a tiresome boss, meanwhile the same craggy landscape rolled along every non-plastic window, mountains and valleys and trees, occasional sandspeck villages, nothing of note. No cars on the road.

She slanted her eyes to see what Max did on his phone. She expected *Homestuck*, but instead saw a blog from a popular social media site. The text was too small to read without shoving her face against the screen like he did, but he scrolled past occasional photographs. They showed a group of dudes inside a... chain Italian restaurant? They posed with breadsticks clasped like swords, they poured wine into glasses. It had nothing to do with anything.

He stopped scrolling at a certain picture. It had two people in the frame, plus the hand of a third extended from the upper right corner. At first, neither of the men meant anything to her. One had a beard and tattoos on his arm as he flashed a thumbs-up to the camera. The other, who held a wine bottle by the neck and swooned beneath the grasp of his fellow, grinned with a full blush. The disembodied hand reached with hooked fingers for the grinning man's face, suspended in perpetuity with the nails bared before a squinted eye. Max lingered on this image, Z. lingered too.

She recognized the second man, the drunken one. Not from the face, nor the clothes—those were different—but the grin, so wide and bright: Maximillion.

"Who wrote this blog?" said Z. with sudden urgency.

"I tried to tell you... but you didn't listen. Let me finish it first, please."

He never tried to tell her anything. "How did you find it Max, how?"

"A moment, please..." He pressed the phone closer to his face, she could no longer see, she waited several more moments than her patience allowed, yet he said nothing. How did he—Maximillion? Where did he emerge from, how did Max find him in a greasy Italian restaurant—whose hand reached for his eyes? She wondered if Maximillion removed his sunglasses what lurked beneath. A flitsome, frantic thought inspired her: eyeless Maximillion...!

No, no, she was nutty, needed to think more normal. What if she stole Max's phone? And sat on it, what would he do? Wrestle her? Try to get it back? Act, emote, express. Even to hear him say, "Give me back my phone," she considered it.

His hand seized her wrist before she even got close. "Please," he said, "Don't touch my things."

Vail

Vail

Nothing to do but think.

Eagle

Eagle

When did they get so distant? Did she forget an incident, something she did wrong? Elementary school, middle school, high school—how could so many years pass and one moment be the deciding factor? Whatever Z. did, was it so bad to erase everything else, the playgrounds and recesses and Friday night movies and jokes and games and secrets and experiences?

Kiki replaced her with Cal, Max replaced her with Hussie.

No, wrong, how could she think—? Kiki made fun of Cal all the time, and Hussie was an unreal person, she had zero faith in Hussie. A cryptic entity in a twisted tower on the coast of Massachusetts. His minion Maximillion, who once wore normal clothes—what was the connection?

She fished out the business card, turned it over. Boston, Massachusetts. All she knew about Boston was a tea party.

Gypsum

Gypsum

The jeep jolted over a bump and Z. snapped out of her trance. The terrain around them changed, no more trees, nothing but brown shrubs and withered roots. Denuded hills hunchbacked across the skyline like ugly dolphins. At least it signified palpable progress, a confirmation they had not travelled a Mobius groundhog loop. Was this Nevada? The names of states formed vague concepts, polygons on a map, she could not append meaning.

The clock on the dashboard blinked 00:00.

She rifled through her backpack for her phone, newly returned by her stepdad, but she didn't have it. She forgot it in her rush out the door.

"What time is it?"

"Late," said Cal. "We're slower than anticipated."

"Take the corners a tad faster," said Kiki. "Failure only means we tumble into the abyss."

"I know my driving capabilities. It's not a question of that. The problem's the engine, it already overheated once, if you hit these roads too hard it'll do it again. Trust me, I'm a licensed driver."

"Alas, poor Malkwon." Kiki clicked her heels, which were propped on the dashboard. "I would have known him, if only our fearless leader had been more fearless."

"I know what I'm doing." Cal worked the gearshift like he wanted to snap it off. "I planned for these contingencies."

"I meant 'know' in the Biblical sense. I hear the groupie lifestyle pays dividends."

"I can throw you out. I can stop the jeep this second."

"You seem tense, Cal."

And back and forth.

Another bump, something metal clanged beneath. Z. turned to see if an exhaust pipe or brake doodad dislodged, leaving them to careen to their untimely demise, but saw something way worse: Maximillion.

"Guys," she said. Cal and Kiki continued their argument. "Guys, guys, guys guys GUYS—"

Cal slapped a hand on the steering wheel. "What."

"Our new friend's back," said Kiki. "Maybe he wants to invite us to golf. I can shoot an albatross."

"Call the cops or something!" said Z.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a second." Cal held up a hand, fingers outstretched. "Call the cops? The *cops*. Kiki, who is this goon? Who is she, really?"

"I don't even know what the Z stands for," said Kiki.

"Why can't we call the cops?" said Z. "You call the cops when a creepy freak is following you, that's standard cop protocol."

"Think for five seconds. Five seconds is all I ask. You expect *cops* will believe *us*, teenagers—three quarters of whom display ambiguous ethnic traits—or Wonder Bread Winning Smile in the Car of Costing Much Money? We'll say, officer, this guy's following us. He'll say, sorry officer, just a coincidence. He'll say he knew our car broke down earlier so he wanted to stay close in case it happened again. A good Samaritan! These mountain roads are dangerous, et cetera, I bet he can prove he's going somewhere on business while we can't prove anything, he spins the story a thousand ways and they believe any of them before they believe one of ours. Then they ask for my license and registration, and we're in real trouble."

"Why would that be trouble?" said Z. "Why would it be trouble if they asked for your license?"

Cal hissed, like what a dumb question, stupid dumb Z. why ask such a dumb question.

"You're driving illegally?!"

"Malkwon taught his star pupil Khalid 'Lil Cal' Bhandari well," said Kiki. "Fuck the police and that jazz."

"Simple history," said Cal. "You know what white cops do to nonwhite motorists? Ever hear of Rodney King?"

No Name

No Name

Z. had never heard of Rodney King, her dread mounted. "This conversation is the worst, confirmed by science, worse than Hitler in fact—"

Glenwood Springs

Glenwood Springs

"Nobody's talking about Hitler," said Max. "You're hysteric."

Cal took off his sunglasses and chewed one of the ear-hook-dealybobs. "We have no reason to think this guy is dangerous. He's a literary agent from Massachusetts in a memorable red vehicle. Anyone who sees him even in passing can identify him."

"Personally, I'm eager for my inevitable rape and murder by the gilded man," said Kiki. "Ever see, hm, *Goldeneye* starring Sean Bean?"

"Kiki that's *not a real name!*"

"Stop screaming," said Cal. "Stop screaming in my car, I am trying to focus on the road. Look, Coulter: Calm down. Even if this Maximillion was some psychopath, there are four of us."

"He's not dangerous," said Max. "He's a—"

"Could have a gun!" said Z.

"A machete," said Kiki. "Ever see—"

"I never saw it," said Z., "I never saw anything."

"Even with a gun, that's not how it works." Max closed his eyes and bowed his head. He pressed his fingertips together and spread his fingers apart to lace them in interlocking patterns. They tangled and untangled and the display mesmerized her. "Killers don't go after groups... that's only a movie thing. They go after women when they're alone. Think logically for half a second, Z., please. If you thought before you spoke... perhaps you would excel more in school."

"Exactly," said Cal. "Who's this guy again? He's not half bad."

Cal and Max united against her—of course! Z.'s always wrong. Isn't that right, class? Let's all laugh at Z. Stupid, stupid Z. She can't even understand *Homestuck*, what a total dunce! She's scared of golden men, does she even think *logically*?

"Oh yeah," Cal snapped his fingers, "Remember he gave us his business card. Why would a murderer leave his name and contact info at the scene of the crime?"

"A fake name," said Z.

"So you're telling me this guy printed professional-quality business cards with a fake name, and for what purpose? If we're going with the slasher villain premise here, he could've saved himself the trouble by, you know, not giving us a business card at all."

"If he's a psycho killer, why's anything he do got to make sense?"

"Boo," said Kiki. "That's cheating. You can't have a villain do whatever suits the story no matter how nonsensical because crazy is the motivation, that's the laziest writing."

"Okay okay," said Z. "Don't serial killers have their, like, quirks? Like the zodiac killer, or uh, some other killer. You know, some weird thing they do as a calling card. Except this one's a literal calling card."

"The calling card killer." Kiki tongued the name in her mouth. "Terrifying. Two thumbs up."

"Stupid," said Cal. "If you're so paranoid, get his license plate, so you can write it in your own blood and leave the cops a clue."

Z. immediately turned to read the license plate.

Chacra

Chacra

Massachusetts. The Spirit of America. PEGASUS.

New Castle

New Castle

"PEGASUS," said Z. "It's PEGASUS."

Her dream. Her stupid *Blade Runner* dream. Except—the dream had a unicorn. Unicorn and pegasus were two totally different mythological horses?

"Don't get it confused with CENTAUR, or KELPIE," said Kiki.

"Kelpie?" said Z.

Kiki hesitated a rare moment. "You know. That one mythical horse. In Ireland or something."

Z.'s theory became a hardened tumor in her gut. Maximillion and PEGASUS and her dream with the unicorn, Max's sweater, Hussie. She clutched her skull and kneaded the skin of her forehead. Her stomach churned, she squirmed in her seat.

"Kiki give me your phone," said Z.

"To call the police?" said Cal. "Ridiculous, utterly ridiculous."

"He can't freaking stop you, give me the phone and I'll do it."

Kiki was already using her phone, tip-tapping with her fingernails. Did they even get service in these mountains?

"One sec," said Kiki.

One sec meant yes, this was progress, the heaviness lifted a little—across the faded plastic sheet window whizzed a phantasmic crimson splotch.

"He's next to us, *he's next to us!*"

"I *know*." Cal's eyes flitted in the rearview mirror. "Don't tell me things I already know."

"Max, who is this guy." Z. grabbed Max's shoulders and shook him. "Do you know him, who is he?"

Max wobbled back and forth, his head bobbed on his neck. "Oh... You finally want to know. From how you interrupted me when I tried to tell you... I thought you preferred to linger in your delusions." His blank eyes sliced through her, Max, Maximillion, a million Maxes, maximum Max, like if Max tumbled into a lake and a lady emerged and offered a gold Max—is this your Max? No, where's my Max, who is this blank-eyed Max who hates me?

"Tell me, tell me, tell me!"

"If I do, will you listen?"

"Yes yes yes yes yes."

"Then please, stop shaking me..."

She let him go and squirmed her hands against her thighs. Max straightened his hoodie around the neck and stifled a cough.

"He's... a friend of Mr. Hussie's."

She already knew that! Well, maybe it hadn't been certain before, but it made enough sense to not be revelatory. "Why's he—"

"What in the," said Cal as Maximillion pulled in front of them. His car began to revolve.

Silt

Silt

Revolved—yes, revolved. Z. seized the space between the front seats and leaned in tortured agony as Maximillion's vehicle span. Its tires did not appear to be rooted to the ground, they glided as though the world were liquid. "He's spinning out!" she said. Cal's elbow jabbed her in the nose as he seized the emergency brake. But Maximillion lost no momentum, lost no control—the car span as though it had been designed to do exactly that, spin, and as they whipped around a turn on the undulating alpine road its front began to face them.

"This guy, this freaking guy," said Cal, his hand sliding up and down the length of the brake, clasp and unclasp at random intervals. "This guy, this freaking guy, this *guy*, this freaking—"

The lacquered black windshield grinned at them. The bend in the road straightened. The mountains parted into a great marble valley at the end of which blazed the semicircle setting sun a beet and vicious scarlet. A golden aura enveloped them, swallowed them, choked them, it gleamed behind Maximillion's backward car like a Renaissance halo. Maximillion maintained all momentum. He was driving backward. His car tore down the mountainside in reverse. He was not a human being. He was not a human being. HE WAS NOT A HUMAN BEING.

"He's not a human being," said Z. Her eyes went blind in the sunlight, it purged her, disintegrated her to ash. The light effused Max's translucent skin, she saw through him like a ghost. They would die, they would all die—she lunged and wrapped her arms around him, to protect him, to hold him, something, he wrangled, instruments collapsed atop them.

"What are you doing...!" he said. "Please..." They swayed in the blankness.

The jeep screeched to a halt. Z. flopped forward, Max slid out her grasp. She pulled herself up to see why they stopped, what happened, and on the road before them sat, placid and immobile, Maximillion's car. The sunset drooped. Shadows sliced by the peaks of mountains sprawled long across the valley.

Maximillion's headlights turned on and glared into their faces.

"Go," Z. whispered to Cal. "Go, go... go..."

Cal did not go.

Rifle

Rifle

"GO YOU STUPID MORON!" Z. said. "This is where he murders us, this is where we DIE...!"

"Not on the open road, not on a major interstate," said Cal. But no cars passed them. The road and the mountains embodied a disastrous stillness. Malkwon rapped:

"Shoot the head fill with lead kill em dead. Niggas come to Staten Island while I'm wilding they ain't smiling. We do in daylight don't wait for night ain't it right?"

"The engine didn't overheat right? Let's go, we can go right?" said Z.

Instead Cal leaned over Kiki and opened the glovebox. A compressed stack of forms and paperwork sproinged out, loose sheets swirled in the vortex that circulated between the rolled-down front windows. When Cal drew away, he held a red rectangle, a handle with nothing attached, until he clicked a switch and a triangular strip of metal emerged out the top.

"An Arab with a box cutter," said Kiki. "You must not fly much."

Cal's eyes drilled into Kiki's impassive face. "I'm not," he said, "An Arab."

"CAL WHAT ARE YOU—"

The ground upended from under Z., her legs flopped and the pillar of instruments toppled over her. When she unearthed herself, the door had opened and Max fought to free his duffel bag from around her ankle, where the strap had snagged. One furious tug and her shoe popped off and he staggered out hefting the bag awkwardly onto his shoulder.

Z. lunged for him, the duffel bag made him sluggish, she had speed and precision, but her body only made it halfway out the door. She used her hands to propel her forward sprinter-style, limping from the discrepancy between the foot with shoe and the foot without. Max had crossed half the distance to Maximillion, Z. flew toward him, seized his exposed midsection, they waltzed strangely, they fell. Max on his back, Z. on Max, the duffel bag on both.

"Why does this keep happening?" said Max. "You keep finding excuses to fall on me..." He coughed into her shoulder. Up close, his skin seemed to flake away.

"Max," she said, although she didn't know what to append to it.

Boots clomped across the road, ridiculous heavy-duty combat boots Z. failed to notice earlier but they fit so well with Cal's camo ensemble she supposed she needed to be at ground level to pick them from the rest of him. Cal's steps adjusted for the duffel bag in his way and approached Maximillion's door.

No sign of the box cutter, but Cal had one hand in his jacket pocket.

"Cal," said Z. "Cal, stop, this is bad, it's so bad."

"I'll handle this guy. It's the middle of a major interstate."

The mountains loomed overhead, the shadows lengthened, the orange radiation around the slopes diminished. Max struggled. His elbow jabbed her ribs.

Cal raised a knuckle and rapped the window. A tinny plink accompanied each knock. Three knocks total.

Maximillion's window rolled down.

Z. stretched her neck to see, but through the aperture she perceived only darkness. Time passed, impossible to count, silence, stillness.

A voice:

"Shouldn't drive so fast with your engine in its current state strand you in these mountains not so much traffic not too many people."

"Guy," said Cal. "Leave us alone."

"Your friend acts like he'd like to go with me I guess that's natural given his sweatshirt although I worry you mistreat him ignore him make him feel unwanted it's not good to make people feel that way you come off as a bully it can do damage."

"I can do damage when I feel the need." Cal leaned forward, almost into open window, it had to happen now, Z.'s entire insides sharpened, a breath squeezed through her compressed throat, something—a tentacle—a mask—gunshot—knife—"Quit following us," Cal said.

"The world presents many dangers—"

"I want away from them, please," said Max.

"—for children and young adults I may appear to be an older person relative to you and to young people anyone over the age of thirty is old but I do have a lot of experience with young people being a literary agent the hot commodity these days is young adult literature and its various subcategories middle grade new adult you name it I know it every day I receive a hundred submissions from would-be authors they want representation and of that daily hundred half are young adult in some capacity young adult science fiction young adult fantasy young adult paranormal romance so I know all about young adults and what I know most is they have no clue how to write."

"Shut up," Z. said. "Go away!"

Cal leaned back abruptly as Maximillion's head emerged from the window, attached to an unfathomable neck. The head and its gold hair and gold-rimmed glasses swiveled on its axis, searching left and right until it eventually faced her.

"Why hello seems you've fallen and can't get up ha ha ha ha what are your names my name is Maximillion I would like to know your names too."

"Max Roddlevan," said Max.

Maximillion's head exuded a halo of irradant whiteness. "Another Max my name could also be shortened to Max are you a Maximillion like me?"

"Nobody cares," said Cal. "I am giving you a clear and direct order, guy. Clear—Direct." But Cal plummeted off the face of the planet, he no longer existed beyond a voice, he dwindled into the twilight. Maximillion's eyeless gaze forget Max or Maxwell and routed to Z., his smile pressed upon her, swelled in size. "And you my young friend what might your name be a name means so much for new friendships."

Everything else faded away. The road, the mountains, the duffel bag. The red car. Maximillion's disembodied face hovered before her. It grew, blotted her vision. She stammered, a strangled syllable escaped, her lip quivered. If she gave her name, it meant something more than a name, something abysmal, like the name was a riddle and once known he held power over her. A lonely memory emerged algae-strewn from her subconscious: a story Max told, a story Max had read: If a magic man knew your true name... Souls, the essence of our humanity—Max had changed—had been one person—became a hollow shell...

These were not men, Hussie and Maximillion, not men to give your name.

But the empty eye sockets peered into her, Maximillion's neck elongated, his rows of white—no, yellow—teeth split to swallow her whole. She panicked, the duffel bag pinned her so she could not wriggle free, she tilted back her head to see anything else, the black mountain stalactites reached downward to an abyss of speckled stars. Vertigo seized her, everything was so high up and such a long way down, her stomach lurched inside her, levitated, she was falling, she twisted her head this way and that, she kicked her feet against the road, her eyes blinked like mad, Maximillion expanded, her name, he wanted her name!

She screamed: "Z.!"

The world—

—returned to normal, Maximillion's head a normal size, the darkness abated, the world rightside-up. Cal stood nearby, the halo ebbed.

Maximillion smiled. "What an unusual name is that Z like the letter or Z-E-E I'd truly like to know it's important to know each other's names agreed?"

That's right—she hadn't given the name, neither had Max, nicknames weren't true names, even Cal had a nickname, only Kiki—but Kiki never left the jeep apparently.

She declared straight to Maximillion's stupid face: "DON'T ASK WHAT THE Z STANDS FOR!"

With one momentous heave she hefted the duffel bag. She rose, straightened herself skyward, and although even at full height she remained shorter than Cal she towered over Maximillion and his low-riding red sports car. Maximillion shrank into the inky emptiness, his gold luster faded (but not eradicated), his smile at its lowest wane.

"Alright then if that's how you want it I won't press further I respect the wishes of others."

Max lurched up, his hand reached for the handle of the back door. "Wait, sir, I'd really prefer to go with you... You seem like you'll get there faster anyway."

The face and its shrouded features pivoted on an invisible torso. "Sorry Max I think I'd better not considering the aura of this whole situation I should avoid confrontation I'm not a confrontational man and I know when I'm not wanted I don't mean any harm I only want to help but I see my intentions are misinterpreted so yes it's best I go yes my apologies."

The lacquered window glimmered as it rose alongside a mechanical whirr. Maximillion's face piecemeal disappeared, first the smile, then the golden glasses rims, lastly his hair, all while he repeated "my apologies" ad infinitum and his voice tapered with each repetition, until both voice and body departed. Max's outstretched fingers curled and tightened as the car's motor flared and the wheels churned and everything rolled down the road.

Cal folded his arms and spit. "See? People who ride in sports cars, they think they're something else. You show them something to fear and they back away real fast."

"Thanks, Z.," said Max.

The jeep doors were locked. Cal knocked to get Kiki to open them.

Parachute

Parachute

Max didn't look at his phone anymore. He hunched over his folded legs, his head perched on his knees. His eyes remained shut. A malefic emanation swelled.

They drove submerged in ink. Or like, someone drew a picture of a landscape: mountains, hills, trees, sky. And someone else dumped an inkwell on that image. Now their submersible trawled the depths with only two headlights to slice the all-devouring void. Z. became cognizant of how far from home she was.

The environment affected even Malkwon, whose typical bombast settled into a quieter, more atmospheric track, over which a tired soul sample stuttered on a fizzy, poorly-cut loop. Malkwon himself was nowhere to be heard, unless the faint voice that flickered beneath the noise belonged to him. No, the voice was feminine, not Malkwon at all. The words indistinguishable, like underwater. A lady in a lake—golden axes, kelpies. With no warning, the track ended. All went silent.

If sorcerers could control people by knowing their names, you'd hear about it on the news. Unless they kept themselves concealed—you see this stuff on far corners of the internet, illuminati conspiracies, free mason secret societies.

Stupid, right? Goofy. Right.

Palisade

Palisade

Maybe not names. But the idea that these people had a way to control Max, that they had purposely altered his demeanor, was that truly unreasonable? Serious Z. time. She straightened her posture and became serious, no more jokes. She focused her brain on this one subject, telling it not to wander. No getting bored.

She remembered her unicorn dream. How a robot thought it was human, but its dreams were preprogrammed and the people who created him knew what they were. Everything the robot did was planned. And then Maximillion's license plate, PEGASUS. What was a soul? A word bandied about all the time, what was it? That essence that turned a golem into a living thing? That spark of life? Did robots have souls? What if they thought they were human?

"Barely past seven," said Cal. "A good five hours left in us."

No lights, only a half-moon hazy in the sky, sometimes severed by an invisible mountain. Every so often a cottage or hamlet. "We're gonna drive in the dark all night, Cal?" said Z. "Is there even hope we'll see Malkwon? Are we even in Nevada?"

"Once we hit the plateau we don't have to worry about altitude," said Cal. "We go a consistent eighty. Night is the best time, cooler."

"We can't see," said Z. "We could careen off the edge into oblivion and who would even know?"

Kiki admonished her with a finger. "Now now, let's not be hysterical. Someone would discover our charred corpses eventually."

"Not to mention, just because we missed Malkwon today, doesn't mean we should slacken our pace. We want to be especially sure we'll see him tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? He plays TOMORROW, too?"

"He plays every day," said Cal. Did Z. comprehend these words? Were the words that left Cal's mouth the same that entered her ears?

"You mean you've been uptight about us reaching Vegas tonight while the whole time he plays every single day? So it doesn't matter if we show up tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that? You mean—"

"Every day we're behind schedule is additional funds we (or mainly I) must spend." Cal's voice remained level while Z. got angrier, which pissed her off more than anything. "My goal was to arrive in time for tonight's show, spend the night, and return tomorrow. But now we won't return until Monday."

Monday? Return tomorrow? "You know why we're on this trip, right Cal? Right? Cuz lemme give you a hint, it's not Malkwon, we didn't come all this way to see Malkwon and leave immediately you dense FRANCIS FUCK, we're here for the Las Vegas FanCon."

"FanCon." Cal sprawled the word (words?) across his lips. "I'll humor you for a moment. Let's assume we're going to Las Vegas for this FanCon of yours. Which we're not, by the way, because it's my vehicle and my gasoline so we're going for my reasons. But assuming we were going, when exactly is this FanCon of yours?"

"How many times have I said it? It's a three day convention, it starts Monday and ends Wednesday."

"No, we *leave* Monday, you're out of luck."

"You FUCK. YOU FUCKING FUCK FUCK FUCK."

"Eloquent as always, Z.," said Kiki. "Superb use of iambic tetrameter, an underappreciated poetic form in our contemporary epoch."

Kill them. Why not? Murder them. Knife them to pieces, strew them across the road.

"With that settled," said Cal. The way that indicated it was truly and incontrovertibly settled, as though his tone of voice sealed the argument because all Z. could do was fume in apoplectic shock, because even under normal circumstances words failed her but in these circumstances they became nothing. "We turn to the issue of whether to stop for the night. Regardless of logistical concerns, there are no cities out here. Where would we stay? These villages? They're vacation homes for rich skiers. You won't find a place to sleep—"

The darkness broke before them and revealed a city of thousands of lights.

Grand Junction

Grand Junction

"Impeccable timing, Cal." Kiki slid one leg over the other. Her fancy shoes twiddled in the lights that streamed through the windshield. "Perfect for the laugh track. You need only turn to the camera with a pathetic, embarrassed look on your face to complete the scene."

Cal said nothing. They rolled down a straight incline toward the city.

"What's this, Las Vegas?" Z. said.

"No, idiot," said Cal. "It's still Colorado. Is your perception of time so distorted you thought we crossed the hundreds of miles already? I ask honestly."

Las Vegas or not, what stretched before them in broad panorama, imbuing the slopes with a faint effervescence, was a city, not one of the pitiful sand cities but an agglomeration of human habitation, the kind people, like, lived in. What could be between here and Las Vegas this large?

"Salt Lake City?" said Z.

Cal smacked his forehead (which people don't really do, he just did it to be obnoxious). "*Colorado.*"

"I don't know!" said Z.

"Grand Junction," said Cal. As if it meant anything.

They entered the city through a main thoroughfare. On either side of the road blazed billboards advertising food, clothes, medicine. Although the lights raged, the streets were empty, no cars joined them, no pedestrians loitered under the beams. Cartoon cowboys glowered from above while Z. bent her body between the seats to stare out the windshield. They stopped at a stoplight although nobody else crossed the intersection.

"At the very least, we reach St. George before we stop," said Cal. "But if we make it to St. George, we may as well go the whole way. If we drive through the night and reach Las Vegas by tomorrow morning..."

"Fantastic idea, Cal." Kiki picked at a fingernail. "No food, no water, no problem. The desert at night with no help for miles—in a car prone to breakdowns, easy peasy."

"With a freaking stalker stalking us," Z. added.

"Nobody's stalking us," said Cal.

Reflexively, Z. checked the road behind them. No sign of Maximillion, but his ghostly impression enveloped them, or maybe that was Max's ire.

Kiki slipped her phone from a pocket and tapped some buttons. "Only 102 miles to the next inhabited location. Short!"

"102 miles, 80 miles an hour," said Cal. "That's an hour fifteen, nothing. We have just enough gas."

"Oh jeez," said Z. "We're gonna run out of gas."

"Fine. We'll get gas here, will that sate your unending desire to torment me?"

The light changed and Cal lurched them into a different lane to turn into a pavilion with a parking lot and liquor store and restaurant and motel and gas station. The jeep lumbered to the pump and Cal flung open the door.

Kiki clicked her phone away and rolled her head on her shoulders. A high-pressured hiss seethed through her teeth. "You're missing the *point*, Cal."

"The point's moot." A card slipped into a slot, a gas pump entered a hole on the side of the jeep. Cal's voice had to circle around the jeep and filter through his open door. "We sleep in Las Vegas or we sleep in the desert, either way is fine with me."

"Sleep in the desert," said Kiki. She rolled down her window and poked her head outside. "Fearless mountain man Khalid 'Lil Cal' Bhandari, known for his wicked survival instincts. Did our Donner Party trailblazer remember to bring blankets?"

No response. Gasoline slushed into the side of the car. Z. swooped for the swank double team. "Come on Cal we're not sleeping in the desert, I bet that's illegal."

"I'm not saying we'll sleep in the desert for sure. The goal is Vegas."

"Five or six hour drive, probably," said Kiki. "It's thirteen hours already. No food, water, nothing. Pure science, energy and whatnot."

"I've done worse," said Cal.

Z. never understood other people. How they acted and felt. Right now, she was hungry, thirsty, tired, had to use the bathroom, all the vitals on your character in a life simulator game blinked red.

"Cal, you know." Kiki slipped her legs back into a place where legs should be, unbuckled her seatbelt, and opened the door. "You know what the worst thing is. For someone like me, I mean. Someone who enjoys fun. Someone who jokes on occasion, someone with a propensity for jest? You know the worst thing?"

Cal held the gas pump to the side of the jeep. The numbers went up, dollars and gallons.

"The worst thing is," said Kiki, as she unspooled from her seat and congealed into a more tangible form outside, "The worst thing is having to say I'm serious."

The pump stopped. The numbers stopped. Cal's vestigial sunglasses formed a vacuous hole.

They entered the lobby of a chain motel, generic logo and generic name. The first lifeform encountered since they entered Grand Junction flipped a magazine behind the counter.

Cal slapped a hand on the countertop. "What are the rates."

The teller's head tilted. Her mouth hung agape in bored stupefaction as she intoned the nightly prices. "Two beds to a room only."

"That's fine, the others will sleep on the floor."

"Literally illegal," said the teller.

A tense grumble. Cal turned and counted heads, his gloveless finger pointed to each in turn. "Alright, two rooms. Kiki and I for one, ridiculoids for the other."

Z. was too depleted to argue, the promise of beds absolved her head of any further attempt to bother, but Kiki interjected. "Sorry honey, I'd prefer to sleep with my lovely girlfriend Z., boys have cooties after all." She roped her arms around Z. and hugged her, Z. let it happen.

"No," said Cal. "Nope. I'm not sharing a room with the random schmuck."

"And I'm not sharing a room with you, buster," said Kiki.

Cal rubbed his face and eyes (he had, like a marginally reasonable person, removed his sunglasses). "Quit being coy, these are the most logical room assignments—"

"In your dreams," said Kiki.

They went back and forth for some time, Z. didn't understand the argument too much. The teller returned to her magazine and Z. retreated inward. She imagined Jolly and Rel in the Hell dimension. *This is YOUR fault, Rel! Jolly, I couldn't have possibly known Calofisteri had set a trap. As a fae paladin, Rel, it's your job to consider all contingencies!*

Kiki's voice sharpened and drew Z. from the funk. "Fine, I'll pay for it." She slammed something—a credit card—onto the counter. "Three rooms, two singles and one double."

It took an hour to get into their rooms because Cal insisted they lug all the damn instruments from his jeep in case some vagabond filched them or whatever, Z. floated through the ordeal in a funk. The rooms they got were tiny, so what didn't fit in Cal's room overflowed into Z. and Kiki's. Kiki immediately retreated into the restroom which was fine but then the shower turned on which was not fine, Kiki was notorious for infinite showers and Z. really had to use the bathroom. She snuck into Max's room and used his. Max laid on his bed, shoes and everything, arms folded behind his head.

"Thanks for letting me use, uh, you know." She indicated the bathroom.

"Mm," said Max.

At the door, she hesitated. "Uh, Max... Have I done something wrong? I ask because... it's like you're barely here."

"Nothing in particular," said Max. "You've stayed the same, I believe."

"Then what changed, Max? You're my friend, right? We're still friends?"

"Mm."

"You're mad I stopped you from going with Maximillion."

"He's a friend of Hussie. If I go with him, I can meet Hussie... probably." Max unlaced his hands behind his head to press a knuckle to his lips. He coughed.

Z. opened her mouth to chide him but stopped, she became self-conscious of how motherly it sounded. "Even before I did that, though. You're mad at me. I did something. Even if it's bad, tell me what I did wrong, I know I make mistakes a lot but I try really hard to fix them, you know I do Max."

Max's chest rose, fell. An ancient daguerreotype of a gold miner hovered in a picture frame over his head. The miner leaned on a pickax and touched the brim of his floppy cowboy hat.

"You've stayed the same, Z. Always..."

Then the person who changed—had to be him. And what changed him had to be—"Hussie, tell me about Hussie, who is he, what does he mean to you?"

She expected another lukewarm response, but instead Max sat upright. His eyes twinkled and his pallor became fleshy and warm. His body regenerated before her eyes, and when he spoke his voice became clear as ice, almost feminine. "He's a genius, Z. A genius. The greatest living author—the greatest author in a century. More, maybe. Those who came before him, they could only grapple with humanity's problems. Entropy, dissolution, the inherent inability to conjure meaning in a world of imminent annihilation. Problems of consumerism, problems of excess, problems of materialism. Hussie has answers. His work is... ungodly. Divine, even. I'd say his work is divine."

"Divine."

"It's unfathomable to me that someone alive today could write the way he writes. Could construct a story the way he does. His subtle blend of irony and sincerity, his Gnostic interpretations of the soul and creation, his spiritual renewal of pop cultural detritus... This man turns *Con Air* starring Nicholas Cage into a holy artifact. Imagine that, Z.—Imagine the power that entails."

Z. tried to remember if she had ever seen *Con Air* starring Nicholas Cage. She wasn't sure, but the name was dumb enough for her to get an idea what it might entail.

"He is the next step in literary history. Yet he comes from nowhere—from Boston. He's an enigma. He has no training, he has never published anything significant, it is as though the internet birthed him fully formed, a latter-day Athena." Max stood atop the bed now. At some

point he had stood. "I read his work enraptured. Because of that work, I understand myself better. I thought nothing could ever do that. Of everything I ever read, I never hoped to read something with which I could *identify*. Academic curiosity, base titillation—but to read something and see myself reflected within it? It changed me."

Z. said nothing.

"When I first read *Homestuck*," Max continued, "I knew nothing I could ever create would be an infinitesimal fraction of his accomplishment."

Z. tried to think of something to say. "It's always like this, Max. Always some book you're gaga over. The Odysseus book, the Gravity book, and that other big one..."

"Tch." Max fell to his knees but managed to tower above her. "I said, though, that *Homestuck* resolves those books."

"Don't they resolve themselves?"

Max tilted back his head and cackled. Wild, peeling laughter that choked his gorge, caused his eyes to cartwheel. He flopped onto his back and let the pillows and sheets float around him. The gold miner on the wall tipped his hat.

"The world is ill," he said. "Nobody knows the answers! But Hussie... That's why I said divine. He makes fools of all others. Of me. Those other books are pulp before the might of his godhead. He is the spirit Sophia. The others—Yaldabaoth, Samael, tetragrammaton! Fancies of pegasi and kelpies."

"I don't understand."

"Alright, Z." Max sat up again, his face grinned like Maximillion's. "I'll explain everything once, and only once. If you don't understand then, you'll never understand."

Z. tensed, this seemed important, she wondered if she should take notes, she had no paper. He spoke:

"Imagine the dream in *Blade Runner*. The dream of the unicorn. The entire movie, Deckard—and the audience—believe they know everything. The replicants are loose and Deckard is an inspector who has to decommission them. The world follows a singular track of truth. That world is our world, before Hussie. The modernists, the post-modernists think they know the world—even if what they think they know is that the world is unknowable. Those arrogant authors believed because they could not know the world, the world could not be known. Do you understand? Do you follow?" He spread his hands wide, as though measuring something. "But Hussie—Hussie folds an origami unicorn at the end of the movie. He places it on the ground. He knows the dreams of the other authors. He knows their arrogance is folly, because he has formulated a better truth. The other authors were creations of man. Hussie is a man himself."

"I dreamed about the unicorn," said Z. "Last night."

"You, too, are a replicant," said Max. "We all are. We are automatons who believe we know ourselves. Hussie holds the only true knowledge. We shall expire."

"It's just for fun, right Max? Just entertainment, right? Or art, or whatever you call it."

"So you don't understand."

She knelt beside his bed. "I understand that feeling, Max. That feeling when you're reading or watching or playing something so good it seems like it's the only thing in the whole world that matters, in fact it has its own world, and that world seems so much cooler and better than your world, so you stay there and not here. And you do it for a day, a week, a month. But always that world—there's limits to that world, okay? It always ends. Because if it got made in this world, how can it be bigger than this world?" She had lost her point somewhere. She stopped talking.

"It's bigger," said Max. "That's my entire point."

She meandered around the motel premises. No rooms other than the three they rented (shoulder-to-shoulder at the far corner of the horseshoe-shaped complex) had lights on. It was too early to sleep, so she shuffled across the street to a fast food joint and used some of the change she withheld from Cal for a classic burger and fries. Unlike the motel, the fast food place had people, or rather a person, unless the cashier also counted as a person, which was dubious. The other customer was an old man, the saddest old man in the world. His entire face drooped, folds of wrinkles folded over more wrinkles, clutches of raggedy beard clung to hanging jowls, his head bald save for three, four strands of ashy hair. He ate nothing. He looked at her, she tried not to look at him.

Max needed time. Hussie's world had sucked him in, like the world of *Faerie Endless* once did for her. She had seen the archive for *Homestuck*, it had thousands of pages. One could conceivably lose themselves in so much text, images, and sounds. But after time, the feeling faded, you still loved the thing and the world and characters, but you were so close now you could perceive the infinitesimal flaws. Certain elements became bland, you'd ignored them before, but without the novelty of the first or second experience those elements dragged. The world's two-dimensionality revealed itself. Z. loved *Faerie Endless*, loved Jolly and Rel and Calofisteri, but she did not love it with the same fervor as elementary school Z. The magic dulled. The characters repeated the same words. She played clinically.

One day, Max would blink and remember the real world. Something would jostle him, he'd realize the real world can be cool too. And that the *Homestuck* world, no matter how well-constructed, was artifice. Las Vegas FanCon could be that jostle. With the other fantasy authors and comic artists and who knew what else, something new would grip him, even if for a moment. A moment and the spell broke.

Hussie's spell.

Back at the room, Kiki had finally finished her shower and sat on her bed strumming her bass guitar. It wasn't plugged in, so the notes twanged without force, like a banjo. A dresser separated the two beds and on it was an ashtray with a smoldering cigarette. Between twangs,

Kiki occasionally took the cigarette in two fingers and pressed it to her lips. A thin layer of ash wafted around her face.

"Don't these places have smoke alarms?"

"Really Z., I had no idea you hated safety so much," said Kiki.

"You only smoke those to look cool. They're seriously shit." They didn't even get you high.

Kiki adjusted her legs. She had changed out of her jeans into athletic shorts. The toes on her bare feet curled and uncurled. "Who smokes to look cool nowadays. So passé. People pinch their noses and manufacture coughs in our modern era."

"You're gonna die of lung cancer at forty," said Z.

"Thanks for the heads up, Smokey Bear."

"Smokey Bear is forest fires dipshit."

"Scruff McGruff," said Kiki.

If the smoke alarm went off Kiki would look like a doofus so part of Z. wanted it to go off. But it didn't, and Z. remembered she didn't want to talk about cigarettes anyway, they had other conversations to have that weren't shit.

"Kiki. Something is seriously wrong with Max."

"You're right, he did look a tad more undead than normal."

"I'm serious here, can you be serious too? Please?"

"No."

"Fuck you." Z. plopped onto her bed. Maybe she was overreacting, maybe Max liked Hussie's story and would get over it with time. She liked that explanation. She wanted that explanation. She told herself that explanation a lot. But she didn't believe that explanation. With the other books he read or games he played, he never *excluded* her. He always tried to draw her in—even when she didn't understand. He didn't call her an automaton. "Please, Kiki. Please. I'm not making fun here. I want to talk for real."

Plink plunk went the bass guitar. "Do you."

"Yes!" Z. rolled to her knees and extended her arms. "Something is wrong, he's obsessed, it *scares* me."

The strings stopped. Kiki's purple nails made delicate motions around the knobs at the end of the bass. The trail of smoke coiled and knotted. A half-lidded eye peered through a purple bang. "Max is normal."

"Normal." The word held no meaning, it was only sound, nor-mal. Neither bon nor mal.

"You keep talking about how he's changed. How he's different. I dunno. This whole day he's been normal." Her eye and its perfect lashes. Long and curled above a vibrant iris.

"How can you say that? Normal? Like, how he always is? When was the last time you talked to him, Kiki? He's not NORMAL."

"The only difference I see is that for some reason he no longer cares about *you*."

What about his laconic expression, his lack of responsiveness, his translucent mien, his odd appeals to Maximillion, the fact that he ditched school, the fact that he shredded his books? Maybe Kiki's distance caused her to miss such fundamental components of his psyche. When did Kiki and Max stop being friends?

"I don't understand," said Z.

"No," said Kiki. "You don't."

"What about Maximillion, though? What about Hussie?"

"Who."

"Hussie! Andrew Hussie, author of *Homestuck*? Helloooo?"

Kiki's eye stared, blank. "Maximillion's an ordinary American citizen. He has his hobbies and passions and pursues them as our Constitution advises."

"Constitution?"

"Golf, literature, a true paragon of society." Kiki tilted her head back and watched the ceiling. "His dedication rewards him with opulent clothes and cars. Such is the American Dream."

"We're talking about MAX."

"I thought you wanted to talk to me, though."

Nonsense. Utter nonsense, it tumbled out all mouths, nobody said normal things, nobody spoke her language. "I am talking to you?"

Kiki sighed, that sad, extended sigh of disappointment, the same sigh Max sighed, the same sigh her parent and fake-parent sighed, the same sigh her teachers and her brother and everyone else sighed. "If only, Z."

"What's your problem with Max?"

Kiki smiled—an actual, real smile. Her lips spread, her teeth flashed. "He's a little rat bastard," she said. "A selfish, pathetic cuntboy. A sodomized betafish, a hornless cuckold, a big swollen *faggot*."

"Kiki, don't say—"

"A prima donna bitch. A shrivel-cocked falsetto. A self-sucking eunuch. A coquettish unicorn. A Shakespearean castrati. A Caravaggio cupid. An effete academic. A pimpled poseur. A hormonal bookworm. A splotch, an unneeded article, a vestigial appendix, a pipsqueak orgasm, a diddled runt, a case for abortion, an emasculated pedant—"

"I get it!"

"You waste your time with him, Z. Whatever you pour into him, it disappears. It's sucked down the quicksand into his endless oblivion self. He doesn't regard you. He doesn't reward you. Stop trashing yourself over him."

Nonetheless, Kiki smiled. Did she... did she *hate* Max? When? Why? Her words, although harsh, she spoke without conviction. Nothing Kiki said had conviction. Was Kiki serious or sarcastic?

BAH—why bother try to parse Kiki's real meaning. Z. had worse things to chew. In particular, one idea nagged, gnawed, nibbled her entrails, the kernel of an idea that gestated in embryonic form, split cells, developed.

"Kiki," said Z. "What if, what if there's something weirder about Max and Maximillion and Hussie? I mean, all these coincidences, how we're seeing them everywhere, pegasi and unicorns, what if there's something more there? What if the reason this isn't a normal obsession is because something else was added in, something..." The word she wanted didn't come, several cycled through her mind but she made a tactical decision to ignore them. "...Something else?"

Kiki tossed up her arms. "Sure. Something else. Anything else. Whatever you want to think, go right ahead."

She placed her bass against the side of her bed, leaning it so only the neck poked out. She dabbed her cigarette against the ashtray and reached for the light. As she did, the half-closed eye met Z.'s eye and they looked at each other for a suspended moment.

The light turned off. "Get some sleep, kiddo," said Kiki.

Z. wondered if that look meant anything.

CoMmErCiAl BrEaK

Hey kids! Boring *adults* got you down? Wish you had more mythical horses in your life? Never fear, *Funtime Adventures for Children 16 and Under* is here! Collect ALL the horses. Unicorn, Pegasus, Kelpie—and a secret *fourth* pony! Harness the power of your galloping friends—Combine them into bigger and better stallions! Anatomically correct models showcase STRONG equine phalluses. With *Funtime Adventures for Children 16 and Under*, the unihorse is yours to control. But you better not be older than sixteen, OR ELSE.

Hnnngh? Hard floor smacked her face, she flopped over and reached for a groggy pair of eyes but only one arm moved. The other, bound in blankets, lay stone limp. Fifty pillows surrounded her. Her lower body had remained on the bed and her spine bent at a painful angle.

After she removed the blanket, the arm ebbed to life and she contorted herself into a less garbage position. Max... Kiki. Remember when we saw *Blade Runner*? Kiki would say, starring Han Solo? Max would say, we're all replicants.

Kiki was showering—again. Steam issued from the crack under the door.

They watched *Blade Runner*... six years ago. Still in elementary school. Even though Kiki knew all about movies, Max recommended it. He claimed it had "great philosophical significance." The future would probably be like how it was in the movie, he said. Z. didn't know about that. In fact, she thought the movie was super dull, nothing ever happened, Han Solo looked for robots and most of the time he didn't find any, and when he did he shot them and they died. Only at the end did it finally get good, with Han Solo and Main Robot duking it out on the rooftop—can't have a climactic battle anywhere but on a rooftop—but right when Main Robot had Han Solo dead to rights, and Z. wondered how the intrepid hero would escape, Main Robot gave some speech about "life" and died for no apparent reason. Ultimate cop out, right? Of course Max and Kiki went gaga, extolled its brilliancy, its subversion of standard storytelling tropes, et cetera. Z. got so annoyed that after weeks of this shit she blew up and ranted for an hour about how much she hated *Blade Runner* and why they were dumb for liking it.

Now Max and Kiki hated each other? And it was somehow worse, because they still excluded her, but now they did not even effuse their own energy for her to leech.

Z. wandered outside. Sun cascaded into her eyes, she wondered why Cal hadn't woken them. The pavilion between the rows of motel rooms contained an empty swimming pool. Beside it, an empty parking lot. Mountains everywhere, but composed of eroding dirt. She yawned, stretched her arms. Max's door was ajar. She shouted inside: "Hey dingus, wake up."

The bed was empty. Well-made too, like nobody ever slept in it. She drew the curtains but light did not change reality. No sign of a duffel bag.

She scrambled to the lobby. A new teller snoozed behind the counter and Z. slammed the bell like fifty times until she woke with a foolish smile and said: "Hey pal, how may I... help you?"

"Look PAL you see Max anywhere, have you?!"

The teller blinked. "Max."

"Lanky white dude, raccoon eyes, my age, see him?"

The teller placed a finger on her lower lip and tap-tap-tapped it. "I can't say I *saw* him... But! You're not the first person to ask for this Max fellow."

Everything inside sank. Down it went, flushed into the infinity toilet through the bowels of existence. She opened her mouth to speak but her throat became desiccated, barren, lifeless—a crackle emerged—a whistle through colossal bones: "Gold."

The teller shuffled papers and smiled. "He gave me a business card."

On the counter was a phone, Z. reached. "Need to call—"

"Now wait just a second, pal," the teller said, "That phone's out of order. There's a payphone on the other end of the pavilion if you need to make a call—"

By the last word Z. was out the door. She scanned both ways for the pavilion, her sense of direction all screwy, the payphone at the end of a long line, amid an overgrowth of weeds, near a single form beneath an awning—Cal. He tugged down his sunglasses and his eyes met hers. His gaze flitted to the payphone.

"Coulter. Coulter, wait."

The lobby door opened and the teller came out saying something and Z. blitzed. She hopped the gate that fenced the pool and the tip of her toe hit it and she spiraled onto the concrete and scraped her hands and forehead and maintained momentum. Cal sprinted at her, his legs and arms moved in flawless arcs at trenchant angles. She took a running leap at the pool from a corner but missed and hit the edge with her stomach, her hands scrambled for stone while her legs thrashed the water, the teller screamed, Z. through sheer force of will wriggled ashore and rolled to a run. The payphone leaned at a precarious angle, its pole bent from the vines, a single patch of green in the waste, a shrine for nymphs and faeries. Her soles skidded across the tarmac and onto the strip of grass. Payphones took quarters—fast food change—

Cal clipped into her side. His arm ensnared her torso and heaved her airborne. She went up, up, and down, down, down. She hit the ground on her back and electricity shot up her spine, she thrashed and swung, her fist found Cal's chin. "COULTER CALM DOWN." Arms flailed, her lithe body slipped between them. She crawled for the payphone, through the discarded glade of weeds, the vines beneath her burst with sour-smelling juice. Hands seized her ankle, she kicked, Cal cried out and let go. She scrambled forward and reached and the phone entered her hand, she pulled and it jerked on its cord to her ear, a dial tone droned. Quarters, she excavated her pockets, coins and lint spilled onto the knoll.

Tendrils coiled around her. They moved fast to pin her arms to her sides. The phone jerked at the end of its cord and snapped back while Z. and the body entwined with her plummeted into the grass. Sticky fluid coated Z.'s shirt, pants, skin. The body crawled atop her, legs spread around her hips. Jasmine and myrrh invaded Z.'s nostrils and Kiki pressed a finger to Z.'s lips. "Shh. Shh." Fuzzy pulsations imbued Z.'s body, her every nerve buzzed with susurrations, the overwhelming sensation that coated her skin deadened her feeling.

Cal lurched above. He spit a clean arc of blood into the devastated foliage. The greenery accepted his offering even as his military boots gnashed them to mulch.

"Cops," said Z. "Gotta call—"

"No," said Cal. "We don't have to do anything. If you calm down five seconds and allow me to explain."

"Is it alright," the teller called from beyond the universe. Cal gave her a wave and spat another crimson rivulet.

"Z., shh," said Kiki. "Shh. Shh." Her arms cradled Z. in their embrace.

"You're both insane," said Z. "You're both psychopaths! You WANT Max gone, you don't care what happens as long as he's gone, you're LUNATICS—CHANGELINGS—"

"Yes, exactly right," said Kiki. "Exactly right Z."

"I told you to tell her when she woke," said Cal.

"Too busy masturbating in the bath," said Kiki.

Cal wiped his mouth and grimaced. "Kicks me in the face and calls *me* lunatic..."

Before Kiki responded, Z. swung her head upward and slammed her forehead against Kiki's in a gargantuan collision.

Fruita

Fruita

Next thing she knew—Cal's backseat. Her head hurt, her arms were tied to her sides by reams of duct tape. Mouth taped too. She laid on her side among the instruments.

Cal and Kiki cut oblique forms, silhouettes of puppetshow arms. They plunged into a cloudless sky. The clouds had vanished long ago.

"—demon child," said Cal. "More than a hassle. Everything becomes a massive incident with her."

"You exaggerate," said Kiki. "She's sincere. She has sincere feelings. They make her act. We handled it poorly."

A groan stuck to the tape across her mouth, it became a reverberation against the insides of her cheeks. Seatbelts held her in place alongside the other binds, the arc of her movements kept within an inch radius.

"MMPH MMPH MMPH."

The conversation in the front disintegrated. Kiki whirled to face her. A huge bandage covered her head where Z. had hit her. "Sleeping Beauty awakens."

"Much too soon." Cal's eyes, devoid of sunglasses, met hers in the rearview mirror. "Alright kid. Let's get some things straight. First, calm down. Calm. Down. Two simple words to form a simple command. You understand? The meaning of calm? Shall I define it?"

The word calm reminded Z. she needed to be totally NOT CALM right now, Max was gone, gone with Maximillion. Cal drove into the sunset like Max didn't exist.

"Nope, stop, I can already tell you're doing the opposite of what I'm saying. Stop right now. Stop."

THEY BOUND AND GAGGED HER AND LEFT MAX WITH A MADMAN AND THEY WANT HER TO BE CALM?

"Good thing we bound and gagged her," said Kiki.

"Listen kid." Cal took a hand off the steering wheel to karate chop the air. He still had his douchey fingerless gloves, although now he wore a desert camo jacket instead of regular camo. "Maximillion didn't abduct your friend. If you had calmed down a moment and allowed us to explain, maybe I wouldn't have a split lip and Kiki a bruised forehead and you hogtied in the backseat."

Cal tapered off and Kiki switched on. "Max went willingly, Z. All yesterday he talked about how he wanted to go with Maximillion."

"Literally the only thing I remember him say," said Cal.

"Z., I hate to break it, but he doesn't like you. I tried to tell you, but you refused to listen. You have this notion in your head like Max *isn't* a degenerate piece of filth, it boggles my mind."

These idiots. These apathetic uncaring too-cool-for-school frightened poseurs, these quibbling quipping quabbling, fuck if quabbling isn't a word it FEELS like a word, these snarky shitty jerkass rubberfucker francis fucks, these caustic toxic acidic disintegration rays, these oblivious oblivionspheres, these publican pedants, these soulless green goblins, these FUCK, every single word and action, their subtle cadences and tone, how they EXPRESSED without saying, the guts burned inside Z., she wanted to vomit, scream, cry, even if she could talk she would talk the wrong words, she tried to curl up but couldn't, so she whipped her head against the cushion to no avail.

"Yes Z., continue doing the thing we told you not to do, this will improve your situation and make everyone happy." Kiki extracted a folded piece of paper from her pocket. Her long fingers worked carefully to unravel the square into a larger square, and then she held the square in front of Z.'s face even though Z. had no desire to read or even regard this stupid paper, her stupid backwards brain would probably fuck up the reading and she'd misunderstand like Z. always does, ha ha why so lame Z. why do you always misunderstand you'll never understand is that right Max I'll never understand your stupid fucking Andrew Hussie *Homestuck* dumb Z. Coulter to understand A GUY WALKING RANDOMLY AROUND HIS ROOM FOR FIFTY PAGES NNNGHGHGHGHHRRHHGHNNH

The squeal filled her throat but went nowhere. She wanted to bite the stupid paper, and Kiki's hand, grab her wrist and rip it off and make Kiki scream, who's the idiot now? Shouldn't you know better than to put your hand right in front of a BESTIAL CREATURE?!

The paper remained. Kiki did not pull her hand away, she muzzled the beast before she taunted it, like a smart person because Kiki was so smart. The words were written in neat handwriting she recognized as Max's.

I contacted Maximillion. I intend to travel with him the rest of the way. I apologize, but I made a mistake to come with you. Now we will both be happier.

Z. quit thrashing. Her body settled into the cushion.

"Found it on his bed," said Kiki. "Maybe Maximillion made him write it under duress. Some feat, to write so cleanly with a golf club poised at your skull."

I made a mistake to come with you.

Why didn't God launch a thunderbolt at her already? Explode her into a bunch of fleshy chunks. Everyone was right, she didn't understand.

Kiki pulled the paper away and folded it into a tiny triangle. She faced forward and propped her snazzy shoes on the dashboard. "It's simple, really. Max is a faggot. The biggest faggot who ever faggoted."

"Don't you dare use that language," said Cal. "I abide the rest but there are some words you do not use."

Kiki shrugged. "If Max wants to get assraped like a little pig, that's his prerogative. I feel no reason to expend extra effort to extinguish his sadomasochistic homosexual urges."

"I agree to the effort part, at least," said Cal.

They drove. The blue sky never changed. Only the engine's purr indicated any movement, for Z. saw nothing else from her vantage. Not even mountains. Who knew where they were. The shelf of the world, the edge of unknown.

The Empty Quarter (Part 1)

The Empty Quarter (Part 1)

She must have settled down because Kiki turned and said, "Alright, I'll remove the tape. Can you handle it or will you freak out."

Z. blinked, she had no idea what her body would do. She barely controlled it anyway. Kiki took her silence for agreeability and ripped the tape from Z.'s lips with one vigorous yank. The skin tingled with adhesive and carelessness.

She blurted: "Hussie and Maximillion are in cahoots, they've plotted something about Max."

"At least she isn't screaming," said Cal.

"The note said he contacted Maximillion, how could he do that?"

"Yeah," said Kiki, "Not like the guy left us a phone number or anything."

She remembered the business card and felt like an immediate idiot. The card remained in her pocket (or she assumed so), but Max probably memorized the number while she looked at it. A Max thing to do for sure, to creepily memorize a phone number.

"Officially we're in Utah now," said Cal.

Kiki removed some of Z.'s binds. Not all, but enough for Z. to sit up after careful exertion. Her arms remained tied to her sides but she could wobble on her rear like a bowling pin.

A vast plateau of sand sprawled in all forward directions. Monolithic formations of sediment and stone loomed like colossuses across the horizon. The sky opened into a tremendous beast, hideous and fit to swallow the world whole. Z. fluttered with agoraphobia. The mountains had left them, their gravelly tops peeked out of far distances, but otherwise the biome shifted to desert crag, the highway lined with piles of stony slabs and crumbled clay. An impassive sun seared the soil. The scene inspired mammoth awe. With mountains, you fear because you are surrounded by immensity, but in the desert, you fear because you are surrounded by emptiness.

(That sounded kinda cool. A fleeting moment where the words in her head went together in a pretty way. She wanted to hold them still but new thoughts came and the old ones dispersed.)

"Seventy miles to the next town," said Cal. "After that town, a hundred miles until the next."

Seventy... a hundred miles. The exact significance eluded her. "How long is that? When do we reach Salt Lake City?" Her docility surprised her.

"We don't reach Salt Lake City, we're not going anywhere near Salt Lake City, it's never happening."

All Z. knew about Utah was Salt Lake City, and Mormons, although her concept of Mormonism was similar to her concept of a hundred and seventy miles.

"What a veritable Empty Quarter," Cal continued. "Like the desert in Saudi Arabia."

"Ah, your fatherland," said Kiki.

"I'm PERSIAN you clod, how many times do I need to say it?"

"Taken your pilgrimage to Mecca yet."

"What's that have to do with anything?"

"Mecca's in Saudi Arabia."

"Shut up about freaking Saudi Arabia."

"You're the one who mentioned it. It must have been a subconscious longing for your ancestral home that bubbled to the surface."

Cal grabbed at Kiki's hand, which made flippant motions, and after a slight scuffle seized her wrist. Kiki tried to pull away, giggling. Actually giggling, with a reckless glee that struck Z. as totally alien, a sound that should never leave Kiki's mouth.

"Oh no," she said. "Help. Help. The brute is raping me."

"That's not what I'm doing!" Their hands danced between the seats. Z. regarded this display with seething disdain.

"We never should've let his kind in, Z. Now they're blowing up our towers and ravishing our women and enacting Sharia law. Next thing you know, it's burkas for us all. Hajibs and minarets. Mosques and Kasbahs."

"You don't even know what those words mean," said Cal.

"American news media told me so, Cal. How can you not trust American news media."

Giggling, laughing, joking. Because Max was gone.

"Hot flash of big blast shiver down my spine," said Malkwon. "When Bush nukes New York best prepared iodine."

"See, even Malkwon knows what's up," said Kiki.

"Malkwon is clearly deconstructing the oppressive political regime that has ravaged the African-American male since Jim Crow, are you this dense on purpose or has it become mere habit?"

He no longer held her wrist, now their hands intertwined, fingers a jumbled knot of joints that coalesced into a single caramel fist. Z.'s aggravation only deepened. Now that Max left they

were carefree, joyful... Max was happy too... Everyone happy but her.

Cal's hand tore away from Kiki's and clenched the wheel. His eyes glared in the rearview mirror, Z. hadn't said anything, at least she thought she didn't. But he didn't look at her. He looked at something behind them.

"This guy. This freaking guy."

Z. knew what guy.

She looked anyway. A new color appeared on the infinite road behind them, distant and shrouded in ripples of heat that fanned from the gashes in the earth, the ravines and gullies of a cracked landscape. The shape was obscure but the color was not. Z.'s dark thoughts and dark mood dissipated, replaced by—replaced by—she didn't know what new emotion entered her brain.

"He's going to return Max," said Kiki. "He didn't want him either."

Maximillion's car made unmistakable progress upon them. Cal wiped his forehead with the back of his fingerless glove. "Well, I can't go faster. The engine will for sure overheat. We just let him pass, easy."

"If he doesn't pass?" said Z.

"Then let him slug behind us the whole way, what's it matter?"

Maximillion's car corporealized. The sonic rev of acceleration cracked the silence. He came upon them fast and directly from behind. Maximillion... and Max. She imagined him in a starry space, adrift in a fetal position, his eyes galvanized to his phone. The distance between them shrank. PEGASUS license plate. Massachusetts, the Spirit of America.

The red car whipped around them. One moment it was behind them, the next on their side, the next in front. It swerved side to side, scraping asphalt off the road with its tires. It suddenly dropped back. One moment it was in front of them, the next on their side, the next in back. Then Maximillion accelerated again.

"Who is this invertebrate," said Cal.

"He's so cool, *so* cool," said Kiki. She folded her limbs into herself like a crab. "The way he *drives* with no regard for the rules, mm, what a *bad boy*." The red car was already beside them, now it was in front. If the road had more than two lanes he'd run circles around them. "How long until he drives *backward* again. That's his best trick."

"Shut up Kiki." Cal wiped his neck. "Let me concentrate."

Maximillion dipped in front, he dipped back. He dipped in front again. He sped up. He fell back. Cal wiped his forehead. Maximillion dipped in front, he dipped back. He dipped in front, he dipped back. Cal punched a knob and Malkwon turned off. Maximillion dipped in front, he dipped back. He dipped in front—and Cal slammed the brakes. The jeep skinned

itself against the road as Maximillion shot forward into the grand blue and became a dot instantaneously.

The steering wheel turned. The jeep tilted. The endless screech of brakes elongated. Z. swallowed her own heart and toppled onto her side. The instruments jangled and quaked. The jeep left the road and skidded into the arid clay. The cabin shook like mad. All traction left the tires, they swirled this way and that, sand enveloped them in a dizzying cyclone. Hard brass implements plunged into Z.'s gut, something bounced off her already-ringing skull, she rolled off the seat and onto the mud-caked carpet.

They stopped. The jeep gave a final, staggered lurch and fell still. The heat and burnt rubber palpitated on her tongue. A final displaced instrument plopped onto her ass.

"Ace driver Cal," said Kiki.

Z.'s entire body trembled.

"Okay," said Cal. "Okay."

A door opened—Kiki's. A seatbelt unlatched and a body staggered into the open heat. Z. tried to lift her head but the instruments had buried her.

"Kiki," said Cal. "Kiki!" He followed her outside. He said other things too quiet to discern.

Kiki, louder: "Ha! Fine, totally fine. That guy, so cool, right? Big racer. Must have practiced a lot. "

"He's gone," said Cal. "He's gone now."

After a ton of shuffling and wriggling, Z. surfaced above the instruments and gulped a deep breath of air.

"Look, let's get back in the car, we'll keep driving," said Cal. "By the end of the day we'll be in Vegas and everything will be fine. Absolutely fine, I guarantee it on my *word*. I don't guarantee on my word unless I mean it, you know that."

He slid into the front seat and implored Kiki follow.

"I'm enjoying the beautiful view. The beautiful Empty Quarter."

"Kiki I said back in the jeep." A key turned in the ignition. An engine sputtered and wheezed but did not roar. "Kiki I said back!"

"Warm air combats tuberculosis," said Kiki.

The key turned. The engine whined.

"Back in the car." Like if she did not enter the car a sandworm would emerge and devour her.

The engine coughed once and fell silent.

Cal slammed his fist against the dashboard. "Who built this? What possessed my father to purchase such a CHEAP PIECE OF TRASH?" He punched the steering wheel, he slammed his boots against the floor, he rocked his seat. "Screw the American armed forces! Screw the military-industrial complex, they only fight wars in deserts so their CARS SHOULD RUN IN THEM!"

"The drones will hear you," said Kiki.

Cal wrenched something feral and animalistic from the inner reaches of his ribcage. He rolled out of the car and Z. managed to prop herself against his seat in time to watch him sprint into the wastes, each step his legs bending further, bending and bending until he seemed to crawl forward on his knees but with his arms raised to the heavens and the vast blue above the only god to hail. He fell forward onto his face and remained on the ground, a beige lump over which sand scattered.

Cal remained on the sand a long time but eventually Kiki unraveled Z. from her duct tape tortilla. Freedom! Z. extended her arms like a bird and flapped until her joints snapped back into her sockets. She emerged from the vehicle while Kiki retreated inside. Cal slow-roasted where he had fallen, she thought maybe he fell asleep. But the moment she conceived the idea, a zombie resurrection enchantment enveloped his form and animated him into a standing position. He did not bother to wipe the sand off his jacket as he returned to the jeep.

Cal tried the ignition again, failed. He opened the hood and pent-up steam puffed into his face. He looked at the engine a long time although everyone knew he knew jack dick about cars and was never gonna fix it.

Time passed. No cars came down the road.

It got hot, even in the shade of the jeep.

"Hey Z.," Kiki said sometime. "I forgot to tell you. My mom called this morning—she said your mom and Max's mom went nuclear when they found out you left without telling them."

Oh.

Yeah.

Z. supposed she did kinda forget to tell anyone about her Spring Break plans. To be fair, under normal circumstances nobody would ever notice. Max's mom, though—Mrs. Roddlevan—she must have found out—became hysterical—contacted everyone... Z. could imagine it. Vividly. A knock on the door, some ungodly Cal Bhandari hour, six in the morning. Only her brother's awake, like hell he'll answer, but Mrs. R is insistent, she pounds and fusses and demands tribute to her wrath. So eventually some slipper-shod bathrobed denizen shuffles to the door—and the bomb detonates. A chain reaction commences. A scene lived before, Z. buried beneath the blanket to drown the noise, well aware what Mrs. R came to say.

"What will they do about it?" Z. said.

"Who," said Kiki. "What."

"My mom. His mom."

"Gun you down like the criminal you are."

"Thanks, Kiki."

"Don't mention it."

The hood of the jeep slammed shut. Cal lumbered into the driver's seat and wiped a glistening forehead. "I assume your cell phones don't work."

Kiki held hers up. "No satellites gaze upon the Empty Quarter."

"I left mine at home," said Z.

A mammoth bird, tremendous wingspan, cut a diagonal line across the sky at the upper end of the windshield's view.

Cal reached under the front seat and retrieved a rumpled cloth, splotted with ancient oil marks. He wrapped the cloth around his head, like either a turban or a do-rag, and tied it with swift and efficient motions. From another hitherto-unseen compartment he retrieved a FULL BOTTLE OF WATER WHAT THE HELL?! So he withheld this sweet nectar from them the whole trip, leaving Z. with only some half-brackish half-backwash swamp water oh my god. He tucked the bottle into an inner jacket pocket and began assembling random supplies from around the jeep.

"What is this?" Z. asked.

He opened the glovebox, excavated a folded paper map, and spread it on his seat. It showed the whole United States plus major interstates. Cal's finger lanced a spot near the Colorado-Utah border, poking the map into the seat. "We're here. Seventy miles forward to Green River, the next town. But we left the Grand Junction area not too long ago. Probably traversed ten, maybe fifteen miles. A doable walk."

"Fifteen miles? In the DESERT? The sun fried your brain. We're not walking that, we'll die of heatstroke." Z. appealed to Kiki for aid but Kiki only gazed at the map with a vacant expression.

"You're right, you're not walking that. I am."

He lifted his finger from the map and folded his arms to preside over the concentrated QED his proclamation had formed. Z. upturned her hands and had no idea what to say to such bonkers braindead dumbfuckery, even Kiki effected a partial expression of surprise beneath the purple bang that stuck to the sweat on her forehead.

"I am a healthy, athletic human male." (Cal had never played a sport in his life, or at least as long as Z. knew him, which was like two years.) "Fifteen miles—and that's maximum mind you, maybe shorter—is two, three hours. If I leave now, it's entirely possible for me to reach

Grand Junction, acquire a tow truck, and have the jeep repaired to reach Vegas at a reasonable hour. Maybe we miss Malkwon tonight. Maybe. But then we see him tomorrow, because at this point I don't care what I have to do, I don't care how long it takes, I am *going to see Malkwon in Las Vegas*. Even if I have to crawl across this forsaken desert to do it."

Z. tried to reconcile his insanity with the real world, found it too difficult. "In two or three hours someone will drive by, it's way more sense to wait, even I know that and I'm not in classes for smart kids like you knuckleheads."

"First, an hour has already passed and nobody, not one person has driven by." Extended fingers shoved into Z.'s face, one for each numbered point. "Second, even if someone does drive by, no guarantee they'll stop for three teenagers, especially when one is Persian. In fact, my plan is quite ingenious because it accounts for this very conundrum. If I walk for Grand Junction, it gives us a specific window of time by which we can assume a complete and total resolution to the problem, as opposed to the unlimited uncertainty we accrue if we all wait. Meanwhile, nothing stops you two from hailing any vehicles that *do* manifest, and with only two teenagers—both female—your odds of making them stop exponentially increase. If you do manage to find a ride, you'll assuredly pass me on the way to Grand Junction. Does my explanation make sense or do you fail to make logical connections between your neural pathways?"

Ugh, when he got serious and authoritative he reminded her of Max—especially that last line. Especially how he seemed right. Clearly he pondered this beforehand, during the silent hour he spent behind the hood, while Z. as usual thought about vapid nothings. So she had no answer, his logic on a superficial level contained no prominent errors, but a deep unease settled into her. "We're less safe if we split up."

"Exactly," said Kiki. "Horror movie 101. You split you die."

"This isn't a horror movie, it's a farce. We have little water—"

"Whose fault's that," said Z.

"—Not to mention, if we all go, who'll watch the jeep? Anyone could steal my instruments."

"Who cares, your parents bought them anyway," said Z.

Cal lurched up and towered over her. "My parents think music is a waste of time. My parents want me to become a dentist. My parents didn't drop a cent for anything. My parents—" He caught himself with an *ahem*. His centipede body folded back and he stood at a normal height. "This bottle can get me to Grand Junction. I know I can make it. Yes Kiki, I foresee your racist quip about my desert heritage, I read the idea gestating in your mind, don't bother uttering it. I can make this walk. I can make it."

If anyone could never die ever, it had to be Cal. His infallible confidence alone would carry him to salvation.

"What if Maximillion comes back?" said Z.

"Maximillion is light years away," said Cal. "He rocketed off over an hour ago. He's gone, stop talking about him, stop thinking about him, he's gone. I can make this walk. I know I can."

"They used to test atomic weapons here," said Kiki. "The mole men have mutated."

Cal slammed a fist on the dash and the entire jeep shook. "Shut up about your mole men, shut up about your Maximillion, shut up shut up shut up. If it's such a big issue, take this!" He wrenched the box cutter (blade retracted) from his pocket and thrust it forward. Kiki took the handle between two fingers and plucked it from Cal's grasp.

"Thank you, Cal. It'll be useful for ritualistic disembowelment if we're beset by rabid coyotes."

Cal swaggered into the open plain. He became a small man swallowed by the overwhelming sky. A feeling like something important was beginning seized Z. and she crawled out her own door, a sweltering breeze enveloped her, Cal had already reached the side of the road and started the direction they came.

Beside her, Kiki appeared. Arms folded, fingernails dug into the skin above the elbow, where the sleeves of her tight shirt ended. Z. asked: "Is this a good idea, are we letting him do this?"

"It's a male thing, he has to assert control of the situation, especially when eligible females are concerned."

"This plan is practical and foolproof," Cal said, distant. He receded down the road, which slithered through the tortured land unto a far distant horizon with the promise of the mountains they abandoned in its jagged crease.

Time passed.

Cal disappeared. Z. and Kiki returned to the shade of the jeep. More time passed.

Max had maybe reached the convention by now. Except the convention didn't start until the next day—because Cal made them go early. Had Hussie already arrived? You don't just stagger into a convention right when it starts, right? Z. had no clue how conventions worked, her attempt to engineer the scene in her mind hit a roadblock because she had no clue what Hussie looked like, he became a man with a black hole for a head.

Time passed.

Kiki pretended to sleep, her door open and her hand stretched into the sun. Z. pretended to play *Faerie Endless*. The inevitable thing that had to happen inched toward them. Her and Kiki alone in the car. Usually two people, alone, they do a thing—talk.

"Kiki, why do you hate Max."

"Why do you like him."

"AUGH." Z. peeled herself off the leather and dragged herself closer to Kiki. She wanted to yell and shout and fume in Kiki's face but the more she aggressed the more Kiki passive-aggressed, every statement matched by a counter irony-statement that deflated whatever Z. wanted to communicate. Normally Z. would not possess the clarity to realize this fact, but the languid desert tranquility heightened her mental faculties or some crap and she caught a glimpse of a future of ironic statements, a prescient vision of this exact conversation aided by the fact it had happened so many times before.

"In elementary school, we were friends. All three of us, not me and him and me and you, but you and me and him. What happened? Nothing changed with me, what changed with you?"

A lizard scurried across Kiki's outstretched arm, even though the arm did not touch the ground, so how did it get there? It turned around and sunbathed on her palm. "Z., in elementary school everyone was stupid. If you liked a video game and someone liked the same video game, you were friends. That's all you needed."

"Why don't you like *Faerie Endless* anymore? We used to roleplay the characters on the playground. Why do you guys have to pretend you're too grown-up to like it?"

"Z. You just. Don't. Get it. You don't understand anything outside the frame of your own mind. You don't understand other *people*. There's more to friendship than liking the same entertainment."

"I know," said Z.

"Yeah okay," said Kiki. "If you want to keep your friends, try harder to understand them first. You can't go around being autistic your whole life, or you'll be terribly, horribly... alone."

She closed her fingers around the lizard. It squirmed but did not escape.

"Kiki, how am I supposed to understand either of you when you're so nutty all the time, maybe help me out? Say anything, ANYTHING, without lacing it in sarcasm or snark? Come out and TELL me why you hate Max?"

Kiki lowered her hand to the ground and opened her fingers. The lizard scurried into a crack. "That's your problem. That's just your problem, you don't get it, you see nothing, you traipse through your own fantasyland completely oblivious to what's really going on around you."

"Not true," said Z. "I know there's something going on between you and Max. I know you think you can be cool as long as you say the opposite of what you mean and I know Max has some kind of sinister *attachment* to Hussie."

"Sinister!" Kiki laughed, covering her face with her hands. Z. balled her fists, gritted her teeth, waited for the punchline that had Kiki in such fits.

None came. The conversation died with no new knowledge or insight, no progress in any direction, nothing at all, an exercise in futility, thanks Kiki, did she say thanks she meant FUCK YOU, fuck you Kiki, she hoped Kiki got bit by that lizard and died even though lizards weren't poisonous except Gila monsters and it probably wasn't a Gila monster, she

hoped scorpions unburrowed from the earth and stung her, she hoped wolves dragged her from the car and tore her to pieces, bits of Kiki splattered across the landscape, bloody ligaments and musculature, and then Z. felt guilty for her awful thoughts and sank into her seat and let the unbearable leather weld to her flesh and seal her to the jeep for eternity.

Alone.

Stupid pity, she needed none of it, not from himself, but she gazed onto a life of friendlessness, of silent solitude, teenage Z. becoming adult Z. becoming old lady Z. becoming a gravestone in a cemetery, where they would put her real name because she had nobody to say not to ask what the Z stood for.

Depressing thoughts cluster so quick. She turned on *Faerie Endless* to nullify her mind, but the battery on her Gameboy was low, she forgot to charge it at the motel. She fought Beelzebub to avenge Lu but rushed and gunned it and soon Jolly got hit by Glutton's Cornucopia and Rel mismanaged her elementals and they all died. She shut the game off.

Time...

...Passed.

"If Cal dies, how would we know," said Z.

"We meet him in hell."

Alongside Beelzebub.

Something caught her eye outside the open door, far distant in the shimmering distortion of heat.

Kiki confirmed her suspicion: "Car."

They perked up in unison. Z. acted first, hustling into the open sun, her arms raised. Kiki bumbled after her, except Kiki never bumbled, she swept across the sands with poise and other feminine virtues of which Z. had no interest. They reached the side of the road and Z. cupped her hands around her mouth and hollered although the realization struck her immediately that in no universe could the driver of the car hear her, but she yelled anyway until the reverberations chafed her dry throat.

A thick plume of sand festered around the distant vehicle. Z. tried to remember what Cal told them to do if they managed to hitchhike—he designed that whole plan and everything—but the specifics escaped her.

Kiki sank to her knees. It happened fast, one smooth plop, her body bounced on her hips. Her hands unfurled to the sand, her purple fingernails slipped into the sandy cracks. She started to laugh. Harsh, bitter laughter, laced with mockery and derision, each laugh like a stern hiccup out her purple lips. Her head tilted back and she cackled to the sky, hair falling around her face, the purple bang sliding aside to reveal two wide, bloodshot eyes.

Heat? Dehydration? Had the dye seeped into her scalp? Z. looked back at the road because a dark thought formed and—

—And the car was red.

"No, no!" She flung an accusatory finger at the road. "Unfair, it's been three hours, this is WRONG!"

Her finger did not halt the car. Leaving Kiki by the roadside to laugh, Z. dashed back to the jeep and rifled through all the crap in the front seat, where was the box cutter, it wasn't anywhere, she swore Cal left it with them, she gave up and ran back to Kiki, nearly tripping over an earthen scab but not tripping at all.

The vehicle came into focus, the sand cloud and heat smoke dwindled. Kiki's laughter subsided into staggered chuckles and chortles as she tossed handfuls of dust around her. Z.'s chest swelled, swallowed. Sweat beaded on the crown of her head and dribbled down in cool rivulets.

He came back. He waited for Cal to leave and came back. He planned it. He made Cal leave.

Maximillion's red sports car stopped on the road before them.

"Shut up Kiki," said Z. "Shut up shut up!"

Kiki wasn't making any noises.

The door opened. Only a crack, the tactile clunk of a locking mechanism unmechanizing. The door hesitated, swayed in the stagnation, and then flung open fully. A straight, long, golden leg emerged, headed by a coal-black shoe that clacked upon the road with solemn heaviness.

Maximillion emerged.

Z. had prepped herself to charge him the moment his stupid grinning face appeared, claw his stomach and let his runny golden guts grime the cracked asphalt but she knew if she charged he would grab her and siphon her into his fae vessel. Better to wait for him to come to them. To displace him from his vehicle, sever him from the source of his wily arcana. Ugh no, what was she thinking, why was her head doing these STUPID things, she had to focus, Maximillion had no powers but he might have a gun or knife or golf club or anything, and if she fucked up she might REALLY fuck up, no redo.

Maximillion spoke:

"Hello girls hope my sudden appearance didn't startle you the desert so barren isolated with that ghostly wail can you hear the wail if you listen close you can hear it sometimes I hear the wail when I'm not even in the desert ha ha ha ha ha."

"Why are you here? Why won't you LEAVE US ALONE?!"

"Well after my stunt with the car to show you my slick moves and I admit I perhaps did it impulsively without thinking anyway I thought I saw you guys roll off the road I wasn't sure

and I kept thinking about it and thought maybe I should see if they're alright and Maxwell kept saying not to worry not to turn back but you know me I worry about everything so eventually I turned back to check on you guys if you guys got hurt because of me I would never forgive myself I would kill myself right then and there ha ha ha ha ha wouldn't that be a sight?"

"Where's Max," said Z. "Is he inside—safe?"

"Is he still a tremendous cunt," said Kiki.

Maximillion bit his lower lip but maintained his smile. "Now let's not be rude that word isn't appropriate for civil discussion between civil people by the way I notice your other friend has gone missing did you leave him at the motel it's not nice to leave your friends I told Maxwell but he refused to listen I always struggle to say no when someone asks with enough force."

By the time Z. grappled with one thought he overwhelmed her with fifty more. Meaning seemed to lie more in his cadence than his words, although maybe the words were important too she just couldn't follow them, if magic spells existed she must be listening to one but she needed to quit with this magic crap it was bogus baby faerie tale bullshit.

"Where's Max!"

"Inside of course he didn't want me to come but while I have difficulty saying no I also have difficulty abandoning friends in need I take it your car won't start—"

"Yes, yes, shut up, the car won't start, you know that, you know where Cal is and everything else, stop TALKING SO MUCH."

Maximillion stopped talking for a precious interlude and the jumbled buzzing blockage of words streamed out Z.'s ears on wax waterfalls until her head emptied and she could think with proper pauses.

"If Max is in the car, I want you to show me him," said Z.

"I assure you he's safe and sound in the backseat I offered the front I even offered to move my golf clubs but—"

"Show him to me!"

Maximillion coughed and straightened his tie. He adjusted his sunglasses and nodded as he took a rigid, animatronic step to the backseat. He opened the door. The inside remained dark and black but Z. discerned the outline of a seated figure, hunched over a device—a phone.

Max. Normal. Unmolested and unmurdered. A faint arm rose, a faint finger tapped the screen of the phone. A pale light illuminated a skeletal face.

"Let him go," said Z. without conviction.

"Maxwell's free to leave whenever he wants I asked if he was sure he didn't want to go with his friends but each time he told me he'd rather not so you can ask him yourself if you don't

believe me."

If he was held hostage he would scream, shout, say something, ask for help, anything, but all he did was nothing.

Maximillion continued: "It appears you may consider me a deviant a disreputable fellow and given the state of our modern world you're correct to harbor suspicions young girls like yourselves ought to be guarded so I understand your qualms." He closed the backdoor and straightened his tie again. "However I am not a murderer I am a literary agent with a respectable clientele including authors you may have heard about."

"Oh phew," said Kiki. "Thanks for putting my worries to rest." She climbed to her feet, sand stuck to her stockings.

Z. was not so naïve as to consider a man kosher just because he said so. But Max had gotten inside this man's car. He had requested it. Memorized his business card phone number to call him. What was his deal, did he not comprehend the concept of Maximillion whatsoever, did he not see the same guy Z. saw? The same grinning freak with the tacky gold ensemble?

Did he hate her so much none of it mattered?

Did he love Hussie so much the risk was worth it?

She kept a wary eye on Maximillion for any sudden movements but otherwise the vigor sapped out her soul, drained into her feet where it puddled useless and dismal. An unspoken arrangement had been made, something between the lines like what Kiki or Max always told her about when they criticized her social skills.

"Maximillion," she said. "Take me with you."

"What?" said Kiki, she actually used a question mark, rounded by the rise in her voice. "Z. —"

"Of course if you would like a ride with me I am perfectly willing especially now that your other friend has departed I no longer must worry about seating space so all are welcome."

"Yes Z., get in the golden man's car, yes, do it, you are a genius, you are such a fucking genius holy shit how can you be this smart?" Kiki's nails curled into Z.'s shoulders. "Albert Einstein here, we got Albert Motherfucking Einstein in the house ladies and gentleman."

Z. muttered so only Kiki could hear: "Someone has to watch Max."

"FUCK MAX," said Kiki. "Let him rot in hell, you don't need him, he doesn't want you, why do you want him? Let him die, let Maximillion eat him for brunch!"

"Believe me I am not a cannibal nor have I ever partaken in cannibalistic activities," said Maximillion.

"I'm gonna stay with Max."

"A paragon of reason," said Kiki. "A saint of rationality."

Z. chose her words with care, the situation demanded it, a gravitas settled over the panorama of Maximillion/Z./Kiki backdropped by infinite emptiness, the eternal om of void that resounded in her throbbing eardrums. "Max isn't getting out of that car. I can't leave him alone. I know it's dangerous. I know that, I'm not braindead. That's why I have to go, because Max is braindead and doesn't know it."

Kiki coiled her arms around Z. and held her tight enough to whisper. "If Max wants to leave with this stranger, let him. Let him go, who cares. He doesn't care about you. He doesn't deserve you to care about him. Let him go, stay here, Cal will come back, stay."

"I'm going." Z. broke from Kiki's grasp. She approached Maximillion. "Take me with you."

The smile waxed and the hands pressed together and the gold glinted in the sun. "Spectacular brilliant this is truly the best day I always enjoy conversing with new friends don't you enjoy friends Z. they often lend new perspective to your own insular life—"

His words became a constant background drone as she approached the car with tepid and measured steps and her pace slowed at an exponential rate the closer she came to Maximillion until she wondered if she would ever ford the vast expanse as he held the backseat door for her with a stately bow.

"Then, then, then," said Kiki. "Then fuck you. So considerate of you to leave me in the desert to die of thirst. To get eaten by coyotes, or Gila monsters or whatever. To get so sunburnt I develop spontaneous skin cancer."

Maximillion beckoned inside like a chauffeur. "Plenty of room for all lovely ladies and certainly no sunburns I have fully functional air conditioning pine scent upholstered leather quite sensitive—"

"To drown in quicksand. To be stung by a scorpion."

Z. got the middle seat.

The inside was spacious, dark, and cool. Maximillion's colors faded within the tinted confines. In the seat beside him, wrapped snugly in a seatbelt, were golf clubs, a whole set in a cylindrical case. He played no radio. A scented pine tree dangled from the rearview mirror but the interior lacked scent piney or otherwise. All sensation became neutral.

"Alright now that everyone's comfortable we've one final introduction I know Maxwell I know Z. but I've yet to become acquainted with the stylish female and her lavender aesthetic would you be so kind."

The desert landscape scrawled past. They went fast, super fast, so fast Z. worried Maximillion might hurtle them into an explosion.

"Coco," said Kiki.

Cuckoo for cocoa puffs, Z. thought, at the same time Maximillion said:

"Cuckoo for cocoa puffs that's a fine name classy glamorous it befits a confident self-assured woman with her own aesthetic I think it's important everyone finds the style that suits them in life I love the way young kids experiment and try different clothes and sample different entertainment I often encounter young kids for my job the young adult genre is huge right now—"

"You're an agent right?" said Z. The best way to shut him up was interruption but the only way to interrupt was to change the subject and no matter what subject you chose he had something to say about it forever. "You're going to FanCon because you represent a fantasy author right? Who do you represent?" She added: "Hussie?"

"No, Z.," muttered Max. He leaned against the door and stared out the window. Greetings upon Z.'s entrance had been terse and he avoided her eye.

"I mentioned before but no I don't represent Mr. Hussie although I'm acquainted with him and his work which is how I first grew intrigued by young Maxwell while I represent an array of authors across many genres my primary client and the one of whom I am traveling on behalf is Mr. Ian West the noted fantasy author perhaps you've heard of him."

Ian West, the name had a familiar ring but was fairly generic, so Z. had no clue, it was totally possible she even read his books once but didn't remember. Kiki said:

"The guy who writes fantasy rape stories."

"Well no I wouldn't say Ian's stories are about rape per se I'd rather delineate his themes as duty and responsibility Ian always thinks about the thematic components of his stories which gives his oeuvre an extra kick you normally miss in the fantasy genre—"

"Isn't there a faerie who's the sex slave of a spider," said Kiki.

"It's true," said Max.

"Well for starters it's not actually a spider it's—"

"Can we stop," said Z., "Can we please stop." The mention of faeries made her realize she forgot her game, she patted her pockets and discovered the Gameboy wedged where her phone usually was, her hands must have spirited it away, they sometimes did things her head didn't remember. But she did leave her backpack, clothes, and assorted other stuff. Plus her charger, so she had little playtime left. At least in Vegas—assuming they made it—she'd have other stuff to do. Did Kiki leave her stuff behind also? No, Kiki's backpack lay against her feet. What about Max's duffel bag? Probably in the trunk. How did everyone remember their stuff but her?

After an interlude, Z. piped up. "So you're not Hussie's agent, but you said you knew about him—what's the relationship?"

"Z., I *told you* this," said Max.

"Yes but you weren't specific—"

"An astute one aren't you Z. you parsed my deluge of gobbledygook to discern the important details or at least the details important to you I did mention I have history with Hussie well I'm pleased to tell you it's more than mere acquaintanceship the three of us by which I mean me Ian and Hussie attended the same university along with other creative men isn't it remarkable how talent coalesces the number of people I know who've since risen to success in various facets of the entertainment industry is of course being an agent it's my job to bring people success in entertainment so the remarkability isn't so spectacular—"

"Cut to the part where you hack us limb from limb," said Kiki.

"Sorry I don't mean to ramble but I admit I'm being excessive that's because I'm so excited to have company it's rare I meet people to whom I can speak outside of a professional setting and especially young people like wow real young people I remember not long ago I was your age I'm only in my thirties but wow that's twice your age how old are you let me guess sixteen no fifteen am I right."

"Sixteen," said Z.

"Sixteen the cusp of adulthood the year you learn to drive I learned to drive at twenty-six I was a delayed adult I was not self-sufficient I was not someone who knew their direction it was Ian who pushed me the publishers refused his novel it had too many elements that concerned them he needed a salesman I said Ian I'll gladly sell your book they see a man in gold they see opulence they see success everything came naturally which surprised me because I was so bad at other things when I was your age."

He prattled. On and on. His words came faster than the car drove, and it drove gonzo fast, the desert blurred against the tinted windows. So Maximillion (and some random Ian West guy nobody cared about) knew Hussie, went to the same college as Hussie. Two theories manifested:

1. The "Goofster Coincidence" Theory. Maximillion and Hussie happen to know each other and happen to travel to the same (admittedly nationally significant) convention when the former happens to stumble upon and follow them like a creep.
2. The "Illuminati Watdafuck" Theory. Some megaconspiracy had enveloped their lives, the specifics remained murky but the questions posed poignantly with an impudent hip sashay: Did Hussie send Maximillion? Why did Hussie send Maximillion? Did they have anything to do with how Max had changed?

"What's Hussie doing?" said Z.

"Right now I posit he's flying in an airplane he'll arrive tonight to prepare for the convention tomorrow and most people fly nowadays not me I prefer to drive there's a feeling of freedom funny how for millennia man dreamed of flight but when he achieved it he crammed himself into a tiny tin can shoulder to shoulder knees to knees for me this vehicle is my airplane it allows me to soar although I remained forever grounded."

"That's why the license plate says PEGASUS? Because flying?"

Maximillion laughed his obnoxious robolaugh. "That would be a nice retroactive explanation but truthfully the meaning is much different for starters this car technically doesn't belong to me I bought it for Ian as a gift once the money came but Ian dislikes cars which perhaps was an obvious miscalculation on my part he returned it to me so the plates I had purchased for him now belonged to me it's a complicated story but Ian has something of a personal motif and the plate refers to that—"

"Hussie, does Hussie have a... 'personal motif'?" She leaned forward, almost between the seats.

Maximillion glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "You're much smarter than you appear."

Kiki roused from an apathetic inspection of her fingernails and quipped: "Crazy how stupid he must think you look then, eh Z."

"Ah kill yourself," said Z.

Green River

Green River

Maximillion lurched off the road and for a moment Z. thought here's where they die but he landed on a less obvious road that took them into an itty bitty town. Cal said there were no towns for like infinity miles but either he lied or was wrong or Maximillion reached max warp capacity and spanned the divide in minutes. The sign said Green River but it was more like Brown Creek. It felt wrong to consider it an oasis although the desert stretched behind and the desert stretched beyond.

Benevolent Maximillion bought them food and beverage at a local diner. It was awkward watching him eat because it forced Z. to remember he was an actual human and not an reptilian automaton, although he ate like he talked. He finished well before anyone else, tossed a casual Benjamin on the table, and left the diner to pace around his car in the parking lot. Z. watched him through the Plexiglas aquarium storefront as he prodded the tires with his shoe and ran a finger along the scarlet coat.

When he seemed engrossed enough to not notice them, Z. nudged Kiki's ribs. "Payphone by the bathroom. Let's call Cal."

"No need," said Kiki. "I see now Maximillion is a perfectly normal fellow human who deserves no scrutiny."

"Maybe he's trying to lower our guard. If he attacks us straight up we'd win."

"Paranoid," said Max.

"I bet he's a cannibal," said Kiki. "Or a vampire. But not like a canon vampire, one of those romance novel vampires that sparkle in the sunlight instead of bursting into flames."

They called Cal nonetheless, pooling quarters and copying the number out of Kiki's cell. The phone rang once and went to voicemail.

"Hey Cal," said Kiki. "We've been kidnapped by an international terrorist ring. They're currently brainwashing us to strap bombs under our shirts so we can allah ackbar famous American landmarks. Considering your ethnic heritage I thought you'd want in on the fun, if so call back at 1-800-JIHADGO. K thanks bye."

Z. grabbed the phone. "Also we're getting a ride from Maximillion so we may actually be in trouble, help please."

Outside Maximillion flipped a cellphone closed (he had service out here?!) and greeted them. "If you want off you don't have to get in I swear I'm not a cannibal or vampire ha ha ha ha ha I enjoy company and new friends."

Soon they plunged back into the waste.

The Empty Quarter (Part 2)

The Empty Quarter (Part 2)

"That's why I'm so excited to finally have someone that I can you know have a conversation with and stuff it's like I left college and entered the real world now I don't do anything I accumulate money Ian doesn't talk Mitchum doesn't talk Hussie doesn't talk but I have many things to say I think all the time about things to say but never have anyone to say them to."

Z. glanced right and left. Her companions had zoned out, only she listened. "Uh and what do you have to say?"

Maximillion paused, as if trying to unbury the things he had to say that, after not saying them for so long, he forgot. Eventually he turned and flashed her a smile, his features enameled and aglow, but his candor dwindled and a slight shadow crept across his face, his smile didn't fade—it never faded—but despite the immobile bulwarks of his sunglasses and his crescent Cheshire teeth Z. detected a shift in his demeanor—the eyebrows, it was the eyebrows, drawn with a pronounced arch as he regarded the backseat.

At first Z. thought he noticed something on her and she pawed her cheeks but when nothing scraped off she glanced over her shoulder and saw what had to be the first car in epochs, a beleaguered infinitesimal thing ablaze in two parallel plumes of ashy dust as it roared toward them. The bizarre thought invaded Z.'s head: Maximillion! As though Maximillion had split himself in two, one gold and one tarnished silver, but the nonsense thought only confused her so she shuffled her brain around and reached a new conclusion: Cal! He made it to Graham Juncture and fixed the jeep and raced after them for a daring rescue. But no way could Cal's clunker, even assuming miraculous mechanical recovery, match Maximillion in raw speed.

Maximillion returned to a forward position and the engine revved, the carriage lurched, they propelled forward. "Not right not right not right nobody's supposed to be here nobody's supposed to be here," he said. "Nobody how are they here how'd they catch me who are they how?"

Max watched the new car with vague interest. Even Kiki gave a disinterested nod. "They made it already," she said. "What a surprise, a trip that's only supposed to take one day they managed to do in one day."

"What are you talking about?" said Z. "Who's it?"

The car closed, a filthy white sedan emerging from the slag and sand, a mid-class family-size post-apocalyptic diesel grinder that Z. knew instantly what it was, who it belonged to, why it pursued them with such doggedness, such unrestrained ire and hatred and devastation and cataclysm—

The car belonged to Mrs. Roddlevan. Max's mother.

The shebeast herself.

"No," said Max. "No. NO!" He tore at his seatbelt.

"Nobody's supposed to be here why would anyone be here no no no," said Maximillion. "They can't see me they can't see me in here I've made sure of it." He ran a hand through his hair and became disheveled instantaneously.

Z. clenched her fingers around Kiki's knee. Kiki remained dull and disinterested, even as Mrs. R's sedan (nine years old, what miracle, what vehement will on the part of its driver propelled it with such velocity?) catapulted closer, now half the distance as before, now close enough to read the non-vanity non-Massachusetts license plate, the Roddlevuella swallowing in all her horrific glory the windshield of the vehicle, long witchy fingers coiled around the steering wheel. The bitch expanded like a great shadow, a black blob, a pestilence of malediction, Hecate herself. Death—they were dead—no hope, not a prayer, not a single evocation to a deity mono- or polytheistic, Athena nor Jehova nor Shiva nor Odin, the woman if you could call her such would compact them into tiny cubes, dash their skulls and bake them in the openfaced oven of this unforgiven hellscape, the sedan lurched alongside them, please pass, no way did she know they were in this car, this random red sports car in the desert how could they know, all the windows tinted nobody could see them.

"Nobody can see us nobody can see us everyone remain calm we cannot be seen remain calm everybody," said Z. "The windows are tinted right Maximillion they can't see us right Maximillion?"

Maximillion made no recognition, he accelerated, the sedan matched him, what was this world, what was this world!

The sedan's back window rolled down and from a jack-in-the-box emerged Max's brother—Frederick. His brittle mullet rippled in the wind along with the extended collar of his trench coat. His face, pale as Max's, included vacuous, sunken eyes, nonexistent lips, acne bunched around his pointed nose. He graduated after Z.'s first year in high school, he never spoke, but everyone knew him as the guy in the trench coat.

His omnijointed upper body coiled out the window. Under one arm he held a small, plain box. His other arm he banged against the sedan door, his eyes pierced the tinted windows and drilled directly through Kiki into Z. and out Max into the wastes beyond. He made a motion for rolling down a window.

"Don't do it," said Max. "Don't roll it down, don't even look at him—ignore him, for the love of god! You've *no idea* what they can do to us all."

Maximillion babbled but the windows remained closed. Kiki, meanwhile, loosed an obviously fake laugh.

"Oh-ho-ho my dear Z. You spend so long worried about Maximillion, you rave and ramble, but—now you got a real opportunity to escape and you don't want it. You're petrified of the alternative."

"One thing she has right," said Max.

"You're doomed too if they find us, Kiki," said Z. "Our fates are intermingled."

Kiki stretched her arms with a petite yawn. "I don't see *my* family in there."

Z. shook her just to destroy her maddening composure, but she had too many worse things to worry over. She and Max shouted for Maximillion to hurry, they shared terrified glances, they tensed, their shoulders touched.

Frederick leaned back into the sedan and his window rolled up. Unbelievably, the sedan jolted forward, it gained speed and crested Maximillion and continued down the road. She and Max leaned close and stared through the tinted windshield as it dwindled into a dot ahead of them. After an unlimited expanse of time the Roddlemobile vanished on the horizon.

As the heart settled and the blood chilled and distance reframed their brush with death in a more consistent light, Z. realized how close she and Max had been, how *united* they had been. Even if Max afterward drew away and watched out his side with his shoulder to her, the spark thrilled her. She knew Max was still there. They had a connection. The bond had frayed but not broken. With diligence, precision, and finesse—traits Z. possessed in droves—she would reel him in.

Salina

Salina

Speckled structures marked the end of the Empty Quarter. The presence of landmarks gave context to Maximillion's blistering speed.

Sigurd

Sigurd

They went so fast Z. couldn't even read the names on the signs.

Joseph

Joseph

Maybe they really could reach Vegas by nightfall. They had plunged deep into the afternoon and the sun shone orange over the slopes of craggy basins.

Cedar City

Cedar City

"Is this real life," said Kiki. "I have cell service."

The city they entered was way larger than the previous couple dozen. Other cars even dared venture onto the highway, as if Z. had returned to a regular functional world where normal people did normal things.

"I got a voicemail," said Kiki.

"Cal?"

"My mom." Kiki pressed the cell to her ear. "She says... Don't let mean Mrs. Roddlevan ruin your vacation! Hope you're having fun. Hugs and kisses ex-oh-ex-oh. Thanks Mom!"

"Any news about *my* mom?" said Z.

"Oh yeah," said Kiki. "Your mom's *hopping* mad. Looks like you're going to military academy. You misbehaved so egregiously the school took one look at your mom's application on your behalf and changed their boys-only policy."

"Shut up," said Z.

Maximillion loosed one of his trademark robotic laughs. "Wow what great friends I love to see some quality banter some witty repartee between good friends it's refreshing when you're used to hearing nothing all the time."

Z. and Kiki giggled.

Leeds

Leeds

Z. resolved any anxiety about future parental reprimand with one simple thought: If she was getting in trouble for something, she better make sure she enjoyed doing that thing anyway. Thus, she waved the magician's wand and banished her worries to the shadow realm. Poof—Vegas awaits!

St. George

St. George

The next city was so large she thought maybe it *was* Vegas. Well, it wasn't so large. A relative largeness. Any size, when compared to specks of sand, seems large. Besides, it wasn't like she thought it was Vegas proper. Maybe an exurb or something. A fringe satellite. Come on, she's not THAT ignorant.

After Z.'s misunderstanding had been thoroughly corrected, Maximillion said: "Don't worry kid we're close soon you'll have your chance to meet Hussie he's definitely worth the wait ha ha ha ha ha."

Mesquite

Mesquite

"Welcome ladies and gentleman to savage sinful seductive Nevada," said Maximillion.

That HAD to mean they were close. Right? If Z. succumbed to the archest of travelogue clichés and loosed the dreaded ARE WE THERE YET (starring O'Shea "Ice Cube" Jackson, Kiki would be sure to append), would some Cal emerge from the woodwork to slap her wrist with a lrn2geography and explain they were actually on some backward-ass opposite end of the state from Las Vegas, that they were actually not going through Las Vegas at all despite it being the original destination, but instead forging onward to California where the Sargasso Sea of entertainment was exported to every nether corner of the planet, beyond even there and into the Pacific to benthos cracks through which molten mantle fed a little life to twenty-foot tubers and maneating clams?

"Are we there yet," said Z.

"Oh yes oh yes oh yes," Maximillion absolutely brimming with energy kinetic and potential, an electric surge glistening every glitter shard imbedded in his coat.

The valley before them tore open in a vicious eruption of Maximillionsque twinkling. A massive city extended a gaping maw, far greater than Denver or anything seen on heaven or earth: A City of Light. A city of skyscrapers, pyramids, obelisks, neon, mandalay bay circus circus em-gee-em grand trump ceasar's palace luxor. The city that every movie that even mentioned it required a montage of famous landmarks to hammer home that you are now WELCOME TO FABULOUS LAS VEGAS NEVADA—they saw no montage, only a sudden cluster of faux Italian villa structures and suburban agglomerations, an infinity complex of billboards for traffic lawyers in both English and Spanish—and this boring sprawl seemed to stretch at least as long as their trip thus far, with only those galaxy lights in the distance to sustain Z. through her sudden bout of anxious twiddling and lurching. Something unreal had occurred, they had made it, despite all that happened, Cal and Maximillion—the fear, the trepidation—nothing mattered, the past two days blasted away like sand, and underneath lurked a gold ingot. None of these jumbled mixed metaphors made sense even in her own head. Nothing mattered! Not even the squat adobe brick that thronged around them as they cut down a car-choked highway, because in the distance thrived all those lights, all those lights, all those lights!

Chapter 5: Las Vegas

PART III: CITY OF SMOKE

Chapter 5: Las Vegas

Eventually they escaped the stranglehold of suburbia and reached the horizon lights, real lights after all, no smoke and mirrors illusion: pillars of debasement and debauchery, the famed casinos of the city, unreal contraptions of fiberglass and gold, contorted into all sizes and shapes—Z. leaned over each of her friends in turn to smush her nose and forehead against the window for the best look possible, Max pushed against the window next to her, their faces filled it, skin caked in dirt, hair clumped in snags, eyes dry and throats drier. Two days of mountain and desert, two vehicular malfunctions, unpleasant characters abound—but they made it! She wanted to kiss someone, she grabbed Max and hugged him.

"Unfathomable," said Max—with a smile. "But..." The smile turned into a cough. "Watch for my mother."

Right. Ain't out the waste yet. Somewhere prowled a sedan beige with clodded dirt. The somber lull lasted a mere moment, though—because it was Vegas! A new sight buffeted them at every turn: pyramids, statues, celebrations, celebrities, riffraff, prostitutes, pimps, performers, gamblers, drunkards, druggies, banquets, buffets, millionaires, billionaires, roller coasters, skylines, boxers, racers, Z., Kiki, Max, Shirou Katsumata, Andrew Hussie! An equally agog Max shot a finger over Maximillion's shoulder and against the top of a vertical gold ingot, a solid and unbroken rectangle of glass bedecked with a sleek platinum title: GRAND MBUJI.

"Gold!" said Z., uncertain the significance.

"The convention's there," said Max, but without reproach.

"Gold," said Kiki. "Yawn."

"Gold denotes opulence and extravagance for a casino it's perfectly reasonable to overdo the gold from a psychological standpoint you want your patrons to feel a rush if I enter this golden monolith I'll leave with its treasure however the gold is but illusion no doubt they tinted the glass or painted it you know."

When stoplights stopped them the backseat breathed and Z. noticed the bustling streets seemed imbued by a listless brand of excitement, like someone paid the streets to bustle, which maybe was a Sunday night thing, it technically being Sunday night—such a bonkers thing to consider, Sunday night, and she unfettered from obligation and reality while the world remained anchored to it. They crossed beneath a decadent gateway adorned with cast-iron seraphs and liquid bronze cherubs. Topiary bestiaries formed a perimeter around the Mbuji tower grounds, they concealed a garden of exotic plants within, bamboo stalks and rainbow flowers, venus flytraps and lush green roots, clustered around a central fountain. The

overgrowth did its best to obscure the rounded driveway to the front of the hotel. Several cars already clogged the path and Maximillion had to halt.

A burgundy-vested gentlemen approached and offered valet services. Maximillion tugged his tie and collar, straightened already-straight sleeves. "No no that's all right I'd prefer if I could park myself if only you'd show the way I'd much rather park myself in case I must leave quickly you understand."

They parked in a subterranean labyrinth. Z. emerged with a triumphant stretch and exalted bask in the fly zapper underground lighting while the others shouldered backpacks and duffel bags.

"AhhhHHHHhhhh," she said. "Well Maximillion, thanks for the ride, time for us split and find somewhere less grandiose to sleep."

Maximillion clicked a key and his car chirruped. "Nonsense kids I've already booked a reservation in fact I receive free rooms from the people who host the convention the point is everything's swell everything's accounted for yes yes."

"For us I mean," said Z. "The three of us. Not you."

Maximillion ushered them into the elevator. "You misunderstand remember how I explained my friend-slash-client Ian West was meant to attend the convention so I ordered another room in advance but he regrettably flaked so that room is empty nothing to worry about if not for you it'd be an empty room at least now it goes to good use."

A likely explanation! Well. A reasonable one. Z. had no choice but to concede. And she did kinda wanna stay in one of these mongo hotels now she'd actually seen them. Plus no Cal remained to protest for the sake of asceticism. Kiki and Max sure said dick.

Dead in the center of the lobby towered a thirty-foot-tall colossus wearing a bowtie, hands on his hips as he stared fixedly into a brighter tomorrow. Reminiscent of Martin Luther King or some civil rights commando, some man of real importance, but its position in an otherwise ordinary hotel lobby baffled, both her and Kiki cracked up, Maximillion loosed a robotic ha-ha-ha and Max smirked or she assumed he did. They staggered drunkenly to the statue, which had a plaque beneath it:

LEOPOLD MBUJI

HOTEL OWNER, ENTREPRENEUR, HUMANITARIAN

RECIPIENT OF THE 2005 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

"A rather grand Mbuji indeed especially if you take the French meaning of the word grand which roughly equates to tall," said Maximillion.

"Holy Christ it's the greatest thing," said Kiki. "The greatest thing since the sixty-foot bronco outside Denver International. Someone take my picture."

Phones exchanged hands, Kiki posed with V-for-victory anime peace signs, she and Z. bunched between the spread bronze legs and selfied themselves, they forced Maximillion to match Mbuji's pose and captured him too. The photos went directly to the folder on Kiki's phone called COOL reserved for such tacky displays of misplaced aggrandizement, goofy statues, tasteless public art, poorly-worded signs, degenerate slobs on park benches, vandalized street signs, pugnacious graffiti, goth dweebs, Frederick Roddlevan, various riffraff and miscellany. The aforementioned bronco picture was the prize of the collection, its exquisite cobalt body and flaming eyes made it something unlike anything else in the world. This picture, this stupid dumb statue of the most self-important hotel owner in history, it faded the unfathomable odyssey of the last forty-eight hours into the fuckstonsphere, planets returned to their natural axis, Earth realigned in syzygy with Mercury and Mars—something for once felt RIGHT.

A college-aged female greeted them at the counter. Maximillion said, "Reservations under West would you mind looking them up for me mademoiselle?"

The receptionist plugged away at a keyboard. Although her disposition was already sunny, she went supernova as she regarded the screen. "Omigod omigod omigod?! You're Ian West, like is this real? This isn't some kind of hoax, there's no hidden cameras right?"

She seized Maximillion's hand and gave it several vigorous shakes. Maximillion smiled. "I take it you enjoy my books that's great as you probably know I'm at the hotel for the convention these are my associates I should have extra rooms already booked for them."

The receptionist relinquished Maximillion and pressed both hands to her heart. "I am SUCH a huge fan of your works Mr. West I've read them so many times I love the *sadism*—"

Maximillion grinned. Z. awaited the correction, the explanation that he was not, in fact, Ian West, but Ian West's agent, Maximillion Ackerman.

The receptionist becalmed. "Ahem. That was unprofessional of me. Yes, it appears you have two extra rooms booked. I assume the young man will take the single and the young ladies will take the double?"

"That's correct one room for Mr. Maxwell Roddlevan and the other for mademoiselles Kiki Radney and Z. Coulter," said Maximillion.

"Coco," said Kiki. "Coco No Lastname."

The receptionist click-clacked away. "The letter Z or Z-E-E?"

"The letter," said Z.

"Ooh and what does it stand for?"

"Don't ask what the Z stands for," said Kiki, Max, and Maximillion in unison.

After Maximillion signed a form (under the name Ian West, pretty sure that's fraud bubby) they received keycards for rooms all the way on the EIGHTEENTH floor. Rooms 12, 13, 14,

organized in order of descending maleness. Shit was posh. Z. and Kiki's twin beds, jammed nearly to touching, overflowed with an entire fabrics outlet of sheets blankets pillows goony silk stuff Z. didn't know what it was, all gold or scarlet with gold trimming. Z. had to jump to get atop it, faceplanting into the mattress with a pent-up sigh. When she lifted her head, a face-shaped imprint of dirt caked the covers.

Maximillion knocked. "Don't get too comfortable kids I'm taking you to see Hussie remember." The gold goblin instantly transformed from weird goof guy to big fucking hero—Max would be so thrilled.

"Hussie can suck my dick," said Kiki as soon as Maximillion left, "It's a whirlpool bath in here and fifty shades of shampoo."

It turned out not to matter anyway because although Kiki spent eons in the bath, humming behind an ajar door while Z. bounced on the bedding anxiously and watched cartoons on their room's plasma-screen TV, Maximillion did that typical adult thing where they say something'll only take a minute but it actually takes an hour. Kiki emerged aromatic and freshly purplized and Z. still had time for rudimentary ablutions before Maximillion knocked again.

Before she reached the door, Kiki said: "He gave us a ride and a room, we have zero reason to do anything he says."

"I gotta meet Hussie," said Z. "Me and Max."

"Yes Z., deeper into the candy house," said Kiki.

Maximillion knocked again.

"Just go with me," said Z. "It's a hotel filled with people, a fancy hotel too, nothing bad can happen, come on come on pleeeeeeease?"

They went to a lower floor. Maximillion made constant adjustments to his jacket cuffs, he still wore his sunglasses. Anticipation floated pungent, a rock atop a vertiginous cliff. Life swelled in Max's features, a strangled grin purpled his lips.

"Ever see *The Shining* starring Olive Oyl," said Kiki.

"Why yes I did and I must say quality film A-minus nine-point-one out of ten ha ha ha ha ha."

At the door, Maximillion inched a knuckle to the wood and gave a quick double-tap.

"It's me Maximillion remember your old friend and guess what I've brought kids why not let me in how about it?"

Silence.

"Come on don't you want to see your old friend Maximillion come on come on please?"

"Come on pleeeeeeease," mimicked Kiki. Maximillion exuded an angry look, except he was smiling and wearing sunglasses.

The knob jiggled and everyone stepped back with a collective shut up. The door opened inward to reveal a dark and smoky room rank with marijuana and hookah and a zillion other inhalants, an entire oriental pleasuredome. The mist manifested a hazy man, piecemeal components that coagulated into a fuller form. He was tall, lanky, sinuous, wiry with a bushy beard immaculately trimmed around the upper lip to maintain a semblance of fashion (as opposed to straight hobo), nerd chic glasses, thick black rims like secondary eyebrows that maintained a serious expression despite his real brows arched to almost comedic degree. His designer faded t-shirt bore an esoteric reference to a cult video game from the 90s.

The six main characters of the TV show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* were tattooed across his arms, three to each forearm.

"Ya faggot," said the man like an anthropomorphic weasel, "Don'tcha got little boys to pork eh?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha classic simply classic you always have a witty barb ready some clever repartee." Maximillion glided into the weed plume. Max, then Kiki and Z. (after a confused glance to one another), followed.

"Are you not a learned scholar? The proper term is stichomythia." The man's voice altered; it boomed with false gregariousness. "At least you brought sexual entertainment, but you surely must know my tastes better than that—I like them in diapers. Fetch me some kindergarteners eh?"

Z. coughed, she might get high just walking through this featureless room. "Are you Hussie?" she asked.

"Exactly right. But my day job is Hussie's slutty fuckboy, I give him blowjobs for pennies on the dollar." Mr. Beard's voice changed to crippling falsetto. "Call me Ian West."

Z. looked to Maximillion for confirmation but all he said was ha ha ha ha ha intermixed with the word "classic" here and there. Ian West or whoever led them to a round table in the middle of the room where all variety of paraphernalia awaited. He dropped into a chair and took a hit of a ready-and-waiting bong. His nostrils flared dragonlike as he exhaled.

"Care to puff the komodo, bruhs?" he asked in SoCal stoner accent. "Fire in your lungs eh."

"No need for excess," muttered another voice. The rest of the room seemed empty, although with the smoke it was hard to tell. Had Mr. Beard thrown his voice like a puppeteer to confuse them even more? What the fuck was this guy—Hussie? Could Hussie be a man like this, whose voice shifted every time he spoke? Who seemed to deliberately say the worst possible thing? She did not like this man.

"Incoming smoke alarm," said Z., and she coughed for effect.

"Firefighters already came for me," said the guy. "Stuffed the bodies under the floorboards. Come on kids, drugs are cool, let's get cranked tonight eh?"

They sat, mostly because it was easier to breathe closer to the ground.

"Who are you really?" said Z.

In another voice, tenorous (whatever a tenor was, Z. had no clue, but it felt like the right word), the guy responded. "I told you, I'm Andrew Hussie, child molester extraordinaire, diddler of prepubescents since 1994."

"Yeah, those *My Little Pony* tats really get my teenage vagina wet," said Kiki.

"Little girls love ponies—the perfect bait to satisfy my lolicon fetish." He flexed, the rainbow-colored horses bulged and contorted something horrid across his biceps. "Now pants off eh?"

"Classic absolutely classic Mitchum Graves I remember him cracking the exact same jokes in college the crazy Canuck ha ha ha ha ha."

For a sinister moment, Mitchum Graves (until proven another name) sneered at Maximillion, but his easy affability returned instantaneously, so fast it was impossible to tell if the expression ever appeared. "Well back then I didn't have the pony tattoos, so I relied on my wit, charm, and rufilin. Speaking of which, who wants a drink?"

Out nowhere he magicked two full bottles of vodka that distorted his beardy face behind their translucent fluid. Nobody had as of yet answered the pressing issue of who was Mitchum Graves and why was he in Hussie's room—if they were even in Hussie's room? The veil of smoke enveloped the table and erased everything else. Something woozy creeped into Z.'s central nervous system as Mitchum Graves uncorked both bottles simultaneously and poured Gatling gun shot glasses which had arrayed themselves in a line before him.

He slid the glasses across the table with bartender expertise. Z. counted six glasses, one for each of the five present and the sixth unattended in the gap between Maximillion and Mitchum, where a particularly dense plume of smoke billowed from an unseen vat of dry ice. Maximillion and Mitchum imbibed their liquor at once. After a brief delay and a sidelong glance, Kiki drank as well. Max stuck a finger into his and swirled it around, forcing the liquid to overflow onto the table. Z. kept her arms flat at her sides.

The sixth glass remained unattended. Max watched it while Z. watched Max.

She grew bored fast. "So who's Mitchum Graves?"

"A disgusting reprobate," said Mitchum Graves. "A pestilence despised by the peoples of Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick. A plague bubonic that murders men, defiles women, and spreads poison into the earth so that fields he has so much as graced lie fallow centuries after the fact. A creature of nightmares, a modern Beelzebub, friendless, loveless, possessing so few redeeming features he has been declared an enemy of both church and state. A connoisseur of human flesh."

Maximillion poured himself another shot. "Also a webcomic artist and a friend of Hussie and Ian West and me too plus a very funny guy laugh riot totally hilarious."

"A dubious claim," said Mitchum. "I'm unsure I ever met this golden man before." He too poured another glass, before offering Kiki.

"Not a chance," Kiki said as she leaned back and let him pour. She dipped her head back and splashed it down her throat.

"Here for the convention too, Graves?" said Z.

"Please, call me Fuckface. And fuck the convention, I'm here to fuck and snort blow eh."

"Spectacular vocabulary," said Kiki.

"Mitchum's the writer and artist of the much-heralded webcomic *Funtime Adventures for Children 16 and Under* which you should read I highly recommend Mitchum's sense of humor is beyond unique."

They poured third glasses. Z. had heard the name of the comic before, didn't know where, sounded stupid.

"Looks like we're outside the target demographic," said Kiki, although she lied because they all were 16 and thus barely made the cutoff implied by the title of Mitchum's dubious creation.

"Lucky too, couple years younger and I'd tap dat ass halfway up the large intestine eh?"

Kiki raised her glass but Z. grabbed her wrist. "Maybe that's enough?" She looked to Graves. "Do you say anything that isn't a rape joke?"

The man of many voices exaggerated a wince. "Sorry, can't say I do. I'm yet another cog in the chauvinistic patriarchy that defines our society, preprogrammed for sexism and misogyny."

"Rape jokes don't need to be sexist," said Max. "You can rape men too."

After a swallow, Mitchum Graves erupted in hyena hysterics. "You can rape men too! You can rape men too!"

"Mitchum found out himself in prison," said Kiki.

"It's not rape if you like it!" said Graves, cackling.

"Where is Hussie?" said Z. and Max in unison.

"If you don't know by now I'm not sure you'll ever. Like are you retarded? Better question, Downs or autism?" Graves poured fifth glasses, his Parkinson's wrists overflowed onto the table as the vodka bottles emptied in a torrential gush. "Aw fuck."

"I hope I hope I hope we have more ha ha ha ha ha," said Maximillion.

"Whose glass is that?" Z. pointed at the unattended one between Graves and Maximillion.

"Whose glass she says," said Graves. "Where the fuck's Hussie she says. Who's this inchoate you reeled in Maximillion, what kind of amateur is she eh?"

"Don't worry she's a nice girl she understands me better than the other two I think." Maximillion adjusted his sunglasses and his smile faltered. "Don't worry she's no problem come on Z. you should drink lighten your mood I love to drink because it means I don't have to think hey that rhymed I'm a poet."

Z. stood up, grabbing Max's wrist with one hand and Kiki's with the other. "We should go."

"You cunt," Graves smiled warmly, "Sit the fuck back down. Don't you know someone joking hates nothing more than saying they're joking?"

"I know... right?" said Kiki. "She's so dense sometimes."

"If you wanna meet Hussie, sit down," said Graves. His tone became momentarily trenchant. His red eyes throbbed in the mist, accentuated by the glare of his glasses. He drummed bony, withered fingers against the table.

Z.'s own eyes watered, from a standing position so much hallucinogenic smoke clouded her head, Maximillion became a jumble assortment of piss-yellow angles, Kiki's face shimmied into a terrible visage with eight or eighteen rotating eyeballs. Only Mitchum Graves remained clear throughout, as though an impenetrable membrane coated him, the dark outline of a comic book character surrounded by shades and dots. The tendons and muscles in his hand and wrist, tautened by the tapping motions of his fingers, caused the ponies on his forearm to dance in fits of epilepsy. Only the thinnest sheath of skin coated his ligaments, a freakish and unnatural gauntness. She remembered the pale translucence of Max's flesh when she first encountered him in the Hussie throes. Of course, he had always been pasty, but now—she looked to confirm, but the smoke obfuscated everything.

She sat down. Kiki and Max weren't leaving. As long as she stayed sober, she could protect them from this sock puppet of a man.

Maximillion extended across the table with a precarious lean. One hand clutched a glass and the other pressed tremulously to his chest. "Please Z. remain calm everything is fine Mitchum is a longtime friend of mine he's a standup guy the kind of guy you can count on in a pinch he'll fight for you ha ha ha ha ha."

The table went quiet, Mitchum rubbed an eroded nose with his hand and stroked his beard afterward, he contemplated the vodka bottles with an analytical, if bloodshot, eye. Kiki nursed her glass and Max did nothing, although his body trembled with such ferocity that his rickety chair squeaked as if about to fall apart. His eyes remained on the misty spot between Maximillion and Mitchum, could a man—Hussie—be there? Could Hussie be nothing but a plume of smoke, a djinn or genie arisen from the vodka bottle clutched in Mitchum's hand?

The silence became unbearable, all the combined loquaciousness of Maximillion and Mitchum evaporated, almost as if they wanted to punish Z. for being a bitch and ruining their rape jokes, a silence placed upon her like an imprecation, a world alone with only herself allowed to speak. Sudden horror gripped her, she had to say:

"So you're Canadian?" Directly at Mitchum. At least, she hoped Canuck meant Canadian. It meant Canadian, right? Right? They looked at her, they said nothing, she was wrong again, stupid Z. and her bankrupt geographical knowledge—

"Mississauga Ontario born and raised eh," said Mitchum, which only from his friendlier tone could she discern as being a location in Canada, aka Z. was right for once. A beam of pride filled Mitchum's face, sickly pride, not happy pride, whatever happy pride was. As with all Mitchum's voices (Z. quickly put her finger on the things about his character that irked her), an undercurrent of snide cynicism pervaded.

Before she ruminated on his unpleasantness further, he wafted away a wide swatch of smoke and bounced to his feet, overturning his chair. He reached for something behind him and pulled to the fore a real Canadian flag, maple leaf and all, attached to a flagpole the length of a spear. He waved the flag back and forth, its broad red-and-white pattern buffeting faces and overturning glasses and in general being annoying as crap. Then, as though his sole aim were to piss Z. off, he started belting the Canadian national anthem (O CANADA) at full blast, fifty octaves into outer space as he pranced around the table making sure to hit everyone in history with his fuckerton flag, it slapped against Z.'s face with an audible splat, she hated this ponce so damn much and it didn't help that Maximillion keeled over laughing at the antics, that Kiki was even smiling at them, that MAX was grinning—chuckling now—he was laughing! Max was laughing at this clown, did he find this funny? Did this titillate his learned taste in humor? Was this parade of douchebaggery rapier or broadsword, eh Max?

Oh my god, "eh" was a Canadian thing, wasn't it? That's why Mitchum kept saying it. She wanted to die.

Moose Hitler ended his procession of agony by planting the flag in the ground and letting it swish lazily in the circulating fumes. The smoke danced around Mitchum's face as though he were a wizard and the flag his magic staff, his arcane energies ruffled his beard and framed him with a passionate intensity contrasted by the smug aloofness in his eyes.

The fuckery had knocked over Z.'s own, untouched glass and the vodka spilled the worst place for any liquid to spill on a person.

"Ha ha ha ha ha," said Maximillion. "Classic Mitchum Graves classic no man has as much national pride as Mitchum Graves ha ha ha ha ha."

From another pocket of smog, Graves retrieved a third bottle of vodka and poured more drinks. "Seriously though, who the fuck's this gold guy. Never met him in my life. Who are you and whatcha done with Ian West eh?"

"Skinned him alive and wears his face as a mask," said Kiki.

"Poor Ian."

"Poor us, now that we know his secret."

"No no no I assure you Ian is perfectly fine and not dead at all I'm not a murderer no no."

"Tell me goldman," said Mitchum, "Ian still writing fanfiction under an alias to hide from his responsibilities?"

"No no no I assure you Ian is a diligent worker he would never shirk his duty it's very important to him ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha."

Maximillion grew uproarious, his laughter deeper and more desperate. Mitchum Graves laughed at his laughing and Kiki, after a few hesitant chuckles, laughed as well. Whatever had amused Max previously no longer amused him and he resumed a disinterested mien toward Graves and the conversation at large. His leg shook as if motorized, he eventually crossed it over his other knee and it still shook.

Amid the bacchic carousal a voice emerged: "Rather foolish..." The mystery voice. The djinn in the smoke.

Maximillion went quiet. Mitchum went quiet. Kiki, delayed, went quiet.

Behind the sixth glass, the smoke parted, the djinn emerged.

He came into focus in pieces. His hands lay folded on the table, the fingers interlaced. A pair of glasses, white with shine. A green t-shirt. Auburn hair. And not much else.

Andrew Hussie looked like your average, generic, thirty-something, run-of-the-mill white dude. After the flamboyant styles of Maximillion and Mitchum, it was... disappointingly ordinary. Only one detail trilled Z.'s heart with palpitations:

His t-shirt had an image of a unicorn's head in profile.

Hussie stifled a polite cough. He looked side-to-side at the people arrayed before him. His eyes fell toward the tabletop, his fingers fiddled, he flashed an uncertain smile.

"Hello everyone," he said. "Sorry to have kept to the sidelines until now. My name is Andrew Hussie."

He unlaced his fingers to give a halfhearted wave, and then immediately pulled his hands back together even as Max nearly overturned the table to shake them, his mouth open and a sudden deluge of words emerging from it:

"Mr. Hussie it's such an honor to meet you my name is Max Roddlevan I've only recently encountered your work but it is truly an inspiration to me and my own artistic ambitions actually if I must admit the insurmountable edifice of your accomplishment strikes me with a fear—a certain dread—that nothing I ever do will be good enough." The sentence concluded, he lowered his voice and cast a quick, sidelong glance at the others. "My apologies. I didn't intend to seem so overeager."

Hussie coughed again. "It's nothing." After regarding Max's hand for a long time, he gave it a flimsy shake. "I'm pleased you enjoy my work so much."

It was happening—it was happening! Max had immediately broken his terseness, his distance, the words he spoke sounded like Max, a real Max. He sat back in his chair and started an animated conversation about *Homestuck*, to which Hussie nodded at appropriate emphases and cadences while Mitchum and Kiki exchanged knowing glances. Hussie's expression dwindled from pleasant, if shy, receptiveness. His eyes sank into their sockets, black shades appeared across his face. His hands clutched tighter together, he gnawed his lower lip. He looked askance at Mitchum and Mitchum flicked a tongue at him. His breathing became deeper, his head tilted. Max continued to speak.

Something wasn't right, something felt off, some kind of power imbalance was at work here, Z. could sense it. Max spouted his vitality into the air alongside the smoke, wrenching up bits of passion to fling toward this Hussie. Max's speech, the snatches of it she understood, the swaths she could not—it wasn't old Max. No, she made a mistake, it wasn't old Max at all, strange things were coming out alongside the other words—

"I think about it all day, I dream about it"

"I devote my life to it"

"I want to serve it any way I can"

"Yes, well," said Hussie. "That's very nice—" But the words continued, Hussie's quiet voice was buried beneath Max's entire soul.

"I'll be honest with you Mr. Hussie, let me be completely frank. I was thinking about dark things, unfathomably dark things, before I discovered *Homestuck*. I had destroyed many aspects of my life, I had ruined much of what made me want to live, the thoughts I was having—but *Homestuck*—it came to me like... a beacon of hope. I don't believe in God but there was an almost spiritual aspect to the coincidence of me encountering your work at such a nadir, such a dark time—"

These words, what were they? Dark time—when? Z. knew of no dark time, it had been the normal time until *Homestuck*. Hussie's hands clenched into two separate fists and he drummed them idly against the table.

"Jesus fuck Max," said Kiki. "Suck his cock already."

The quip made Mitchum laugh, Max quiet, and Hussie redden. The latter tugged at his collar and ahemed. "I'm glad you enjoy my work." He turned toward Z. and Kiki. "And you two, you're his friends? Could you, um, introduce yourselves?"

"Kiki Radney, professional prostitute."

"Z. Coulter."

"Z. Coulter," said Hussie. "And... what does the Z. stand for?"

Maximillion, who rolled his head across the table during Max's speech, suddenly looked up and opened his mouth to speak the hallowed incantation of what not to do involving Z.'s name, but before he could, Max said:

"Zelda."

A twelve-inch dagger plunged into Z.'s lungs. The blood ran down her chest as a strangled gurgle plugged her throat. Zelda—the name of elf damsels and septuagenarian spinsters. The worst name—quite possibly the worst, and Max had, he had—he had—

She stood up. "What the fuck is happening?! Who the hell are you?!" She jabbed a finger in Hussie's face. "With your fake nice guy act, who do you think you are? You think you can fool me? I know when something's wrong, something is definitely wrong here. Why is Max so obsessed with you, why is he saying these weird things, what have you done to him, why a *unicorn*?!"

Hussie tilted his head to look at her with his white-flared glasses. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Zelda."

A second Julius Caesar knife shanked her pelvis and she doubled over. "You're... strange, something's strange about you and... all your goon squad friends, something ROTTEN!"

"Easy," said Graves, "We just have autism."

"Z. the one being strange is you," said Kiki. "Max too but I can't believe you're not used to it by now. Sit down and shut up, please."

Z. wanted to wrap Mitchum's Canadian flag into a tight coil around Kiki's pretty throat. She almost rebutted, but Maximillion, who had maintained the appearance of being about to speak ever since Max cut him off, finally followed through on his body language. "Come on friends no need for hostility Z. I swear it's nothing Hussie and Mitchum are both good friends they mean no harm there's nothing to worry I swear trust me good friends."

He tilted his head from Z. to Hussie, apparently in a bid to appease them both. Z. didn't know whether to be disgusted or angry but she was both so the point was moot. Mitchum Graves quipped something Z. didn't bother to hear, Kiki laughed and Maximillion laughed and Hussie didn't. Max attempted to resume his manic conversation with Hussie, but Hussie sank back into the mist. Mitchum rubbed a finger across his front teeth and dumped the rest of the vodka into empty shot glasses, which Maximillion and Kiki drank when bidden, Kiki now on her fifth or sixth and leaning precariously. Mitchum tossed his head back and downed his own shot, then he slammed the empty bottle on the table.

"We need more and we need it yesterday people."

"Hey hey hey I got an idea I can drive to the store and buy more yeah I'll do that I can be back five minutes no problem quick it'll be—" Maximillion bolted upright, tangoed with his chair, timbered to the ground with a catastrophic plop. Graves burst with filthy, demonic cackling, tilting back and forth on his own chair with precarious gymnastic acumen, extending a finger and pointing as Maximillion rolled across the carpet. Kiki joined in the

laughter and Maximillion, after what may have been a strangled sob, laughed too, all three laughing at Maximillion on the floor.

Z. hated that she couldn't laugh. She hated that she couldn't fall in line with this party, she hated that she couldn't join Kiki and Max who both looked so much happier than before, even if that happiness was purchased with danger—but isn't all fun? Z. had transmogrified, improbably, into the lame unfun party pooper, the one who kills the vibe, slaughters the mood, makes people uncomfortable because they came to act stupid when the world expected them to act so smart all the time—these honors kids, these good college scholars, these unwinders and unveilers. But why did they find it funny, why did they have such affinity toward *these* people?

Mitchum grabbed his flag and ran around the table and smacked it down on Maximillion's back as Maximillion tried to get up. Maximillion cried out and flopped onto the ground, his shoes scraped uselessly against the carpet as Mitchum laughed like mad and hit him again. Maximillion's sunglasses fell off and he scrambled to put them back on, his face was to the floor so Z. couldn't see his eyes.

"Stop," said Z. quietly. Kiki was laughing, Mitchum was laughing, Maximillion was laughing. She didn't want to intrude, maybe it really was funny? Maybe something was broken with her.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha," said Maximillion as Graves brought down the flag.

Mitchum only stopped when he tuckered himself out. He returned to his seat panting for breath, his thin face huffing air. Maximillion finally crawled to a semblance of standing.

"Alright now that I'm up I'll get the alcohol buy it from the store this is Vegas must have alcohol just quick drive find it count on me."

"What," said Z., "You can't drive, you're plastered."

"No no no I can do it I swear trust me best driver in Massa—Master—choocha—oh god oh god oh god oh god." He flopped down and rolled on the floor. Z. tried and help him up, but he made little attempt to ameliorate his position.

Through wheezed gasps, Mitchum Graves managed to spout: "Get off the floor, you degenerate lowlife!"

Maximillion laughed with him as he made vertiginous ascent using the table as a prop, before moving onto Z.'s head and shoulders. She crooked her neck low to make way for him.

"Ha ha ha ha ha I'll be right back I'll be right back I'll be right back."

"You idiot, you can't drive," said Z. Maximillion's dogged determination had taken him to the door, his outfit's luminescence warding away the smoke. After a few seconds of fumbling he remembered how to use a knob and toppled headlong onto the hall carpet.

"Bets on how far until he splatters his brains," said Graves. "Fifty on one block."

Kiki slapped a hand down. "Sixty-nine!"

"He won't leave the hotel," said Max.

Maximillion managed to half-crawl his way out of view. His unstoppable laughter echoed through the corridor.

Things were hopeless when Z. Coulter of all people had to play the responsible one—the one person unallowed to vacate on the vacation she herself proposed. "I'll make sure he's okay." She hoped her tone conveyed exasperation not only at Maximillion but everyone else at the table for being worthless sacks of shit. "Kiki, stay safe, okay?"

Kiki flipped Z. off.

"Fuck you," said Z. "Don't come crying to me when Mr. Canada puts his hands all over you."

She stuck a tongue at Z. "Maybe I *want* him to, eh?"

The fact that she imitated his stupid Canadian "eh" revulsed Z. so much she stormed out the room. Fuck them, fuck them all, she could do nothing right for these people, any genuine concern on her part got spat back like cobra venom because they didn't care. At all.

She tracked down Maximillion making steady progress toward the elevator. Maybe, now this might be crazy Z., maybe try caring a little less about these people? If they're going to ignore you and laugh at you and say nothing of value ever to you, what's the point right? She tugged Maximillion's collar. "Get up, you stupid ass." And of course Max and Kiki and Cal and everyone were right all along, Maximillion wasn't some serial murderer, Z.'s typical hyperactive imagination on its period again, nothing more than a pathetic loser who got laughed at by his own friends just like her, the party rejects together.

Kiki, stay safe, okay? When you opened yourself to display any emotions other than confidence or snide apathy, it was when you were most vulnerable. That must be the appeal of never saying what you mean, because then nobody could flip you off and make you overreact yet again to something trivial like COME ON Z. what are you even mad about? You're the dumbfuck Z., it's you.

She seethed all the way to the parking garage, she got so worked up in her anger at Kiki and Max and herself that she forgot her original plan (if she ever had one) of tricking Maximillion back to his room until she blinked and she was at his shiny red car with half his weight bearing on her shoulder.

He found his keys, dropped them, spent ten years picking them up, unlocked the car.

"You can't drive, Maximillion."

"Sure I can you don't know me I can do it I can do it no I can't I can't do it." The epiphany wrenched the pin out his back and he fell to the ground in position to barf. Z. shuffled her shoes out of the spray zone but he kept it down and returned to a semi-standing state.

"We need more alcohol can't let Mitchum and Hussie down not after so long with how I always let them down need to try at least."

He reached for the door but Z. barred his path. "Does it really matter? I doubt they care."

"It doesn't matter if it matters what matters is do something needed fulfill that role especially after I said I how can I back out now." He leaned over her to reach for the handle but stopped as his face brightened. "I know why don't you drive Z. you didn't drink anything it'll be perfect."

"Uh. I've never driven a car before."

He was deaf to her protest as he slipped his hand under the handle and shoved her into the driver's seat with his shoulder. Her head bumped against something and she yelped but already he was rolling over the hood, as energetic as drug-addled. He got in on the other side of her, tugged his seatbelt once or twice, then forgot the seatbelt. "Key in ignition foot on brake gear into drive no wait reverse back out don't bump other cars brake gear into drive for real and you're good to go easy as pie."

"I can't drive." Somehow the car keys manifested in her hand. She let them jingle.

"See that's a problem learning to drive is a major part of adulthood it signifies independence the ability to work part of my problem was I didn't learn to drive until twenty-six how crazy is that don't repeat my mistakes now's the best time to sort yourself out."

He nuzzled his head against her shoulder. She dipped out from under him and he fell on the lever thingy between the driver and passenger seats. The thing that shifted gears—gearshift? What did it matter, she wasn't driving, she'd rather take her chances with drunk Maximillion at the helm. He shifted his body and leaned against the window, mercifully away from her. Even blotto he remained scentless, none of the reek of alcohol Z. knew firsthand from several sources (her mom, her stepdad, Kiki...).

"Gotta learn to drive sometime," said Maximillion. His speech slowed down and he yawned, creating the first half-stop she had heard him utter. "Signifies independence. Independence is important Z. Don't be like me I messed up now look where I am."

"Kidnapping kids and getting them drunk in Las Vegas?"

"That's me Maximillion Ackerman B.A. in Sociology literary agent to the great Ian West follower of orders of anyone who asks..."

"Orders?"

Maximillion said nothing.

"Maximillion, why'd you follow us?"

No response.

It took a moment to discover he had fallen asleep, because he didn't snore or regulate his breathing or do anything except not do anything.

She decided to check on Kiki and Max. Leaving Maximillion in the passenger seat (but keeping his keys), she slid out the vehicle, closed the door gingerly, and tiptoed until she reached a suitable distance. Orders... whose orders? One name blared, readily available and easy to speak: Hussie. Why would HE want them followed? Maybe it was coincidence, and Maximillion a drunk rambler. Maybe he meant something else, a mind-event to which Z. had no access. Why did Maximillion have those extra rooms at the hotel? Two for himself and Ian West. When did he book the third?

She hated answering questions. It made her look like a dunce.

After several tries she found Hussie's room again. She pounded the door but nobody answered, maybe it was the wrong room, she considered asking the front desk. She returned to her own room to formulate a plan of action, she paced but nothing coalesced. She went to the lobby but the receptionist had changed, now a gargantuan hulk-man with spindly sideburns engaged in a long conversation with a family of four. Z. circumnavigated the giant Mbuji statue for fifteen, thirty, forty-five minutes while the conversation continued, family of four wanted better rates, the online service that booked the hotel promised such-and-such dollars, hulk-man grunted that the site gave rates for two beds and a family of four needed a four-bed double-room, family would have none of this, the mother in particular disliked this turn of events, they rehashed the same arguments until Z. desired death.

She went back to Hussie's room and knocked and this time the door opened and Hussie emerged.

"Oh," he said. "You."

"Yeah me buddy," said Z. "Where's my friends—Max and Kiki?"

"They left." Hussie held a fist to his mouth and stifled a cough. "It took some time to convince the one, Max, to go. He wanted to talk... a lot..."

He yawned. In the better light of the hallway, his eyes were shriveled, hollow. His t-shirt clung to a bony frame, he looked as sickly as Mitchum, as sickly as Maximillion. A bilious trinity.

"Go where," said Z. "Where'd they go?"

"Look. Zelda." Hussie hesitated, glanced over his shoulder. "You can't... I know from experience. You can't wear yourself thin helping people who don't want to be helped. It only drains you..."

"What's *that* mean—Help them? What happened?!"

Hussie adjusted his glasses. The lower half of his body remained an enigma. "Nothing happened to them they didn't want."

"You're NOT ANSWERING ME!" She grabbed the door, but he held it firm.

"Please, you'll wake the guests... It's pretty late. Zelda, in my line of work—there's two kinds of people. There's creators and consumers. People are hungry. They're hungry for anything that'll fulfill them, that'll make their lives mean something. They look for so many things, but most of these things require... draining the life force... of other people. It's energy, Zelda. Transfer of energy... entropy."

What was he saying, who created this imbecilic conversation?

Hussie continued: "Energy always dwindles. People need to replenish." Another yawn, another adjustment of glasses. "It's... cannibalism, in a way. It makes me very tired. Would you mind if I sleep? Your friends... they'll find their own things to eat."

He slithered back into the room and shut the door. She pounded for several minutes until someone poked a head out a different room and told her to shut up.

Z. rushed back to the floor where all their rooms were. First she knocked on Max's door. After ten or twenty seconds, the door opened and Max appeared.

"Oh," he said. "You."

"Max, what happened, are you okay? Where's Kiki?"

"She's having fun." Max shut the door.

She dropped to the floor and tucked her head into her stomach and squealed into her shirt. The moment subsided and she rushed to her own room. Kiki was back, she lay facedown on her bed, wearing nothing on the upper half of her body. Z. averted her gaze as Kiki mumbled incoherent words in sleep or half-sleep.

Well. She was back. They were both back. Nothing had happened. Crisis averted, she guessed.

Chapter 5x: Cal Calls.

First Day

Chapter 5x: Cal Calls.

She woke maybe two, maybe three in the morning because Kiki's phone exploded. It clattered between the beds, brimming into the carpet as a synthetic pop song pealed full volume, the kind of song apparently millions of people consumed but Z. had never heard it. It took her several soporific moments to even comprehend the music, it started as mere noise until the chorus kicked in, and by then she shook herself from whatever illusory coil to roll over and grab it. Kiki remained rocklike across the divide.

Z. entered the passcode and answered.

"Please tell me you're alive," said Cal. "No jokes, tell me you're okay."

"You're lucky Kiki didn't answer." Z. kept an eye on her addlebrained companion, so far gone in her booze delirium that Z.'s words wouldn't even osmose to her dreamsphere. "She'd give you shit. Maximillion drove us to Vegas, he got us hotel rooms."

"With him? Z., get out now—"

"Cripes Cal, separate rooms, you think we're retarded?" (He probably did.) "Maximillion's not that bad, he's a real literary agent, he introduced us to Andrew Hussie."

"Who?"

Z. sighed loud enough to convey her agitation. "Big story guy, a big name okay? He's a real guy. Trust me on this."

"Why should I trust you on *anything*? Where's Kiki, let me talk to Kiki."

"Kiki's too plastered to talk right now, may I take a message?"

"Plastered? Alcohol? Z., has she been drinking alcohol?"

She wanted to cut in with a snide, Kikiesque jab but her fuzzy head conjured nothing. "Yeah, a bit."

"How much Z.? How much? Has she done anything else? What else is she doing?"

"Jesus dick Cal, lay off it, what's it matter to you? She's passed out in the room with me, she's perfectly safe, calm down." Cal didn't calm down though, he gnashed a word-babble, Z.'s brain moved too slow to filter his speech. Patience aided by fatigue, she waited for a lull in his cadence, and when it came—marked by a question mark, who knew the question—she interjected:

"Didja survive the desert? What happened anyway?"

"Z., did your blunt screwdriver brain hear what I said? GET OUT OF THAT HOTEL. Get Kiki and get away from that Maximillion creep."

"It's a fancy hotel Cal, whaddya want us to do, wander the streets at two in the morning?" She was pretty done with this whole conversation. "Maybe let's go to the police, EH?"

The police buzzword worked, Cal went silent. His voiceless ruminations tickled Z.'s ear as she rolled onto her back and watched dim-lit shadows crawl across the ceiling.

"Okay," said Cal, "You're in a room, right? A hotel room? Keep the door locked. Don't leave. Wait for me to arrive."

"When's that?"

Another pause. A labored, suctioned breath. "I'm waylaid in Grand Junction. I need a tow truck to salvage the jeep and a mechanic to repair it. Maybe... No more than a day. A day," he added with more certainty.

"A day. You want us to stay in the hotel room a whole day."

"I don't care what *you* do, but Kiki—"

"Kiki's her own woman, Cal, she can do what she wants."

"No, you don't understand, how do you not understand even fundamental things about ostensibly your own best friend? Kiki has problems, Z., serious problems, she shouldn't be on her own—Who was she drinking with? Who was she drinking with—Maximillion?"

"Quit being a controlling creep, Cal. I'm going back to bed."

She ended the call before he cut in and shoved the phone under her pillow to muffle whatever fury he retaliated with.

Chapter 6: Pandaemonium

Chapter 6: Pandaemonium

Next thing—daylight. It burst between the slats in the blinds of a panorama window overlooking the next hotel over. Beams and shadows zebra-striped her face as she blinked and yawned and rolled over and scratched her tangled and disastrous hair.

Blankets and comforters from both beds were strewn hither and thither. Across the other end of the room, a bathroom door hung open and an unclothed Kiki retched into the toilet.

In the hotel hallway she found a message written in neat, legible handwriting:

KEYS PLEASE

The words baffled her, she turned over the paper in search of something else, then she noticed from the doorknob hung a pair of badges—all-purpose VIP passes to the FanCon convention in the Grand Mbuji Hotel & Casino Royal Ballroom. Each badge had a name: Z [sic] Coulter and Kiki Radney. In conjunction with the message, this assortment of objects made no sense, she contemplated their significance until suddenly it dawned: Maximillion! She took his keys when he passed out in his car. She patted her body, found them in a hip pocket, and extricated them with some pride that she hadn't impaled herself while she slept. Maximillion, bigshot literary agent as he was, must have pulled some strings.

When she knocked on Maximillion's door it swung open instantly and he emerged in the exact same gold suit. Z. couldn't judge because she wore the same thing too.

"Z. nice of you to visit I'm on my way to the convention I have a booth after all can't leave it unattended someone must think about the fans and Ian won't anyway keys please."

She dropped the keys into his upturned palm and he slid past her, moving with inimitable quickness Z. didn't feel like imitating anyway. No badge hung from Max's knob, so she suspected he already left.

She had to wait like fifteen minutes for the elevator to return after Maximillion disappeared into it.

The inner sanctum of Hell is called Pandaemonium, where the six remaining demon lords reside. Z. entered this location when the elevator doors opened. Creatures teemed, bodies packed into seas of bobbing heads. They choked what was once a cavernous emptiness, blotting the floor, furniture, front counter. Only the Mbuji colossus rose above the horde, and even from it clung humans, beings, entities that clawed his bronze body to stare across the surface. An unknown power propelled her into the mass, it consumed and assimilated her. Arms churned, sweat and humanity's grime caressed her cheek, she had no control over herself. Forces shunted together with cataclysmic cracks at the ebb of mingled souls. Z., not tall enough, sank between the murk and reached for snatches of light above the bodies.

Costumes—all wore costumes—gowns, plate armor, papier-mâché broadswords and bucklers, hilts and belts, boots with wings, epaulets with frills, fezzes with mustaches, wizards with witches, wyverns with warlocks, wights with werewolves, steampunk top hats and steampunk monocles, helms with beavers, halberds with banners, rogues and clerics and halflings, prosthetic ear elves and prosthetic ear succubae, green and gray face paint, feathered headdresses and frenetic hairdos, collars and spikes, a child with faerie wings clutching the hand of a frog, a goblin with earrings taking pictures of orcs, a pumpkinhead scarecrow leading a flock of anthropomorphic ravens, a woman with the body of a spider, a man with the body of a horse, mermaids and lamias, lamassu and satyrs, them and a thousand more, hands and shoulders and torsos and chests, the multitudinous flow of their collective motion ushered her directly into the front counter.

She hit it at an angle and was forced to bend over it, her hands splayed against the crystal surface. Behind it, burgundy-vested attendants issued unheard orders alongside madcap semaphore. She could not pull away, too many bodies pressed against her backside, so she slithered over the counter and rolled behind it, instantly beset by the burgundies who repeated in so many ways ACCESS IS PROHIBITED. But she was one of a million and they couldn't control her, she exercised her brief respite to hold fast against the wall and shuffle along the side relatively unmolested while the torrential downpour of fandom rushed past. Eventually she came to an opening in the wall, the entrance to the hotel restaurant, which normally who gave a crap but it had been twenty-four hours since her last paltry meal and the restaurant was relatively uncrowded. It served brunch, Z. found her hotel room key had Mbuji Deluxe Membership which gave her two complementary meals a day. How convenient, had Maximillion arranged it? The brunch sucked, but they had orange juice and bacon.

(Despite her daylong daydreams about this moment—this convention—she discovered a sedate and nonplussed Z. amid the dregs of the human conglomerate, she chewed her scrambled eggs with passive, uncharacteristic diligence.)

(Sure, fantasy's cool, hell *Faerie Endless* is her leitmotif, but you can only rage against the machine in your little echo chamber so long before you exhaust your energy, you need that secondary perspective, that external mind that butts in with perspectives and ideas, fresh life breathed into your cracked and dry clay cortex.)

(Otherwise you feel like what's the point.)

(Your head fills with bubbles.)

A sickening concavity sagged in her chest as she prodded sausages with a fork. It was worse. Worse than the car ride, at least then everyone was there. Now she sat alone in this kitschy buffet restaurant with gold-plated tigers and—somehow—a bust of Mbuji the Great against the back wall, lighted by crisscrossing strobes. Some of the diners wore costumes or otherwise exuded a nerd mien, some seemed like regular guests disconcerted by their newfound fellows. Ordinarily this collision of natural and internet worlds would titillate her. But it felt too weird eating at a restaurant with only herself.

She decided to go back to her room, grab Kiki, and do something whether Kiki wanted or not. Good plan! Pats on back. She had no clue what to do with her plate so she left it on the table and ran for the exit with her back slightly hunched to evade detection. When she

emerged in the lobby, most of the horde had dispersed, or at least transported themselves to the actual convention center, with burgundies herding the stragglers. Ugly Americans in aloha shirts clustered around the elevators with bags and trolleys, she started for them before they left without her and she had to wait infinity minutes for the elevator to return.

She achieved maybe five steps when she stopped dead, not like "stopped dead" the expression, she stopped literally fucking dead because her heart stopped beating, her blood stopped flowing, her brain stopped working, the telltale signs of deadness, she turned into a perfectly white object with a solid black outline, the color pooled out her shoes and splooged across the ground.

At the main counter, engaged in conversation with the same perky receptionist who gave Z. crap about her name the previous night, towered Mrs. Lavinia Roddlevan, alias Roddlemom, a woman of obscene height, heightened by her thick black pumps, elongated by the conservative frock that swaddled her in formlessness, a pale white neck attached to a swath of dark hair bound and strained through clips and metal bands. Her face was turned away from Z. but her effervescent pulse of antimatter null-magic negative energy signaled her identity in an instant, especially because next to her like a stooge stood Frederick Roddlevan in his classic school shooter trench coat, hands clutching his small unmarked box (larger than breadbox? as Z.'s mother might ask, inexplicably). Mrs. Roddlevan held the poor receptionist hostage, a lot of smiling met a lot of shouting, a lot of hook handed gestures and a lot of yes-ma'aming.

However, the situation left Z. with one distinct advantage, that being Mrs. R was so engrossed in her vociferous rant she did not bother to look in Z.'s direction, which would then truly be the end of her, LITERAL literal death. Frederick, his head a lazy loll, also seemed focused on a portrait of Godhead Mbuji on the wall behind the receptionist, or maybe he was staring at her tits, who the hell knew—the point was Z. had a chance to abscond.

The entrance to the elevators was in their view radius. The doors opened, aloha shirts piled in, Z. could sprint, squeeze between the overstuffed tourists, disappear before either elder Roddle reacted, but it was risky. How did they find the hotel? Maybe Max left something on his computer, maybe Kiki's mom tattled. Maybe if she slinked away silently their trail would go clammy. The next obvious exit point was the convention center, a long series of open double doors that comprised the western wall (she only said western because it was to her left). If she dipped inside, blended in, disappeared... Good plan Z., good brain.

She sidled for the entrance, she closed in like a cheetah/raccoon hybrid, rawr, but a small queue bunched at the doors as burgundy vests checked everyone's ID. Z. tried to push to the front, nobody took any of that shit, she got forced to the back, the line moved fast enough. Three people in front, two—

"Hey—you—obnoxious female!"

She turned and encountered the incomprehensible sight of Frederick Roddlevan charging her, not moseying not walking not jogging but full-tilt sprinting with his box under one arm and the other pumping back and forth.

Z. hurdled laterally past the badge man and into the convention, a monolithic space of surprising length, with vaulted ceilings that spanned past her ability to see, so choked was it with booths and tables and pedestrians, big problem because she had difficulty witching paths in front of her, pockets where she could maintain her manic velocity as she peddled her feet with useless, leadshoed hurky-jerk movements. The people weren't as dense as in the lobby, but still dense enough to—KABLAMO she collided with a dude in a centipede costume, a rubber prosthetic head bobbing back and forth as he zipped out of her orbit and she out of his, only to fly directly into a flock of American schoolgirls dressed as Japanese schoolgirls, was it even fantasy at that point, Z. wound up on the ground, on her back, a dozen faces thronged her with mixtures of sincere concern and unfazed laughter. Through thatches of crisscrossed legs she caught the flicker of a trench coat and a parting of the waves.

She rolled onto semi-cooperative limbs, crawled between a schoolgirl's half-spread legs, tried to rise and snagged on the girl's skirt, everyone started shrieking, gravity started grabbing. The second time she tried to rise a hand clamped her ankle, the gossamer visage emerged from plaid and peacock pleats—Frederick! That ghoul of Max's life, a man encountered more through tale than reality, whose corporeal presence amounted to little beyond sidelong appearances in the periphery, bigfoot glimpses as he lumbered between two rooms in the Roddlevan upper hallway, someone Kiki and Z. always joked was a meth addict because he looked the part, and Z. wasn't always sure it was jokes. His eyes now no exception—infinite black pits ringed by the slimmest white. Only one hand gripped her, the other remained attached to his box, so when she kicked him in the cheek and he reared back into the crowd his grasp broke and she skittered forward, hands and knees until her balance returned enough to rise only to kerplow into a freaking Chinese dragon composed of five or six people. She sagged against a pliant midsection as shouts rose and people fell, chain reaction domino style into a canvased booth which promptly collapsed and trapped several beneath the wreckage, pretty much everyone was pissed at Z. now as she fought her way through the deflating dragon and over the agglomeration of writhing bodies which had formed a sloping pyramid, more people and costumes getting sucked into the vortex until a full-scale calamity transpired, a burgeoning Sargasso Sea of cultural detritus, your wizards and witches and heroes and villains. She pushed down their heads and arms to pull herself closer to the apex, dodging stiltpoles that jutted to gore her, checking over her shoulder in time to pull her foot away from a swipe of Frederick's hand.

Security gathered at the foothills of nerd mountain to wave batons and call for order. People cried in fear and pain as their bodies melded together into grotesque globules. Z's own arm sank through a gap in material and the massy tumor sucked her down to her shoulder; she yanked to free herself, couldn't, something clamped her fingers until blood dribbled down her fingernails. She tried to bite back and got her jaws around somebody's angelic wing, only to spit pillow feathers and wag a rancid tongue.

Frederick seized her by the collar and yanked her back, for a tense moment whatever was devouring her hand tried to hold on and Z. thought she might lose some appendages, but the jaws slackened and she came up under Frederick's arm. He wrestled with her atop the costumes, they tangoed in what felt like midair with the whole convention splayed beneath them, she swung her bloodied fist against his side, his arm, whatever part of his nebulous body she could reach, all she hit was his flapping trench coat, but she had the distinct advantage that this fucking goon refused to relinquish his box, he even started to hit her on

the head with it, it crumpled a little and stuff inside rattled but mostly it left her unrestrained. She wriggled and writhed, anything to break his one-hand hold, her skinny body good for this one thing only, parts of her becoming less dimensional until she tapered into pinpoint wrists and deflated midsections. His grasp slipped, her skin slipped, instead he held shirt, and shirt unlike skin could rip, a sudden unraveling of fabric near the sleeve. He reeled back, unmoored from her tether, he stood too tall and too angular above the unstable pit, his beady eyes drilled into her throat as the patch of fabric he held became thinner and thinner thread. He swayed, suspended, an uncertain moment—the box clutched under his arm—and then backward he toppled, into the mass.

Free, she scrambled over the summit and rolled down the other, shapelier side, skidded over faces to stable ground and rubbed her battered arm (not as bloody as she thought, in fact no blood whatsoever) as she made swift egress from the catastrophe. She ducked between onlookers and soon no line of sight remained between her and Frederick, if he hadn't been subsumed into the hivemind yet, and although she flitted a glance back and forth for his shitster trench coat (not nearly as out of place in this costume smorgasbord), her heart rate resumed normalcy. It had been dicks close though, if Mrs. Roddlevan got ahold of her she was fucking dead. No need for further rhapsodizing, she knew the stakes.

Which meant she must warn Kiki and Max. One unwitting blunder, unprepared for the trap the elder Roddlevans had prepared, and they'd be cannibal-cooked in the cauldron. Plus she'd be bored as hell without them. Luckily ninety-nine percent of people at the convention were taller than her, which made stealth effortless. Flipside, it also made finding stuff nigh impossible. She groped blind down aisles of merchants hawking wares, creators of art and entertainment, fans and the marks of their fandom. She read the placards on the tables, tried to recognize them, but most were nothing but names to her. She tried to find a map, a compass, a sextant or something. No dice. And the creatures in their masks and costumes she didn't dare engage in conversation.

The convention building was ginormous, so big Z. had no idea how it fit in the hotel. Sometimes, when the crowd thinned and she stood on tiptoe with her body braced against a column to better elongate itself, she noticed broad cathedral-style windows on a distant wall, almost spectral with the smoky sunlight that streamed through them, until she blinked and her eyes fizzled and she no longer saw anything and had to rub the world back into her irises.

She smacked into lines and booths until she smacked into one that coiled around several booths and terminated at a long table with a sign that read: IAN WEST. The man behind the desk was Maximillion and she marched past the line determined to speak with him, like why was he here if his client Ian West wasn't, but before she got halfway a collage of arms extended to impede her, a polyphony of voices chimed: NO CUTTING!

"No, I know him, let me through," but the will of the line would not be disobeyed. They undulated her to the back where she waited behind a fidgety dude who kept trying (and failing) to spark conversation with the faeriegirl ahead of him, Z. wondered if the girl was dressed like a character in *Faerie Endless*, or if we were talking some Tinkerbell generic faerie, but Fidgets kept fidgeting into her view so all she ever saw were wings and eventually she gave up and glazed her eyes while the line trudged onward. The thought struck her that standing still in lines was a good way to get Fredericked but then again Frederick had no

convention badge, surely they kicked him out. Well, the point went moot as a knot of white-robed assassins entered the line behind her and she melded into their ranks, they chattered incessantly about anime girls. For the next infinity hours she learned in immaculate detail which neko maid waifu each assassin preferred. Debates about "moe" and the sexual attractiveness of stockings. Z. considered interjecting an argument about Jolly from *Faerie Endless*, who certainly had the stockings down, but nobody noticed her or asked her opinion. When they finished about girls they segued into politics. Z. yearned for the days when Malkwon filled the silences.

Then she remembered she had her Gameboy in her pocket still. The battery was close to dead but it should suffice for merciful minutes of distraction. She booted it up, determined to powergame her time to its fullest, mashing through Beelzebub's prebattle monologue ("YOU'VE RETURNED? YOUR FRIEND MADE A DELICIOUS MORSEL. HOWEVER, SHE WAS A TRIFLE UNFULFILLING. IT APPEARS YOU WISH TO JOIN HER IN MY STOMACH! etc.), entering the fight with her standard no-more-fucking-around strat, the shields went up, the spells prepped, the razzledazzle of Jolly's rapier goring Beelzebub in his sticky carapace, absorb the Tintinnabulation, Transvivify through the Angel Ire, pick a god and pray when Just Desserts drops. Crackle shackle fizzle, Beelzebub dissolved into dust, Rel and Jolly did their celebratory duet and reaped the spoils—1,500 Dewdrops and a Gray Grimoire. Cakewalk. She looted Beelzebub's distended corpse for Lu's Bones and tucked them into inventory. Next she had to go to Pandaemonium and topple five out of six of the remaining Hellgods. Before that, she diverted her route and located Mephistopheles, who took Lu's Bones and promised to revive their dear, departed friend. The game kinda expected you to go beat the demon lords and return, but if you exited the area and came back the next event triggered. Lu burst from the cauldron fully fleshed and formed, albeit now in the form of a demonic succubus with horns and a barbed tail (the fans dubbed her Lulith). Lulith had a totally different personality than demure Lu, aggressive and rambunctious and resistant to direct command, but at least with a full party the next few battles weren't so dickfield difficult. Z. saved frequently lest the game bellyup on her midbattle and eventually as she entered Pandaemonium and got in a fight with some Durahans it did, kaput.

Slick timing too because when she tucked the game in her pocket and stepped forward the thing in front of her was the desk and Maximillion's invariable smile. "Z. wow you came I'm flattered there's lots for a girl your age to enjoy you decide to spend your time with me take a seat you know you didn't have to wait in line ha ha ha ha ha ha."

Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha.

She rolled over the desk and slid into the empty folding chair beside him. Why did he have this extra chair?

The assassins stepped forward. Each drew from their robes a hardcover book and placed them in a line before Maximillion. Maximillion uncapped a felt pen and signed the inside covers while he rattled smalltalk with the clan. "All the way from Albuquerque that's a long way I'm from Massachusetts my assistant Z.'s from Denver it's great how these events these conventions draw people together that's why I write honestly it's about connecting people across space and time literature does that literature connects yes."

The assassins nodded along, swept into the spell of his unstoppable verbosity, his astute observations about literature and human connection, and they didn't seem to notice he signed every book with the name Ian West, his signature as precise and distinct as his regular handwriting. He handed back their books and they stalked away to their next mark while Z. nudged Maximillion in the ribs except her elbow kinda sucked into the side of his golden jacket as though the thing inside were formed of liquid.

An elven fangirl skipped forward and slapped a paperback on the table, yellowed and dogeared. Between the title and Ian West's name was a picture of a scantily-clad faeriegirl trapped in a birdcage, a picture that immediately piqued Z.'s interest. The book was opened and signed in instants.

"Oh wow, you're really Ian West aren't you." The fangirl clasped her hands in an almost devotional posture. "I can't believe, I've waited so long, I've read both your books at least eight, nine times, I cannot *wait* for the third. Your books, they changed my life. I swear they changed my life."

Maximillion's golden brilliance radiated deitylike as he pushed the sanctified text toward her. "Thank you so much for your kind words I love to hear kind words it fills me with joy and whose life do I have the honor of changing?"

The girl's hands kneaded, she regarded the book then snatched it to her breast. She gave a name, a city, she shook Maximillion's hand, shook it and shook it as Maximillion's smile widened and widened. Z. tried to think if Maximillion and Ian West were anagrams, figured they couldn't because of the X. It mystified her, she didn't get it.

By the time the people behind her in line extricated the fangirl and pushed her aside, Maximillion became a serene Buddha of gold, levitating above his chair as his arms spread to greet the next fan.

"Is this par for the course," said Z. "Is this what you always do?"

"Oh yes oh yes oh yes." The felt-tip pen scratched across a page. "Speaking of pars you should join me and Mitchum and Hussie this afternoon we plan to golf I brought my clubs for a good reason Las Vegas is renowned worldwide for its courses empty desert the perfect terrain for a golf course see me score birdies albatrosses I sink shots you would not believe —"

Nothing seemed worse than watching Maximillion and pals golf, even watching good golfers golf was an abortion. The mere mental image of him in gold-suit glory swinging an iron—ridiculous. She figured Mitchum Graves would use his Canadian flag as a club, and Hussie, her conception of Hussie lacked a lower body altogether. Did they actually golf? It sounded as fictive as Maximillion signing Ian West to the novels of adoring fans.

"Come on come on come on it'll be great I can teach you how to swing you're too short for the clubs we can improvise come on say yes."

"Ugh, fine." (She lied.) "Do you know, like, the geography of this place? I'm trying to find Max and Kiki."

Maximillion signed the next book, he didn't move any part of his body except his wrist and still it came out a carbon copy of his previous signatures, neat and legible. "I haven't seen Maxwell at all I put his badge on his door and the next time I checked he'd vanished however I did notice our friend Kiki or Coco in the vicinity of our other friend Mitchum so if you went on a sleuthing expedition he'd be the first witness to interrogate in my opinion."

Uggggggggh. Mitchum, what a stupid, douchey name. It's MITCHELL dipshit, where did the um come from, it sounded like a made-up pun name although what the pun was supposed to be she had no clue, what mattered was its mere intonation in proximity to Kiki made Z. sick, she wanted Kiki to have nothing to do with the guy and his rape jokes and lumberjack beard. She rose immediately from her chair and scoured the visible portion of the convention for a stray maple leaf on a flag. "Where is he," she said. "Which way?"

"If I remember correctly which I usually do I have a good memory his booth is in Sector 7C so head in that direction you're sure to find him."

"Sector 7C? We on a spaceship now or what?"

Rather than voice a response, Maximillion pointed to a pole that rose above the booths, high enough to see from afar. The pole had a sign at its peak: 5D. Z. leaned over the table and saw similar posts and signs distributed across the convention center skies. She ruminated over the fact she somehow missed these things before, muttered bye to Maximillion, and ventured forth.

Chapter 7: A Lesson in Post-Postmodernism

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At Sector 7C she found Mitchum immediately. Or rather his flag. He had impaled it through his booth's table, causing the table to buckle inward while the flag itself sagged lazily in the tepid convention ventilation. No sign of Mitchum himself or Kiki, also no line. The only thing on the table was a stack of fliers that looked like someone made them in Microsoft Paint. She peeled the topmost from the pile.

GET THE D TONIGHT (Comic Sans font). It gave the floor and number of Hussie's room, or whoever's room it was. A pixelated JPEG of Mitchum Graves watermarked the background, thumbs-upping the reader with a wolfish grin. A second, smaller image of him appeared even more faintly in the upper right corner, this Mitchum facing slightly upward with a mask of solemnity on his bearded visage, one hand pressed piously to his heart. To the upper right corner of THIS picture, a ghostly, almost phosphorescent outline of Canada.

"Guess what the D stands for," said a lecherous voice behind her.

Z. spooked, tangled her leg in the table, and plopped onto her rear. Graves—and behind him Kiki. He... wore the exact same retro gamer nostalgia reference shirt, who were these grody men and their nonexistent hygiene?

Kiki lolled her head and held it at a ninety-degree angle on her shoulder. "Endearing klutz isn't your personality type." Her eyes had an uncharacteristic inwardness, more Roddlevan than Radney. The purple lacked luster, she could be a watermark on Mitchum's flier.

Eschewing a skeletal hand proffered her, Z. hopped to her feet and shoved the stupid paper in Mitchum's face. "The hell's THIS?"

Mitchum considered the flier with diligent gravitas, little nods and murmurs. He spoke professorially: "Allow me to pose a query, Miss Coulter: Have you ever read *Lolita* by esteemed Russo-American novelist Wuhladimir Nabokov?"

"What's that have to do with anything? Look Kiki, we got a huge problem, Mrs. Roddlevan is here with Frederick, they're on the prowl—"

But Graves sidled between her and Kiki, he bowed at an acute angle with an arm that extended across the ground. He lisped: "Mitchum D. Graves—the D stands for Danger—cordially invites you to his post-convention *fête*, pardon his French. Bring your own birth control but no need to *répondez s'il vous plaît*."

"Can one man be so one-dimensional?" said Z.

Mitchum erected to standing position and scrutinized her top-down. She scrutinized back and noticed his glasses had no lenses, only frames. "Hm," he said, "You're pretty flat but you surely have holes to stick eh?"

"You know, if you crack more pedophile jokes eventually someone won't think they're funny."

"Of course they're not funny," said Graves. "Statutory rape is nothing to take lightly."

"Do you have ANY other wavelengths?"

"Ask his insightful views on the Canadian primaries," droned Kiki.

Graves cleared his throat. "The Whigs and the Tories—"

"Looks like no one else finds you funny either," said Z., dramatically indicating the absence of adoring cockgobblers surrounding his mangled table. "Where's the fans, Mitchum? Eh?"

Mitchum drew back, a frowny sneer scrawled his face for a mere moment before he composed himself. But Z. knew, *knew* she bopped a bruise, a critical weakness in Mitchum Graves's stupid façade. He was no Andrew Hussie or Ian West. Only a pale shade of either.

He leaned close. "Come to my afterparty and see how big my fanbase is, eh?" A conspiratorial whisper.

Z. had enough of this turbogoon, she pushed past him to Kiki. "Watch out for Mrs. Roddlevan and her lackey. One catches any of us and it's the guillotine."

Kiki gave a listless shrug.

"Kiki, why are you with this guy anyway? Let's check out the convention and find Max. We gotta warn him about his mom—"

"Dammit Z. I don't *care* about Max's mother, she has no fucking *influence* over me."

"The only person with influence over her is me." Mitchum coiled an arm around her. "We have a pimp-prostitute kinda relationship eh?"

Z. waited for a repudiation that never came, so after a lengthy pause with Mitchum grinning she socked him straight in the gut. "Let go of her you creep!" The punch sank into his body with more force than expected, Mitchum's eyes went blank and he toppled backward in a dead drop, landing stock still with his limbs rigid and straight along his sides.

"Z., please," said colorless Kiki. "You're embarrassing me."

Embarrassing! Her! Did she not understand the radiance of fuck this douchebag emanated from his greasy Canadian pores? His lensless glasses, his bushy beard, his pony tattoos, his shifty voices, his stupid irony? Like OKAY FINE KIKI, you like irony, it's a thing you do, but Mitchum's irony wasn't clever or witty or anything it was stupid dull repetitive same tired dunderdunk about rape and pedophilia like ha ha he flouts societal norms and breaks the boundaries of good taste what a jokester what a laff-a-rama let's all think of the most scandalous, shock value stuff we can say and say it constantly to make everyone uncomfortable but it's fine we said it *IRONICALLY* so you can't badmouth us, we can always retreat to that excuse that paper aegis that *NOTHING*, did it even count as a defense

anymore? Who liked this, Maximillion? Maximillion laughed at anything because he wanted the others to approve him, and Hussie sure didn't laugh, so who abided this guy? How did he continue to exist, how had the world not sifted him from existence, why did he have to appear as a perfect idealization of Kiki's dumb stupid dumb persona?

She couldn't stomach this, Kiki betrayed no intention of not being lame, Z. right now couldn't handle another Max Roddlevan, another unresponsive friend, so she stormed away shredding the afterparty flier and tossing the pieces in the air until security scolded her for littering and she had to pick it all up while everyone giggled in the distance.

Graves must have influenced Kiki, injected something into her, the piece of her that didn't fit, the uncanny corner of her schema, the inverted color. Same as Max—except with Hussie. They exerted something—a presence—it affected them—unsure what, she was sure it was bad. The things Hussie said the previous night—cannibalism, entropy, transfer of energy. Kiki looked... drained, muted, faded. Part of her essence had seeped out of her. The conspiracy tightened, the cogs churned, Z. wondered if something had sailed over her head, as things usually did, but this something hurt her friends so she had to think hard. These men—creators, artists, writers, comedians, whatever they were—they were doing something. Putting pieces together. Why had Maximillion followed them? A coincidence—or a reason? Did someone—Hussie—ask him to act in a certain way?

Souls—

"Z."

She blipped into reality, people surrounded her, they floated in myriad directions. A finger tapped her shoulder, Kiki was there, divorced from Graves, alone amid the parting traffic. Somehow she'd escaped, broken his spell, she leaned close to Z., her eyes hollow, her mouth agape, her cheeks flattened and her purple lock of hair plastered to a slick of sweat on her forehead, she had something to say, a plea for help—save me Z.—

"Where the fuck is my phone."

Z. blinked, phone? Phone. A question about her phone.

"Why..." She tried to think, her thoughts muddled together. "Why would I know about your phone?" The confusion broke, severed by a harsh line of indignation. "You're gonna come after me and ask about your stupid phone? I bet Graves has it, I bet he took it."

"He doesn't know where it is. It's missing since I woke up."

"Considering how shitfaced you were it's a miracle you bumbled back to the room at all, who knows where your phone is, maybe you left it at Hussie's room—"

"Mitchum let me check, it's not there."

"Then you dropped it in the elevator, or the hall, or the toilet, don't come crawling to me to keep count of what you do after umpteen, umpteen—*alcoholic beverages*—maybe don't go crazy with weird men first chance you get!"

She blurted this last exclamation directly into Kiki's face. Kiki drew back, her expression masked by a blanket of passivity.

"Yeah... Yeah. That's why—" She scratched her elbow. "Look, I need to talk to Cal, alright. His number's in my phone—"

"Better get looking, I got other things to find."

She ran away, and only got a few steps before a security guard scolded her for running so she had to settle for powerwalking like a tool. Kiki didn't pursue her. Cal! She asks about Cal—who even was Cal, two years older than her, how did they even MEET, what did they even TALK about? Their stupid rap band—Kiki wasn't even good at bass. Yet they practiced every damn day after school.

Blockhead Kiki. She had to find Hussie's booth, Max would be there. He would.

Chapter 8: Introducing, the New Friend...

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She got lost, directions turned around, she wasn't sure she could locate an exit let alone Hussie. She shouted: "Where's Andrew Hussie!" People looked at her but said nothing. Omnipresent security guards tsk-tsked her. She trudged deeper into the forest.

The chaos grew too wearisome, she paused at an empty table to catch her breath and bearings. A scan of the area revealed nothing but booths and costumes, merchandise and merchants, security guards and more security guards. She sat on the edge of the table and fiddled with its sign. The sign had a name: Shirou Katsumata.

She read the sign again. A third time, she tried to find the hole in her perception, the thing she had misinterpreted, but the name remained the same: Shirou Katsumata. The creator of *Faerie Endless*.

Paroxysm seized her. Muscles ossified, she fell to the ground. Sheer force of will rolled her back and forth, her limbs flailed like a rag doll's, she beat her fists against the ground until they hurt, she screamed screams that sucked into the noise-vortex of the convention like she never screamed them at all, SHIROU KATSUMATA, the man, the very man, her heart entered cardiac arrest, she began to die, literally die on the floor of the convention center, her eyes rolled back into her sockets and her tongue flopped back into her throat good thing too because her teeth gnashed and blood leaked out her ears and nostrils as the flesh melted from her bones into a pool of sanguine matter and her clothes caught fire and she drove stakes into her sides and—

"My goodness, are you okay?"

Z. looked up. A girl stood over her, twelve or thirteen, she wore no costume but a suspiciously modest outfit with a prim skirt that went nearly to her ankles. Her hands were clasped over her heart and her face betrayed genuine concern, which Z. also found suspicious.

An exuberant roll/bounce flipped Z. to her feet. "Of course I'm not fine, do you know what this is?" She indicated the table.

Skirtpubescent tilted her head to one side and donned a quizzical expression. "I believe it's a table?"

"It's SHIROU KATSUMATA creator of *Faerie Endless* you uncultured swine, and you dare to ask if I'm okay!"

The girl bit her lip. "I'm dreadfully sorry, I hope I didn't offend you..."

Dreadfully sorry? Z. scrutinized this chick. What era spawned her? Was she doing an elaborate roleplay, her long skirt and stiff-necked blouse a costume for *Little House on the*

Prairie? Z. got the distinct impression someone was playing a prank on her.

"No," Z. tried tentatively, "I guess I'm not... offended. Who are you?"

The girl's demeanor changed, she straightened her shoulders and back and extended an arm, such an unexpected development that it took Z. a moment to register the universal symbol for handshakes. "I'm Cecily! What's your name?"

After a moment of uncertain deliberation, Z. took the hand. "I'm Z." She readied her catchphrase for the inevitable follow-up question.

But the girl in the modest skirt said something totally different, she said: "Pleased to meet you, Z.!" Capitalizing on Z.'s state of incomprehension, she added: "So you're also a big fan of *Faerie Endless*? It's my favorite video game series."

Her favorite? She played video games, she didn't think they were the devil's mischief? Hnngh? And why *Faerie Endless* of all games, sure it was a child-friendly game with a cast of young girls, but Z. figured *Tetris* might be more this girl's style, the suspicions of a practical joke deepened, she searched for candid cameras.

"Well. If you're telling the truth, what's your opinion on the Calofisteri battle in *Faerie Endless III*?"

The girl pondered a moment, signified by her placing a finger on her lip and looking upward. She responded: "I believe you must be mistaken, Z. There is no Calofisteri battle in *Faerie Endless III*. You instead battle Melusine after she's placed under Calofisteri's mind control. Unless I'm the one who's mistaken?"

Damn, this girl wasn't slouching, was it possible she was a real human being who said these things and yet still played *Faerie Endless*, and not even as a dilettante but an actual aficionado?

"So you're here to see Shirou Katsumata too, kid?"

This question prompted the girl—Z. forgot her name—to gush about how much she loved "Mr. Katsumata's esteemed video game series *Faerie Endless*", how she had played it with her sister growing up, how she loved the costumes the main characters wore, how she wished Calofisteri would quit her mischievous ways, how she hoped Jolly would be less brusque toward her friends. Meanwhile Z. wondered how she herself had managed to forget Shirou Katsumata's attendance, she had been so preoccupied about Max she overlooked her own personal god to whom she sacrificed her soul on the altar, as the younger girl bubbled the deadened coals in Z.'s spleen stirred, a breath of life stoked a settled ember, the fire caught. The paroxysms that seized her when she first encountered the table palpitated her heart again at these ebullient words, she searched the empty table for the legend himself. She had to meet him. To shake his hand. To tell him how much his work meant to her. Did he speak English? Everyone spoke English nowadays. A dream she never thought possible now become blisteringly plausible, to interact with Shirou Katsumata, feel his corporeality, hear him speak. He became no longer a name in a credits roll, a word in a fan-translated magazine

interview, an unseen arbiter of fate and reality, he grew to titanic heights in her mind, he became the bronzed Mbuji, a Congolese idol, his mouth opened and wasps buzzed forth...

"Where is he?" she said, cutting off Celestine (no—wrong name). "Where's Shirou Katsumata?"

The girl clasped her hands, her hands were in a perpetual state of either clasping or unclasping. "Oh, did you not hear the announcement this morning? Mr. Katsumata's flight was delayed, so he won't arrive until tomorrow. It's a disappointment, because I really wanted to ask him about the new installment in the series that was recently announced!"

Inhuman crimes, had Japan been sundered by another tsunami? Nothing lesser would suffice.

Sassafras (wrong again) continued: "I don't know if I'll be able to make it into the convention tomorrow, either." Her voice lowered and she shifted closer to Z. as though taking her in confidence. Because of her posture she had no trouble reaching Z.'s ear. "My sister only gave me enough money for a one-day pass. She left me at this hotel to go off with her friends and I have nothing else to do. You see, it's doubly bad because I'm not supposed to be in this city at all. My parents are both teachers, so they have the week off, and they took a vacation to Hawaii. My older sister was supposed to watch me, but she made arrangements with *her* friends to stay in Las Vegas. She couldn't leave me alone, so she brought me along, but then... Well, it's quite a pickle, isn't it, Z.?"

"Pickle." Who said pickle? "Are there other people around? People who like *Faerie Endless* I mean."

"Oh," said S—. "I haven't encountered any other fans, unfortunately. There is a nearby booth with a man who—"

"Take me there," said Z. "I must consort with kindred spirits."

"Are you certain, Z.? This man, he's... I don't mean to be rude, but he's rather off-kilter."

She led Z. through a thicket of goons and pointed to a modest booth staffed by an overweight dude in a baseball cap. "I think he's some kind of 'fan artist.' I tried to talk to him earlier, but I found it all rather disturbing... If you don't mind, I'll wait back here."

Z. waltzed to the booth. The dude had no visitors currently, but a bunch of papers on the tabletop. She slammed her hands down and shoved her face to his. "You like *Faerie Endless*?" She envisioned it now: Z., this dude, and the S— girl. A trifecta of *Faerie Endless* turbogeeks. Things always go better in trios, that's Z.'s philosophy she came up with right now.

The dude scratched the stubble on his cheek. "Uh yeah, how old are you?"

"If you're a *Faerie Endless* guy, we gotta talk. It's written, it's fated, it has to happen."

"Uh," the dude said, "Well, I can't really leave the booth, but if you want, can I interest you in some prints?" He indicated the papers on the table.

Z. glanced at them. At first they struck her as ordinary, a lot of bright watercolors, an expressive style. The *Faerie Endless* characters were clearly recognizable, it was high-quality art at least, which it better be if Gorgonzola got a whole booth at this convention to sell it. The first image her eyes settled upon showcased Rel stuck in a spider web, her arms and legs splayed as a tremendous Wargspider lurked in the shadows at the bottom of the image. Rel's magic wand was conspicuously snared in a snaggle of webbing beyond her reach. That was it, that was the entire image. Z. didn't understand, she looked to the next image, which more rudimentarily showed Calofisteri in a darkened chamber, her teal arms wrapped around Rel as she sent mind-control magic through her fingertips into Rel's skull. Rel's eyes were wide open, her mouth agape. The interplay of shadow and color looked nice, but Z. failed to comprehend this content as she turned to the third picture. This image was actually a comic, four panels divided evenly across the sheet. The background was plainer, mostly sparse whiteness. In the first panel, Jolly appeared to be scolding a Blight Toad. She arched her back forward and held her arms straight at her sides with her hands balled into fists, her little wings carrying her just off the ground, marked by a shadow that served the sole defining feature of the landscape. The Blight Toad stared at her with dumb eyes, barely registered her existence. Blight Toads, being among the weakest enemies in the series, were pretty dumb. In the second panel, the toad, otherwise unchanged in stance, opened its mouth and shot out its long tongue, which smacked Jolly directly in her chest, she cried out in surprise, her wand flew out of her grasp. In the third panel, the tongue retracted, Jolly hung halfway in the toad's maw, her wings crumpled, her stockinged legs twisted, a single hand groped at the dumb frog's face. In the fourth panel the frog looked exactly as it had in the first panel, stupid and uncomprehending, and only Jolly's wand and a discarded shoe accompanied it.

"What the FUCK is this SHIT?" said Z.

The fucker guy slumped in his chair and sighed. "See, I asked how old you—"

"Who would DRAW something like this, what is EVEN the point? Okay, for STARTERS, it doesn't even make sense, Blight Toads are the SHITTIEST enemies, they can't kill you unless you sit still and let them attack for like seven rounds and that's BASE LEVEL, now you're telling me one can INSTAGIB Jolly with one tongue attack, that's BULLshit, and why do they always drop their wands in these pictures, they got sucked through the vortex of Hell and hit with Calofisteri's Gravitron-quintuple-plus attack and they NEVER drop their wands, have you even PLAYED the games?!"

"If you don't like it, you don't have to buy—"

"BUY it! You charge MONEY for this putrid FILTH! This DEGENERATE garbage!" She slammed her fists on the table, the entire booth trembled. "Why would you do this, what's the point—don't they suffer enough? Do you LIKE this, do you THINK about this?" She scrutinized this dude, he looked like a normal dude, she tried to see if he looked like a psychopath. He looked bored.

She seized the paper with the frog comic and shredded it, it tore unevenly because the fancy gloss paper so she ripped it again, the dude reared up with a shriek of dismay, Z. flung the pieces in his face and sprinted, an audience parted ways for her and the S— girl stood at the end of a people cone with her hands clapped to her mouth. Z. grabbed her and ran.

"Security!" shouted the pornographer. "Stop her—you're paying for this you turd!"

"Oh dear, oh my," said Z.'s boon companion.

Chapter 9: Sassafras

Chapter 9: Sassafras

They ran for minutes. The other girl stuttered her feet or maybe her long skirt impeded her or maybe it was standard girl slowness but Z. had to basically drag her, she whipped back and forth as Z. dived between multitudinous obstacles. The girl cried out whenever she smacked against anything, which was all the time, and when they finally stopped she crouched to the ground and rubbed various bruises.

"Ow..."

They took shelter in a nook in some wall, with a door to a utility closet or something. An empty trashcan blocked them from outside view. From what Z. could tell, they had delved into the deep end.

"It's you and me kid," said Z. "You and me from now on. It's clear these other fans can't be trusted." 'Kid' was a good, friendly, colloquial way of dodging having to say her name.

"I don't agree with the destruction of personal property," said Z.'s new friend, "But I suppose in this instance it was justified."

Yeah. The creepy frog. And poor Jolly, what had Jolly ever done to deserve THAT, sure she was a bitch sometimes, but she always came through in the end and did the right thing and helped Rel. Z. seethed, she wanted to blot the image from her mind, it remained indelible, something she could not easily forget. "You and me," she muttered.

"I'm terribly sorry, I never should have brought you to that man," said Z.'s friend. "But you seemed so insistent, I didn't want to disappoint you..."

Z. had a bruise of her own, her upper arm, she had no clue when she got it. She prodded it with the expectation it would cave into her musculature but nothing happened.

"It doesn't matter, let's forget it." She searched for a subject change, it took tons of brain wracking but she uncovered one. "You say you only have a badge for today?"

"Yes, sadly. I'm afraid I won't be able to see Mr. Katsumata tomorrow—"

"No need to worry about that." Z. swept her new friend under her arm as they crouched behind the trashcan. "I know a guy who can get you a badge. Probably."

Her friend's face lit up, a childlike glee imbued it, it actually thawed Z.'s icy heart. "Really? You'd do that for me? I don't want to intrude, if it's a bother please don't worry—"

"No bother, no bother at all." Z. took control of the situation, she played everything cool, a surge of power filled her, a friend she had the upper hand on like Kiki and Max always had the upper hand on her. "I'll get you a badge, then we see Shirou Katsumata together."

"Thank you so much Z., this really means a ton to me!" She hugged Z., which made Z. feel nice, except the girl remembered Z.'s name while Z. forgot hers, so her new friend did have an advantage in one respect. But who cared about dumb friendship power dynamics, this new friend didn't need that crap.

"Come on, I'll take you to Maximillion." (Assuming she could find him.)

Now Z. had to watch out for like five bazillion people: Maximillion, Max/Hussie, Kiki/Mitchum, the pornographer, Frederick Roddlevan, Mrs. Roddlevan, probably other people she was forgetting, like Cal would emerge out the woodwork at some point. As they wandered lost, their conversation invariably turned toward the *Faerie Endless* announcement, the new game and its trailer and the leaks from Japanese gamer mags. "Did you notice Jolly's new outfit?"

"Oh yes, it looked really nice!" said Z.'s friend.

"Yeah but did you notice it bore a striking resemblance to the outfit of the Faerie Captain of the Guard, Scylla? I mean obviously it has Jolly's flair, it's red, but the epaulets, the medals, it all looks rather ceremonial right?"

"You're right, there is a striking resemblance..."

"Scylla only ever appeared in *Faerie Endless Gaidan* and *Faerie Endless Fighters*. So it's only natural most people wouldn't immediately make the connection. But I assiduously compared the two outfits, the match is uncanny. Which leads me to believe that Jolly has received a promotion."

"Ah," said Z.'s friend, "That makes a lot of sense! However, if I remember correctly, Scylla had a special wand that also denoted her rank, which let her use all the faerie elemental magic types. But Jolly's wand is the same old wand it always is. If she had been promoted, wouldn't she have received a better wand?"

"Inconsequential." Z. ducked under a barrel-chested ranger. "They probably couldn't give Jolly a new wand because it'd make her overpowered. Maybe they'll have some story excuse, like Jolly tried too hard to do something and broke the wand by accident."

"Oh ho ho!" said Z.'s friend, with an adorable little chortle. "Perhaps it is not so inconsequential after all, Z. Remember Jolly's conversation with Melusine at the end of *Faerie Endless Last Chapter III*?"

It was the most recent installment in the series and Z. didn't care much for it, she scoured her mind for the exact wording.

Her friend continued: "Jolly asked Melusine what she would dress as for the Harvest Festival. Melusine said she didn't have a costume in mind, and asked Jolly what *she* intended to wear. And Jolly said she wanted to dress up like the Captain of the Guard!"

"Throwaway line," said Z. "Possibly a wonky translation."

"Aha, but!" Z.'s friend scampered closer to her, rubbing balled hands with giddy static electricity, "Think about what *else* was revealed in the trailer. There was only one new enemy—a flying jack-o-lantern."

Z. stopped in her tracks.

Oh.

OH.

She slapped her forehead, it created a resounding thud. How could she be such a dunderhead? How could she have missed—but with the contextual clues—and she had missed them—Missed them! Had totally forgotten the aforementioned conversation between Jolly and Melusine, and nobody on her forums said a word, how, HOW? This was exactly the thing Max would have caught, drawing from his freakish rainbrain an instant catalogue of connections and theories—a Halloween-themed game!

Z. swung on her friend, shook her until her little head bobbed. "That explains why Calofisteri is disguised in the crowd in the trailer's opening shot—she's using the Harvest Festival as a way to sneak into the Seelie Court!"

"I saw a theory like yours on a forum I frequent," said the friend. "I only lurk, but it got me thinking..."

"It's genius, GENIUS." Z. searched for something, turning her friend this way and that, scanning the heads and faces, she had no idea what. "And the purple and orange aesthetic—the leaves on the trees—" So obvious in retrospect!

"I bet everyone else dresses up too," said her friend. "What do you think Rel's costume will be?"

The image of Rel ensnared in a spiderweb flashed across Z.'s mind. "Cat. Cat ears. We already saw it—she has cat ears."

"She does?"

"Yeah, I saw a post—I didn't pay attention at the time—a guy zoomed in on Rel's appearance in the trailer, like digitally exemplified the image, and found cat ears."

"I saw that post too," said her friend, "But I found his or her evidence inconclusive."

His or her—Who says that! It didn't matter, her friend said it. "We ask Shirou Katsumata himself tomorrow and know for sure. We can confirm the Halloween theory and the cat ears, it's perfect it's perfect it's perfect! Come on, let's find Maximillion and get you a badge."

She took her friend's hand and ran for about five steps until a security guard sprung from the crowd and told her to knock it off.

Chapter 10: First Battle of Homestuck

Chapter 10: First Battle of Homestuck

An hour more of aimless wandering, occasional booth schmoozing, and frequent stops for renewed hypotheses and theorizing, and they finally found the booth where Maximillion—ahem, "Ian West"—was supposed to be.

He wasn't there. A janitor swept stuff with a broom nearby.

"Well, I know his room, I'll take you there."

Her friend dragged her feet. "Uh, I don't mean to be a bother, but I don't know if I should go to the room of a man I don't know..."

"Come on it's fine, he's harmless. He's a famous guy after all, how can he be bad? Come on come on come on!"

Her friend acquiesced to Z.'s electromagnetic tug, also the general ebb of pedestrians pushed them toward a more active "sector," although booths closed shop everywhere they flitted. Z. found it incomprehensible to believe the entire day had already passed, but you know the adage: time flies and bananas and whatnot. Soon their progress was yet again impeded, a gnarled thicket of costumed goons tumesced around a booth, so thick and athrob that other wayfarers decided to circumvent the growth via an adjacent aisle. Z.'s friend wanted to circumvent too, but circumvent was barely a word worthy of Z.'s vocabulary.

"I'll cut a path, stick close and we'll get through."

"Um, but, these people, they, I don't mean to speak ill of them as a whole, meaning I don't intend to disparage a group of people I've never met, but these people... Do you know who they are, Z.? Z.—"

Z. tucked her head and pulled her shoulders inward, although she had to awkwardly keep one arm behind her attached to her friend's wrist. Braced for drilling, she plowed into the crowd, which wore the broadest array of costumes she'd yet seen, ranging from steampunk vests and monocles to t-shirts with simple symbols to alien beings with varying skin colors. She wedged herself between a crack in the edifice, two teenage 20s-style gangsters were forced to split to make room. Once inside, the limbs and bodies shifted pliantly at her nudging and browbeating, she shoved with her skull like a Pachycephalosaurus, not caring whose privacy she invaded or what anatomical part she had to butt to carve her path. Her friend stuck close behind, nearly hugging her to keep from separation. The crowd, although obstinate and cacophonous, nonetheless made unconscious shifts within its innards. Z. trudged onward, a pack mule, an American bison, a pronghorn moose-ram, through people in green suits and people in purple dresses and people in floral kimonos. People in suspenders and people with robotic cardboard arms. People in hooded rags and people in clown attire. The deeper she went the faster she went, the more brusque she got, the more she fought her way for air in the

endless agglomeration of nonsense combinations, no central theme or unifying element in these costumes. Out of her way—out of her way, out! Out—

Her head slammed a solid object. She bounced back, a tense moment while she lifted on her heels, a mousey squeak emitted from S—, and then both dropped. Z. landed on her friend and rolled off. Legs shuffled aside, people parted as a silent commotion of whispers erupted.

Z. sat up. "Excuse ME!"

A ring formed around them. Her friend, nursing a side, smoothed out her skirt and shuffled on her knees as a throng of faces peered down at them, cold and unwelcoming with that hivemind unity of fandom. Z. knew that aura anywhere, the most familiar form of condescension.

Which only indignation cured. She stood up and pointed at the thing she had bounced against. A guy in a lavish red suit, he also... wore sunglasses? The bafflement undermined her and she hesitated, unsure if she stared at palette swap Maximillion or some kind of Maximillion cosplayer. The guy wasn't Maximillion, his blonde hair was a wig.

"You, uh. Out of my way!"

Red!Maximillion tapped a sword—obviously not a real one, made of styrofoam and white paint—against the ground. "Yo chill," he said.

A murmur rose through the throng, some added similar interjections.

"Let's leave," Z.'s friend whispered, "We were rude, I think. Let's apologize and move on."

"They're the rude ones." Z. jabbed Red!Maximillion's tie. "You're blocking the way for everyone, you know that? Nobody can get through."

Although voices rose, Red!Maximillion held an arm for quiet. He commanded with only his presence, he was a tall and lanky man, he had a slight slouch.

"Don't like it go around," he said.

His proclamation became law. Others echoed it: merfolk, postal officers, horsemen, unreal mishmash. Most held plastic weapons similarly compiled from the infinite armory of mankind's history, hammers and tridents and rifles and crowbars and canes and knives.

"It's a FIRE HAZARD," said Z. A shitty response, she knew it the moment she said it, she wished to unsay it and braced for whatever heckling arose from her limpwristed riposte, but red suit goon's sunglasses gleamed as he considered her words.

"Looks like you started some sick fires bro," he said.

This comment meant nothing, it negated Z.'s own failure, surely all tension from this situation just evaporated, but the mob nodded judiciously and tightened their throng, the words "sick fires" whispered in echo.

Z. laughed. What else could she do? Another fan, a girl in a pirate captain's costume, cut in. "How many irons are in the fire?"

A bakery jester(?) added: "All of the irons."

"The court is also on fire," said a wizard salamander.

"The big man comes."

"For a little one on one."

"He has the rock."

What! What! What! Was it meant to be ominous? Their voices chanted, they weaved a circle around her, intercoiled knots of—people—if they qualified for the distinction! Their memetic phrases melded into a mash as incongruent as their costumes, they became mere magic words that whirled chainlike around her, forced her to one knee.

"Hey," said someone. The single muted syllable sliced the mélange and every damned one of them went silent in unsettling unison. Their ranks parted, their faces turned toward the man who spoke, who sat behind a booth previously obscured by their horrendous mass.

It was Andrew Hussie. These were his fans.

Her stomach sagged, the despair unfolded in its apocalyptic entirety. Hussie had not changed from the night before, he added to the list of people who did not change their clothes, his glasses blared pure white under the spotlights above, a halo enveloped him as he honeycombed his hands atop the table. A lone pen adorned the desk, some blank sheets of paper. Behind him flitted helpers, young women with badges, as well as a lone costumed person who seemed displaced, shorn from the horde otherwise corralled on the other side of the booth. She was a girl in an icy blue dress—way too short of a dress, by the way, you'd see nearly her entire thigh if not for her long stockings—and she wore a matching wig and leaned against a scythe nearly a head taller than her. She stared at Z. with intense, frosty eyes, and something about her unsettled Z. completely, but she said nothing and made no action and remained in the background while Hussie expelled a labored sigh:

"...Zelda."

The bile rose. "Z."

Hussie rubbed his eyes beneath the glasses. They shifted upward and the light left them a moment before they plopped back onto the bridge of his nose. "Why are you here."

"For Max," she said—true too, if only by coincidence. "Where is he, what'd you do with him?"

"What did I do with him." Hussie chewed the words. "What did I do... I think you're asking the wrong question. You're very, um, accusatory. I don't know what your relationship with Mr. Roddlevan is like, and I'm starting to think you don't know either." He scratched his hair. The unicorn on his shirt blazed in the light.

Z. shook S—'s hold on her leg and strode toward Hussie. Her hands balled into fists as she encroached on the table, Hussie a passive and sallow Buddha, the girl with the scythe a stolid sentinel—then hands flew from all directions and seized her. They grabbed arms, torso, head, legs, drawing her apart, quartering her. They wrenched her from the table even as both Z.'s friend and Hussie himself called for peace.

"Stop," said Hussie, "Please stop..."

But the fans didn't stop. They subsumed her into their mass, churned and twisted her, stretched her bones and muscles, leaned their weight against her. Hussie, the booth, the blue-eyed scythegirl disappeared, a styrofoam sword swung down and slapped her ribs—the leer of the red suit dude emerged above—her body dragged against the ground and her shirt pulled up her back and her bare spine chafed against the compacted carpet. More things buffeted her, hollow plastic and balsa wood, each fan took a crack, direction distorted and she lost her senses. One of these people—could they be Max? The world tilted upside-down because she was on the ground. Her body sang with stinging bruises. A flurry of security guards pushed back Hussie's fans, confiscated weapons from primary ringleaders. Red! Maximillion somehow slinked away from the scene of the crime and stood unaccosted near the booth, where Hussie made halfhearted appeals to either the guards or his fans. Nobody paid any more attention to Z. except the girl with the icy eyes behind Hussie, and even she only leaned on her scythe and watched with no discernable expression good or bad.

Someone knelt beside her. "Oh no, are you alright?" Z.'s friend. "Did they hurt you? Do you have a concussion? A horse kicked my head once and I got a concussion, my mother said to ___"

"I'm fine—fine." She shoved herself up and spat, expecting blood, but it was just saliva and it stuck on the carpet. Whatever!

"Are you sure? We can call the doctor—"

"I said I'm fine!" Z. whirled on S— and felt guilty immediately because S— was so pure. She tried to make her face less angry and had no way to know if it worked. Maximillion. They needed to find Maximillion and get a convention pass.

They left the convention. After a check to ensure no Frederick in the lobby, they took the elevator.

Chapter 11: Funtime for Maximillion

Chapter 11: Funtime for Maximillion

Z. pounded Maximillion's door and it flung open immediately and Maximillion grinned down at them, his tie loosened and some of the buttons on his gold jacket undone. "Girls wow girls you came to visit so sweet I was just about to watch a movie you've got perfect timing come in please come in please."

"Maximillion's a literary agent," explained Z. like she knew dick about literary agents. "Fast-talking's part of the trade. I thought he was weird too, but he's not the worst."

Maximillion tightened his tie and leaned right up to S—. "Whoa what a twist this isn't Kiki this is some new friend I don't remember driving you which means you just met unless you conspired ahead of time—"

"Interrupt him or he never shuts up," Z. added with a wink.

"—What might your name be mademoiselle?"

"My name is Cecily," said Cecily (Cecily! Cecily. REMEMBER IT THIS TIME DAMMIT). She extended a tiny hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, sir."

With a shake fit to dislocate limbs, Maximillion ushered them into his room. Z. said: "Maximillion think you could hook the girl up with a convention badge? She only has one for today."

"Of course of course no problem no problem at all I have so many privileges many things nobody else has I could bestow a million badges but I have only so many friends. Please come in please come in I promise you have no need to fear I'm a nice guy I swear."

The door slammed shut behind them. Maximillion's room was untouched save for the bag of golf clubs propped against the bed.

"D-do you golf, Mr. Maximillion?" Cecily kneaded Z.'s arm and stood close.

"I love golf a social game you go with your friends you putter about talk have a good time love it except none of my friends like golf I asked Mitchum and Hussie they want to golf but you know them always busy busy busy." He fiddled with TV knobs.

"My father loves golf," said Cecily. "Once when I was little he took me to the golf course with him, but I got heatstroke and had to go to the hospital."

"Her sister brought her here and ditched her," said Z. "I thought it'd be cool if she hung with me for a bit."

"Wow that's great so great I love how kids make friends so fast it's the happiest thing I could imagine." The TV flickered and an advertisement started to play, which Maximillion skipped immediately using the remote. "I got this movie from the front desk would you believe they actually have movies this one's called *Hotel Mbuji* I can't wait to watch I can't wait."

He teetered on the edge of the bed. Cecily fidgeted.

"You going to Mitchum's afterparty?" said Z. The title screen played. It read *Hotel Belgium*, not *Hotel Mbuji*.

Maximillion lingered on the Play button. "An afterparty huh." He shoved his fingers under his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "That's so that's so you know that's so like Mitchum he really loves his parties he really loves bringing people together he's so thoughtful like that he seems like a real odd bird you know you know but if you get to know him you understand why he does it because what he likes more than anything is to make other people laugh you know?"

He hit Play. The film cold-opened on a shot of a line of young men kneeling on the ground. The camera panned across their shellacked and shellshocked faces, brown men with beards and tilted eyes, crooked teeth and porous noses, some with heads too bowed to see, some whispering prayers. A man in fatigues paced behind him, as the camera panned his legs sometimes strafed across the background.

Helpful text explained: Belgium 2004.

"So it's fine for Kiki to go around with Graves all the time?"

"Of course of course of course he wouldn't hurt anyone he wouldn't hurt anyone at all."

Cecily raised a hand. "Excuse me... I don't mean to be impolite, but I probably shouldn't stay for a whole movie..."

"Aw come on Cecily," Z. lingered on the real name, making that HUMAN CONNECTION, "It'll be fun what else you got to do?"

"Well, if you insist..."

Yes, yes, yes. This was it, movie nights were back on the menu, if anyone ever asked her if she'd seen *Hotel Belgium* starring Denzel Washington as Leopold Mbuji she could reply with an incontrovertible yea. Maximillion placed his elbows on his knees and balanced his head on his hands. Cecily leaned against her, she shook at every shock, she said no at every death, she held her breath at every moment of suspense. Her fingers dug into Z.'s wrist when Mr. Mbuji climbed from the basement with the bloodied sergeant on his back, her squirming legs depressed the mattress when the bad general's goons surrounded him with rifles. Z. had no clue what the plot was supposed to be, it didn't matter, this movie had emerged out the head of Maximillion so abruptly and yet it dissolved her entire day to sugar water as the light in the window dwindled to dusky night. *Blade Runner* all over again. She and Kiki and Max in the Radney entertainment room, sprawled across leather seats as surround sound invaded their bodies and the screen images united their solitary silo souls into a shared experience. Because that's movies, right? That's why people congregate in a theater of five hundred.

They're not allowed to speak, it's too dark to see one another, and yet in that hour and fifty minutes they merge into a single soul. Cecily's emotions became hers. Her emotions became Maximillion's. They were both human beings, she realized, not automatons. They and her were the same—she understood.

The credits rolled. A somber orchestral arrangement presided over a sedated director and cast. For a time none spoke, while the final scene—Mbuji alone among the spirits of the dead in his hotel lobby (no bronzed vanity here) ruminated in their collective mind.

Maximillion broke the synthesis:

"Wow great flick I give it a B+ no an A- thank you two so much for watching this movie with me you really don't know what this means to me."

Z., bubbly, giggled. "Why are you so weird, Maximillion?"

"Why am I so weird why am I so weird what a question thank you so much for asking Z. I am one hundred percent sincere when I say thank you because nobody ever asked me that question before ever."

"I don't think you're weird, Mr. Maximillion," said Cecily. "You just talk a little different from other people!"

"You haven't seen him drive yet!" said Z. Incapable of restraint, she blurted an obnoxious car-revving noise with her mouth and made Cecily jump.

"I'm serious one hundred percent serious I've waited so long for somebody to ask that question I prepared an answer allow me to explain I am thirty-something years old I live in Boston Massachusetts every day to go to work at my agency I wake at seven and drive an hour except I don't drive like a normal person I drive stop and go stop and go stop and go always stop and go if I could drive one hour straight no stopping that's fine I loved it every second driving here to Las Vegas but the stopping the stopping I replace my socks once a month I wear such holes in them you don't even know you don't even."

Z. scratched her collar and exchanged a glance with Cecily. The entire mood shifted, a purple poison dripped into their tranquil well.

"Then when I arrive at my agency you know what a literary agent does I'll tell you I sit in my square office first I check my email every day my email is flooded with one hundred new emails from undiscovered young talent they want me to read their manuscript dear Mr. Ackerman dear Mr. Ackerman attached is attached is 10,000 words 50,000 words 300,000 words thank you for your consideration your consideration what I have to do to each and every one of these kids these kids who poured soul into manuscripts spent years writing manuscripts dreamed about manuscripts dreamed about living a life like Mr. Ian West what I do is copy paste same single rejection paragraph reply to sender sorry Mr. Mrs. while your manuscript shows great promise I'm afraid it's not right for us at this moment except at this moment is every moment that's four hours four hours of copy pasting same message same soulcrusher smile then I eat lunch by myself then I call Ian I say Ian hey buddy what's up haven't heard from you in so long please answer the phone but at the end of every recording I

have to say also the publisher wonders where your next manuscript is I look like I look like the bad guy the bearer of bad news don't shoot the messenger and—"

"Maximillion?"

"—After Ian doesn't answer and I've run out the alcohol I snuck under my jacket I slouch over my desk wondering if tomorrow things will be different maybe tomorrow I can say yes sir ma'am we'd love your manuscript maybe tomorrow Ian will answer the phone say hi Maximillion long time no see remember when we acted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare class what was that ten years ago ten years out of college it's so long yet when I put the math together I realize ten years isn't half the years isn't one third the years I'll still do the same thing every damn day until I'm sixty unless the industry dies or if my liver lasts that long I worry my liver will give out my eyes are so yellow I can't show you how yellow my eyes are but at this point it will be a relief when my liver goes it'll be a relief and that's the thing I fear the most because if it's a relief why don't I just quicken the process ha ha ha ha ha."

He fell back onto the bed. Z. said nothing.

Cecily wrapped her arms around herself, her face ghostly in the pale glaze of the television screen that became the only light in the room. "Mr. Maximillion? Are you okay?"

Maximillion laughed. "I'm okay now because I'm with you kids and I have someone to talk to for once in my life." He wiped his eyes. "You are both such good friends I hope you live long and happy lives."

"What about Mitchum Graves and Andrew Hussie?" asked Z.

Maybe the wrong thing to say, because Maximillion erupted into more erratic laughter, so strained and painful it felt like crying instead of laughter, but the sound itself was unmistakable.

"You kids are so thoughtful why is it that the day I'm the happiest the day droves of people line up to see me shake my hand why is today the day I fall apart?"

Cecily managed a smile. "Maybe you're not sad, Mr. Maximillion. Maybe you're so happy it's hard to tell?"

"Or maybe because they weren't lining up to see you," said Z. "It was Ian West they wanted to see."

"Ian is a wraith I may as well be him," said Maximillion. "Except he's still writing and every so often a piece of his soul descends upon the country to the peals of ten thousand squealing fans. So maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe—"

The credits ended.

"Maybe what, Mr. Maximillion?" asked Cecily.

Maximillion exhaled and sat up. "Maybe I should stop spouting gibberish ha ha ha ha like what am I saying no wonder people don't want to be around me when I say things like that." He bounced off the bed and turned off the television. The room would have been completely dark if not for Maximillion's sparkling jacket.

In an instant Z. understood everything. Since she met Maximillion she had been unable to make congruous his bizarre traits and habits, but for once in her life she thought she could explain why he tried so hard, why he dressed the way he did and why he drove the way he did and why he spoke the way he did.

If you could just be a person people like, then they like you. But if you're not a person people will ever like, and you don't understand what people like to begin with, then when you try to be a person people will like, you instead morph into something even more distant and unreal, something far more detached from reality than your original self.

How can you expect to have ties with people if you don't even understand them? Maximillion wasn't a real human being. Maybe he had once been something a lot closer to one. She tried to imagine a Maximillion without his gilded apparel, Maximillion in college—Maximillion in an Italian restaurant with the hand of God descending upon him. Even then the outcast, who the others allowed to remain only out of habit. Despite his deadened social acumen he sensed they disliked him, and bit by bit donned pieces of a new personality he thought might appeal to their sensibilities—signifiers of success, happiness, joyous excitement, earnest dedication—unaware they only shunned him more and more...

Z. jolted upright. "Have you seen Max lately, Maximillion?" The blood left her head and she felt faint. Cecily steadied her until she righted.

"I can't say I have he may be in his room why don't you check?" Like a nightlight he drifted through the dark to a hallway extending out of his room. He flipped the switch to reveal the bathroom, at the end of which hung ajar another door into another room. "His room was originally meant for Ian West before Ian dropped out I thought it'd be nifty if our rooms were connected you know that's what Mitchum and Hussie did two rooms made into one big room it's so considerate of hotels to design for that."

Z. looked through the portal to Max's room. The only thing she could see from the light filtering in was the duffel bag on the bed. It was open, and empty.

"He's not there," she said.

"Excuse me, who are you talking about?" said Cecily. "Not that it's any of my business... sorry..."

Maximillion nodded. "I figured so much excitement so many new friends to make who'd want to stay in their room after all that."

Cecily shifted at Z.'s side. "Not to be a bother, but it's getting late. My sister should be back... soon... So I think I really ought to leave."

"Of course that makes sense thanks again for watching the movie with me and I'll be sure to get you that badge no problem leave it to me."

"I'm going too," said Z.

Maximillion smiled and smiled and told them to come back any time.

Chapter 12: Funtime for Mitchum

Chapter 12: Funtime for Mitchum

Cecily claimed she knew the way back to her room and not to worry about her, nice meeting you Z. A curtsey to boot. They made loose plans to meet the next day in the lobby stairwell, then she made swift egress and left Z. alone in the hall.

Kiki would be at the afterparty for sure. She suspected Max as well. It didn't matter if she didn't understand what they were doing with their lives or why. If she understood why they disliked her—why she repulsed them—either way, she didn't want them at that party.

Many goons loitered on Hussie's floor, squished against walls with crossed legs and folded arms. They left a narrow path in the center corridor but made no effort to widen it as Z. passed. She recognized them as the same hodgepodge of miscellany that composed Hussie's fandom. Their leers lingered over Z.'s head as she shuffled between them, sure to kick "on accident" as many extended feet as possible, if they dogpiled her let them and see what happens when they don't catch her unaware.

Red!Maximillion stood beside Hussie's door. He wore fancypants headphones and nodded his head to an unheard beat, his shoe tapped the air with arrhythmic twitches. Through his sunglasses Z. couldn't tell if he noticed her. Next to him, however, was the frosty bitch with the blue wig and the scythe, and she definitely saw Z. Z. flipped her off and knocked on the door.

One knock, two knocks. On the third the red suit jabroni took off his headphones. "They won't let you in bruh."

Z. ignored him and knocked again, harder.

"The douchenozzle manning the door only lets in hot chicks—pretty ridic. A real Ernest Chumpingway that guy—shitty beard hipster. See his tats?"

"Yeah, Graves is a massive ponce," said Z. "I'm here to get my friends away from him."

"Hell yeah nothing like a bit of bonding over a mutually hated dick." Red suit guy pulled his sunglasses down to reveal perfectly normal eyes. "By the way," he whispered, "Sorry for going bonkers on you earlier—just horsing around you know? Didn't mean to like hurt you or whatever."

"It's fine," said Z. She whaled against the door.

The sunglasses popped back to their original position. "I think that guy has some irony shtick going on but it's like Class D irony—amateur hour irony. Like it's open mic night at the local irony spittoon and some bozo sauntered up all drunk and shit saying stuff like—Look at me I'm so ironic. Get it it's ironic because I'm ironically calling attention to my irony. Total poseur."

Z. started to kick the door.

"You need more finesse and dedication to the craft. You need to be so ironically distant that you wrap around the world and get close to the source again. It's a subtle art—he gives it a bad name."

Z. was about to make an impolite entreaty for silence when the door snapped open and her foot sailed against Mitchum Graves' shin.

Graves' foot buckled at a weird angle, he stooped forward with bulging bloodshot eyes in his lensless glasses and leaned upon the scepter of his Canadian flag. The full brunt of the party assailed Z. and she flinched for cover, the cosplayers in the vicinity did likewise save the scythe girl who did nothing. The room throbbed with music, horrible horrible hip hop music. Not the old school Malkwon stuff, by comparison Malkwon was Mozart, the ungodly abomination that filled her ears was an orgy of frenetic electronic detritus intermingled with vaguely-comprehensible blips and blops, all while a raggedy voice wheezed the so-called rap:

Grope this bitch tits while my dick getting bigger

Tell her hey my name Fly cuz I'm a fly nigger

Now do Fly a favor you dirty dick licker

Bitch best swallow else I'm a pull this trigger

Dead ho society bitches call me the gravedigger

Unparalleled lyricism. Was the asphyxiating voice spewing such vulgar bars the Canadian himself? He did have a knack for switching the way he sounded, and Z. would not put it past Graves to record his own shitty raps for his own shitty rave.

Graves snapped his foot back in place and loosed a boisterous crow: "Z. Coulter! Welcome to my evil lair, eh!"

His tattooed arm coiled around her neck and dragged her toward the hellparty. Z. jammed her limbs in the frame as his grizzly visage swelled, the Canadian flag aloft, the bloody maple leaf phantasmagoric in the smoky plume.

"It's our chance," said the red suit guy. Him and about five of his fellows made a run at the door. Their combined force propelled her and Mitchum into a writhing mass of moshing(?) bodies, Z. tumbled facefirst into some girl and bounced off and wound up on a dank, beer-splotched carpet, stilettoed female legs jabbing down at her. Her shirt tore on a shard of shattered glass as she crawled for safety. The place was a madhouse, an insane asylum, bodies collapsed in puffs of mist, girls with blank expressions and vomitous lips. Oh god if these stains weren't just overturned liquor—she reared up, collided against a thing, caromed into the glutinous chunk of humanity. Her head sailed into an elbow and she pinballed in a different direction, tilting and twirling.

She fell into the waiting arms of Mitchum Graves. One hand gripped her lower back by the fingertips.

"The riffraff's getting in—why'd you gotta do that?" His hand crawled up and inside her shirt, tarantula fingers.

"Where's Kiki!"

"I wrenched open her ribcage and feasted on her heart, bwahahaha!" He nibbled on her hair, his jaws chattering in skeletal laughter. His hand traveled far up her back. "Ho shit no bra? You perverted slut, I like it!"

Z. flung out a hand and knocked the Canadian flag out his grasp. It hurtled into the smoke and disappeared. With a frantic yelp, Graves released her and plunged after it, toppling partiers domino-style. The hand up her shirt, whiplashed after the whole of its body, wrenched out with a tremendous jerk. A tear split up the shirt's backside and Z. leapt to avoid getting dragged into the blackhole after him.

A moment of uncertainty, groping in the strobe, she located a wall, or a solid vertical object of indeterminate construction. She felt the rip, it went nearly up to the neck. Luckily not on the front.

She oozed across the wall, weaseling her way between tightknit humans and their sticky sweat, coughing on smoke and instantly losing sense of direction. Above the sea of heads extended the Canadian flag, it swiveled with a sad twirl, no way to tell if Graves was attached. It rose on an upswell and tangled in a chandelier. Z. had to turn her face against the wall to ward off spontaneous epilepsy, all kinds of colors ebbed beneath her eyelids. Her cheek scraped the plaster as she fought her way forward, convinced if she stopped moving she would be unable to start again.

A doorway. She pressed her hand against the knob and it swung into a darkened space. Nearby, the dude in the red suit held the frosty-eyed girl against the wall, he grabbed at her thighs as they pressed their lips against each other's faces. Somehow the frosty-eyed girl maintained her impassive glaze. One blue eye shifted to fall upon Z., the swollen pupil pierced Z.'s body, lanced her straight through, chills beset her, everything trembled, Z. flung herself into the darkened room and shut the door behind her.

The door did nothing to mute the music, she fumbled for a light switch, her hand hit nothing but an unidentifiable cloth and a smooth glass surface. At the end of the room thin cracks of light spread around what had to be another doorway. She inched forward in utter blindness, touched a long leathery sheet—shower curtain. Something beyond it loosed a hideous gurgle and Z. stumbled away, she tripped over something and landed on her ass on the hard tile floor. Her pupils, adjusting, perceived a hooked claw extend from the curtain as the gurgle settled into a low slurry of many blended sounds, Z. scooted ass-backward down the bathroom until her bare back slapped against the door, something sluglike oozing black liquid was emerging from the bathtub, she seized the knob and rattled it and slid inside and shut the door and shoved her back against it and breathed.

She had entered another hotel room, a normal one, no degeneracy or foulness here, no bath-slugs or marijuana smoke or Canadian flags. Almost identical to Z.'s own room, different bedspread color, different painting above the headboard (a tiger).

A lone man, Hussie, sat at a desk in front of a laptop into which he typed with machine gun ferocity. The bombastic clack-clack-clack ingested the din of Mitchum's party. Its rhythm assuaged her frayed nerves and stabilized her breathing, she remained a long time propped against the bathroom door merely listening, unable to see the words on the screen he typed. Sometimes, eons ago, when Max wanted to write and Z. wanted to be with Max, he grudgingly allowed her to remain in his room if she promised to keep quiet, and normally the task would be impossible but the tactile stimulation of tippity tippity tap tap tappity lulled her into a dazelike trance while her own thoughts had a chance to rise to the surface of the murky waters and coagulate into words and images. The sound of a keyboard can be anything.

A unicorn. Galloping across an ethereal landscape. Luminescent with purity and whiteness. Woodland, trees. An unblemished lake crowded by pines and evergreens, frigid northern air. If Max falls into the lake, the kelpie inside emerges in the form of a beautiful woman: would you prefer the golden Max or the red Max? Where's the original Max, my Max. I used to sit on his bed and listen to him type. I used to watch movies with him, I used to hear his theories on art and literature. I used to have friends. Now I'm so alone at the bottom of this lake. It's cold down here and I'm lonely. If I say the words I'm lonely and someone hears them will they be my friend? Will Max and Kiki care about me again? I want them to... I want someone to. When the noise is loud and the thoughts run free and there's always something to think about, something to play or watch or read, then she doesn't have to worry. But when the silence comes and there's nobody around she has to face that fear and nothing terrifies her more. Her, unloved, unwanted, unneeded. That edge of infinity where one step off the precipice and you fall forever in an endless darkness sometimes the notion seized her although she could ignore the thoughts all she wanted she could think other things she could say or do anything but it only filled the space was that what her entertainment became a placeholder a substitution why had things gotten this way she had always been different but was she so different that she deserved to lose everything?

Chapter 13: Sex

Chapter 13: Sex

The keyboard quit clacking and Hussie said: "How long have you been there."

She lurched upright and banged her head on the doorknob. The fallow pit of loneliness circled the dregs of her stomach, a faint melancholy of which she was dimly aware but uncertain how significantly it affected her. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, her shirt had ripped at the back.

"Major oversight... they have no locks on the outside," said Hussie. "You can lock them from the inside but not the outside. Anyone can come in at night—" He slapped his forehead, actually slapped it. "I should have locked the door on Mitchum's side, how did I not think of that?"

"Mr. Hussie." Unsure what honorific to bestow him. "Please, tell me, where's Max?"

Hussie adjusted his glasses. Even in completely different lighting, they managed to catch a glare. "Zelda," he said, "Why would I know that?"

"Because you've done something to him," said Z. "I know you have. I've seen it, I've seen him change myself. He's never acted this way. Never so... distant from me. Something about you is different. You've done something."

His fingers remained on the keyboard, but they did not type. He sighed. "Sometimes I wonder what exactly I've done..."

Z. approached, leaning over his bed and propped herself on her spread fingers, she dared not move closer. His laptop had a word processor open, and words on it. It was attached by a cord to a plain black box that blinked with sporadic lights. This box mesmerized her during Hussie's lull, she found it unfathomable, what purpose could this alien box hold? An ancient artifact unearthed from Tutankhamen's tomb. Except it was made of plastic and metal. When she squinted, the side said "External Hard Drive". It was a boring thing, and she remembered she was in the midst of a conversation.

"He's not there anymore," Z. said. "Please, Mr. Hussie, Max isn't THERE anymore. I talk to him, I take him out here, I just want to be with him. He's not there. You've taken him away from me, please, I want him back."

Hussie considered these words. His head lowered. The light left his glasses and she could see his eyes as they drilled into the carpet near his feet. His foot tapped. The unicorn on his shirt ruffled.

A sickly, feeble smile spread across his face. "You know... I never considered... Maybe they got what they deserved."

"What?"

He looked up at her. "All this time... Zelda. Do you know what it's like to write? To create a story?"

"What do you mean, got what they deserved."

"You create something from nothing. A godlike task. By the rules of physics, literally impossible. So there's always been this conceit... of writers being like gods. Or at least a shade of them. But I've never believed it. Because I don't create something from nothing."

"Who got what," said Z.

"I take part of myself, my essence, my soul..." The smile widened. "And put it on the page. I wrench a piece of myself out of me and mold it like putty. Characters, places, events, I devise them out of my own being. That is what it is to write. My experiences, my memories, my life, my imagination—I chisel out bits. An act of self-erasure. The more I write, I find, the hollower I become.

"And then they... take that piece of my soul..." He stood up so abruptly his chair fell backward. "And they stick their filthy hands inside and rip out little pieces and jam them down their throats and chew and chew and chew. Hahaha." He took a step toward her. "They gnash their teeth and eat more and the more they eat the more ravenous they become all of them feasting on my contorted twisted corpse of a semi-soul maybe that's... maybe that's why..."

Z. backed away, unsure if the man were dangerous or simply passionate, unsure what he was talking about.

"I did it at first because I wanted to, I didn't know why I wanted to. It was fun, I guess. It makes no sense in hindsight, why I started to write. But I never expected these insatiable cannibals to gather like rats around me. So maybe when you say your friend isn't all there, capital-exclamation-point THERE!, well maybe that's because when he gobbled down a piece of my soul he didn't realize my soul was sour."

They stared at each other from across the bed. Hussie's eyes blazed with passionate intensity, all trace of his somnolent demeanor evaporated in its heat.

"Consider it my revenge. They feast on my soul, I poison theirs. They swarm me and demand more, well maybe they should choke. They stalk me, they pretend to be me, well maybe that's as much their purgatory as mine. Maybe—"

Z. had enough of this "maybe." "JUST TELL ME WHERE MAX IS!"

"Maybe if you listened, you'd learn something..." said Hussie. He adjusted his glasses and turned his head and again the light flared. "I wonder if you even care about this Max, or if he's a name invoked to console yourself. I wonder if you ever think about other people as people and not just names to surround yourself with. You're one of them, aren't you? A souleater."

Souleater! Ridiculous. So what, was Hussie's whole philosophy that the process of consuming art was like the process of consuming a person? Suddenly HUSSIE was the victim? Oh boohoo, poor guy, with his legions of dotting fans. "The only person here fucking around with souls or whatever is you," said Z. "You've fucked up my friend and I intend to do... SOMETHING about it, what I don't know, but whatever you're doing to him I'm going to stop, you hear me?" She leapt onto the bed and bounced higher than expected, her head hit the ceiling.

Hussie and she stared at each other. Her last proclamation resounded in the hollow of her mind but he made no reply. His glasses shimmered. His intensity resolved into a more neutral, more familiar expression. He covered a cough.

"You're right, this is pretty stupid." He picked up the chair he had overturned. "I'm tired... I say strange things when I'm tired. I didn't want... you know... to make a scene." His voice quieted as he bumbled about his chair. "My fans... they're nice people. I should treat them better..."

She sighed too. What did she expect. Vagaries and metaphors, always when she didn't understand something it was because it turned out to be a metaphor or simile or some bullshit. She had come in with such a simple question. And gotten such a bullshit answer.

"Please." One final time. "Please tell me where I can find Max."

"I, uh, don't know his current whereabouts," said Hussie. "He may have attended Mitchum's party, I know some of my fans were interested, they expected me..." He lulled, watching his unmoving computer screen, seemingly lost in thought until he continued: "You should, uh... Have you seen the girl at my booth today? The one with the, uh, large scythe?"

"Blue wig chick?"

"Yeah... her. She sticks out, doesn't she? She might know something."

Holy fuck, finally. A semi-respectable answer, or at least one that ADDRESSED THE QUESTION SHE ASKED. She had a lead now. She ran for Hussie's door and into the bathroom, remembering only too late the swamp-thing in the tub.

The antediluvian abomination unfurled halfway from the black-splotched basin, the shower curtain twisted around it. It inflated with oxygen and uttered a sibilant hiss to expel it. Other than a slight throb from a tumorous growth on its arched carapace, it made no irregular movement. The light from Hussie's room cascaded on the crumpled shower curtain.

Hussie commanded her to close the door—it was too loud. Terrified but unable to disobey, she shut herself into darkness.

She hoped for her eyes to adjust but they didn't so she groped her way along the wall. Her shoes landed with thunderous splashes of sound. Each thud forced her to cleave closer to the wall, each brought with it uncertain gurgles from the beast. It reeked of bile and alcohol. Z. doubled over and crammed her fist into her mouth to stifle a cough, she bit down on her wrist as her throat chafed against her tongue and nausea frothed in her innards.

The creature, almost directly beside her, stirred.

"Z."

Z. spat out her knuckle. "Kiki?"

The Kikimonster tried to roll over, but it snagged in the curtain and only managed a pitiful wobble.

Z. plopped beside the toilet and leaned her head back against the wall and stretched out her legs and laughed. And laughed and laughed and laughed—a Kiki enchilada! She dragged her fingers across her scalp and felt her hair between them and couldn't stop laughing.

"Alright. Alright." She harnessed a modicum of calm. "Alright, let's unwind you."

She crawled to Kiki and patted the curtain, it formed an unbroken seal around her, she could discern no beginning or end, and worse yet half of Kiki remained in the bathtub causing her body to awkwardly arch around the waist and exacerbate the entanglement. She tried to wrench Kiki out of the tub but she wouldn't budge, in part due to the curtain, and she tried to unravel the curtain but it wouldn't do that either in part due to the tub, which basically put Kiki in a Rubik's Cube bind where no matter which way you twist the damn cube you fuck up the part of the puzzle you already solved.

After a long time in the dark trying to figure how things worked she jumped in the tub and a viscous liquid schlucked against her shoes, something stickier than water. She seized Kiki's legs and shoved until her feet gave way in the mushy basin and she slipped and slammed her chin on a porcelain abutment.

"Uf," she said.

"Unngh," said Kiki.

A renewed effort, a redoubled sally, a ripped curtain, a dislodged pole, and a cascade of gold rings. Kiki's body hoisted up and over the side and plunked onto the tile and lay still. Soles squelching, Z. managed with some pawing and blind fumbling to unwrap her.

"Cripes Kiki how much you drink?" Shuffling, pulling, twisting limbs and body parts into shape, she moved like a mannequin. Z. tried to prop her against the wall, but her head lolled and she became dead weight.

"Nngh," said Kiki. "Z., ah."

The exertion necessary to move Kiki's fat ass (actually she was infuriatingly svelte but ninety pounds of bagabones was ninety pounds) left Z. panting and slouched over Kiki's lap.

"Ah god Kiki, this place is such a mess." She wiped her eyes. "You're such a mess." She had Kiki now, they were together in this bathroom of uncertain fluids, all its unguent pungent dinginess. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Bluuuuh," said Kiki. "You goof."

Goof was good enough, she'd take it.

They remained in the bathroom an indeterminate amount of time, breathing and sitting, until Z. figured she ought to bring Kiki back to their room. Afterward she'd find Max. She lifted herself off Kiki and reached her hands under Kiki's armpits and pulled hard. She slid easily enough even though Z. had to walk backward with her body arched over Kiki's head to maintain her momentum.

When she opened the door to Mitchum's party, no tumult assaulted her, no monstrous amalgam of women tumbled against her. A distinct deadness imbued the room, silhouettes made vague motions in murky haze, garbage and liquids and bodies covered the floor. A vaporous, strained music played from stereos submerged in the ocean, a brusque voice muttered the same ambiguous line ad infinitum. Refrigerator coolant radiated from the wasted terrain. As Z. dragged Kiki across the corpses, she had the distinct impression of traversing an apocalyptic waste land, napalmed Vietnam. She perceived no doors or boundaries.

"Mm, Z., where we go," said Kiki. "Sleepy."

"Work with me Kiki, gotta find an exit." She picked a direction that matched the direction the exit would have been in Hussie's room. At first she tried to step between the splayed arms and legs and heads of girls who caked the floor, but Kiki's dead weight steamrolled them anyway and they didn't complain—maybe they had actually died in some kind of Jonestown mass suicide—so Z. just stepped on them. Maybe Graves, true to his name, had some necrophilia fetish going on, Z.'s head imagined all kinds of goofster scenarios and she had no clue why.

Kiki's hand touched Z.'s bare back. "Ha ha, shirt." Out of the fog emerged a solid wall, like she reached the loading zone that spawned it. She breathed heavily from exertion and sweat dribbled down her armpits with an uncomfortable coldness.

"Almost there," said Z., "You think you can walk?"

"Where your bra," said Kiki. "Ahahaha cuz you got NO BOOBS."

"Did someone say... boobs?"

Something primordial stirred from across the room, a black bulge that lifted slowly. Z. started to tug frantically on laughing Kiki's arms to get her moving faster as the Shadow Graves, the Tyrannosaurus Mitchum lumbered toward them with contemplative sluggishness, its elongated arms reaching far to drop against the ground and pull the body closer.

"Mitchum!" Kiki raised her own arms and gave a celebratory cheer. "Z. has no boobs!"

"Gonna get dem boobs," said Mitchum Graves, closing the distance. "Gonna get em." As he neared, his silhouette changed shape, bubbling and rippling, growing and arching, and from him extended the shadowy form of a flag which he used like a walking stick, spearing the women beneath him as he built momentum.

Z. wobbled backward at a precarious tilt to maximize speed, slipping and falling and regaining her balance. The wall gained detail, switches and magnolia patterns and a solitary closed door. Kiki kicked her feet and twittered with glee, Z. dropped her and fumbled with the knob, drawing almost the entire length of her body to reach it from her knees. She shoved against it trying to open it and it not budging until after a dumbfounding long time she realized it opened inward and reversed her internal force to pry it nearly off the hinges and feel the blast of the fresh air from the corridor.

"Kiki come on—" But when she turned for Kiki, Mitchum had already beset them and grabbed both of Kiki's ankles, jerking them around with his mangled fingers.

"Mitchum, no!" Z. lashed out a foot and kicked him in the face. His head jerked back and his dumb fake glasses flew off. An extreme amount of blood splurged out his nose, his neck looked about to snap. Z. yanked Kiki but Mitchum retained his grip, tugging Kiki's stockings and sliding them down her legs.

"Eeeeeee," Kiki said. "It tickles!" She stroked her knees together while Mitchum started to kiss her skin.

Z. leapt over Mitchum's head and stomped his back. She bounced until his shirt crumpled up and the beginnings of a large, elaborate tattoo emerged at the base of his spine, a pool or lake or something from which something else was bursting upward, but that part of the tattoo remained obscured by her trampling feet and the tremendous bruise that spread along his back, his body bent and twisted.

"Die die die die DIE!" she said. His jack-o-lantern fingers broke their hold, his entire form shriveled beneath her onslaught. The moment he let go she seized Kiki and they rolled out the room and Z. slammed the door shut behind them, Mitchum looking like a small thing on fire that coils into a dead ember until he looked like nothing because the door was closed.

Kiki lay facedown dribbling spittle. Z. half expected the door to fly open and Mitchum to descend upon them, but it didn't so she took stock of the now mostly empty hallway. Only a few Homestuck fans remained, neither Frosty nor Red!Maximillion.

"Z. rub your face on my legs please," said Kiki. She rubbed her own legs against the carpet. "Mm yes like that."

"You lost your shoes," said Z. The dull factoid meant nothing, the overarching goal remained: ferry Kiki home. Gritting her teeth through fatigue, she mustered additional resolve and tried to lift Kiki's upper body. She envisioned an idealistic scenario in which they walked together, one supporting the other, but Kiki grinned gremlinesque and confounded Z.'s attempts at every possibility.

Eventually, with leverage and physics, she got Kiki on her shoulder and managed to shift her weight in specific directions to approximate forward movement. Kiki's arms tangled around Z.'s neck, her hands went into Z.'s hair, a lot of stroking and mumbling and giggling.

A pair of girl Homestuck fans, or what Z. assumed were Homestuck fans, glanced from their phones as the Z.-Kiki amalgamation passed. One, in only a t-shirt (maybe not even a costume

at all), said:

"Oh wow she's drunk."

"Yeah," said Z.

"You're the girl we ruffled today, aren't you dear?" said the other girl, who wore a top hat.

"Maybe."

"Condolences!" The girl fiddled with her phone. "We got a tad carried away. No big deal though."

No big deal though. Ha ha! She searched for a caustic remark to fling in their face but creativity levels approached 1.6 percent.

"Either of you know about that girl with the frosty hair? And the scythe?"

The girls exchanged nods, each nodding in tentative expectation of the other's nod, so that the nods were only half-nods and neither seemed absolutely sure despite the nodding until the first spoke: "Yeah, we saw her, her costume was real cool."

"It perhaps deviated from canon."

"Alt universe genderbend speciesbend ice elemental—"

"Yes, she definitely put her own spin on things. Much like myself!" Girl 2 tipped her top hat. "I like girls who have their own flair."

"Seemed tacky to me," said the plainer girl.

"But who is she, what's her name, where can I find her?" said Z.

A pause while the girls communed via telepathy (probably). One said: "Nobody we know. She doesn't talk much."

"Condolences!"

Useless! She guessed sooner or later frost queen would turn up in Z.'s endless parade of unpleasant people so she didn't worry too much, but she had such a froth of emotions that her anxiety vis a vis the Max question ascended unbidden in her infinity list of worries, she didn't understand how she fell into the position with both her friends unspooling into long threads that she couldn't tie back together the way the machines that originally packaged them had.

"Z., Z., Z., Z.," said Kiki, sometimes in a whisper, sometimes in a shout.

Somehow they reached an elevator and even managed to tumble out the elevator onto the correct floor. But "tumble" was deliberate word choice, Z. and Kiki had to do YET AGAIN the "Get Kiki Off the Fucking Ground" dance, until Z. started to slap Kiki's face like movie

people did and yell get up, get off the ground you degenerate ape, which only made Kiki push herself closer to the ground, rubbing her face against it.

Z. knelt beside her. "Please Kiki, please, I'm so tired, please Kiki, please."

"Aww Z. if you're tired get on the floor with me." And she tried to pull Z. to her, grabbing the midsection under the torn shirt.

"No, your bed is fifty feet away, you can sleep in your bed, how's that sound?"

"I like the carpet!"

"No carpet Kiki, no carpet."

"I like Z.!"

Z. almost said 'No Z.,' so much energy had redirected from her mental faculties to her physical ones, but she caught herself. She even smiled and said: "Thanks, Kiki."

"You're my best friend," said Kiki. "Don't be sad!"

And Z. melted, she started to cry, explosive sheets of tears that rolled down her face and wrenching sobs as she curled into a ball. She became aware of Kiki touching her spine, the extended vertebrae that rubbersheeted her skin, Kiki's fingers rubbed around them in semicircles. The spot in front of Z.'s eyes turned into a wet splotch, her entire face went numb, acupuncture by a thousand stinging nettles.

"What's wrong Z., did I make you cry? Oh no..." Kiki drew her into a hug, she had actually gotten off the floor by herself. "I always do this, I'm always so terrible..."

"No," said Z. She lifted her face and even though she wasn't fine she said, "I'm fine." She tried to be fine, tried to encompass fineness, and against all odds it worked, although her face remained totally numb. Kiki was up now, this was the opportunity, although maybe they could stay on the ground together, no she had to get Kiki to bed, it was important—duty. "Let's go to bed."

"Okee," said Kiki. She lisped for no apparent reason. "I go to bed with you."

They made forward motion. Kiki shuffled her feet in pantomime of walking while her hands glided over Z.'s back and stomach, her head nuzzled against Z.'s shoulder. Z. counted the steps, each step removing one step from the step ticker, a manageable countdown that maintained her motivation. They reached the midpoint between Maximillion's door and Max's. Z. halted a moment and stared at Max's peephole; unmistakably, the light was on.

Knock? Speak to him. But he wouldn't answer. No matter how hard and how long. She—

Kiki's hand grabbed Z.'s tit.

Z. ossified. Kiki's hand remained there, pressing deeper. "So small..."

"Kiki stop."

"Whyyyyyy," said Kiki. She tried to pull Z. onto the carpet with a treacherous dead-weightening but Z. only dropped to a knee. "Let's fuck Z., whoopsie I mean frick, the sexual tension is palpable, ahhhh palpable is a funny word." Her other hand angled for Z.'s other breast but Z. seized the wrist before it reached.

"What are you doing, stop."

Kiki didn't stop, her smile grew voracious, she tried to wrangle Z. onto the ground, suddenly Z. was on her side with Kiki crawling on top of her, pawing her, Z. powerless, Kiki's empty puppet, smooth hands slid—

Maximillion's door opened. Z. immediately hurled Kiki off her and Kiki crumpled, and then Z. had to worry about what her shirt was looking like but it had miraculously continued to cover everything which was good because Maximillion's face was already looking directly at her with his punchable smile full on display. He had, bizarrely, his bag of golf clubs slung over a shoulder.

"I thought I heard your voices wow you two realize how late it is you must be real night owls hoot hoot what're you doing on the ground having fun down there well I won't pry I'm actually uh actually I'm on my way out to do something so uh bye!"

With remarkable lack of aplomb, Maximillion powerwalked down the hallway and disappeared around the corner, his golf clubs jangling. The encounter had been so brief and stunning Z. nearly forgot Kiki's previous behavior, although Kiki started to crawl in Z.'s direction donning a mischievous smirk. Z.'s attention, however, focused on Maximillion's door, which closed slowly in the wake of Maximillion's swift egress.

She stuck out a hand and stopped the door microbes away from being closed. She watched the hallway lest Maximillion roar back in a puff of golf clubs and gold dust. Was entering a hotel room that wasn't yours unlawful? Maybe like, a misdemeanor.

"Come baaaaack Z." Kiki languished on the floor in dejection and squalor. "I proooooomise I won't grab your boobs again, no matter how cute they are."

"Shoosh." Z. pressed the door and peered into the blackened space for devils and/or Satanists. "Stay put, I'll be back in five minutes."

She entered Maximillion's room and closed the door behind her, slow and quietlike. She flipped the switch, almost not daring to, and the plainness and tidiness of the room confronted her, the bed unruffled and no sign of loose clothes. She entered the bathroom. The door at the other end, to Max's room, was shut, and when she tried the knob it was so firmly locked it wouldn't jiggle. Didn't Hussie say these doors didn't lock? Did he forget to check? A moment's thought made Hussie's claim seem completely outlandish, why wouldn't a high end Vegas hotel have locks on the doors. Regardless of expectation, reality obviously would contort to make her miserable anyway, so Z. had no clue what she expected.

As she slugged back toward Kiki's lascivious hallway realm she realized the door was locked from *her* side. She regarded the little turny lock-thing with abject incomprehension before, almost indignant, she rushed to the door on Maximillion's side and checked it and confirmed that there were lock-turners on both sides of the door, the door could lock from inside and outside, but the lock on Max's door was turned the opposite way as the lock on Maximillion's (unlocked) door, meaning it was definitely locked from the bathroom side, this was some major league quantum calculus but she solved it, ace genius Z. Coulter.

Maybe the door was also locked on Max's side, but she wouldn't know unless she checked. She switched the turny-switch-dealybob and tried the knob. Miracle upon miracles, the door popped open.

The red suit Maximillion wannabe sat on the bedside. He leaned back with his legs splayed out, his arms propping him up as his head tilted slightly and his mouth hung agape, the tip of his tongue on the swell of his lower lip as his sunglasses streaked with slim bands of light from the chandelier above. On her knees, between his legs, was the girl with the frosty hair.

For a suspended moment in time things continued as they had been, the red suit guy stifled moans, the frosty hair girl bobbed her head as her synthetic strands of hair swished around. Z. found her vision drawn to the girl's gently gyrating rear, as though the ruffles at the end of the pale blue skirt formed a hypnotist swirl.

Then the red suit guy's head snapped abruptly up and he let out a strained cry and tried to turn away, jerking the frosty hair girl with him. After a brief delay she extricated herself and he clamped his legs closed and folded inward like a piece of origami and uttered meaningless expletives and interjections.

"Max?!" said Z.

"Ah—I—uh—fuck—ah—shit—"

The girl with the frosty hair stood up and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. Her icicle eyes drove their points into Z.'s soul as she extended a witch's finger with a long blue nail and accused Z. of murder without saying a word.

Then she did say words:

"GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY ROOM Z. OR I SWEAR I WILL—"

Z. turned and slammed directly into the bathroom door and ricocheted in a cyclone toward oblivion, she sailed into the shower and tangled in the curtain until it ripped from the pole and shrouded her like a straightjacket and she clapped against a wall and then a toilet and then floundered into Maximillion's room while all the doors in the entire world started slamming shut in a polyphonic harmony of condemnation a hellchoir of the seven archdemons and their affiliated devils durahans cerberi manticores nightmares the collective hordes of Pandaemonium uttering a unified and unrelenting invective against her Z. Coulter the fool of Denver the girl of clouds in the city of smoke as she rolled over Maximillion's bed and mashed her hands against the shower curtain until she burst from it and scrambled into Maximillion's closet and shut the door and waited in the dark.

Chapter 13x: Funtime's Over

Chapter 13x: Funtime's Over

Eventually the idea of perpetual existence in Maximillion's closet became untenable and she left. In the indeterminate amount of time since she entered, Kiki had oozed to the door of their shared room. She scratched at it like a cat while uttering meow noises.

"Look Z. I was good, I went to the door all by myself." She also appeared to have made an effort to put herself in dishabille, but either through tastefulness or failure had not shorn herself entirely.

Z. let her into the room, went to her own bed, and started to cry for like the fiftieth time that night. Crybaby Z.

Kiki pressed herself against Z. from behind. She pressed her forehead against the crook of Z.'s neck and Z. felt her sticky alcohol breath on her skin. "It's okay Z., it's okay. Forget about Max. Forget about shitty boys, let's be cute together."

"Get away from me."

"I don't want to sleep alone Z., I swear I won't do anything bad, let's stay in the same bed tonight okay?"

"Stop touching me you FREAK."

Kiki stopped touching her. Z. focused on the tasteful floral print of her bedspread. Poppies. The flowers of sleep.

She became dimly aware, as her own sobbing subsided, of Kiki sobbing. Kiki! What did Kiki have to sob about, what problems did Kiki have, perfect attractive Kiki with all her friends, Cal and Mitchum Graves and a host of faceless anonymous scene kids who inhabited the hallways of their middle class high school, Kiki who if she wanted could ring a silver bell and have men—and women, and everyone—crawling to her snazzy hipster shoes or combing her snazzy hipster bang or filing her snazzy hipster nails. And Z. only ever had Kiki and Max and now she had neither and when she rang a bell the only people who came did so to kick her teeth and despite that she rang anyway because it beat the alternative—And Kiki cried! Kiki who had not—seen what Z. saw—seen Max—

"You're right," Kiki said in a strangled whisper, "I'm degenerate. I'm filthy. I'm unclean."

Z. glared over her shoulder, her vision bleary and Kiki blearier. "Oh yeah? Oh yeah?"

Kiki folded into supplication. She bowed her head against the floor. "I'm disgusting. I'm so disgusting. I do the most disgusting things with the most disgusting people and I can't stop no matter how hard I try because I can't control myself and oh god. Z. I need you I need you so bad I need your purity I need to steal just a bit of it please Z. I need it."

Purity. Did the word have a definition?

"I need Cal and you I need you both we never should have left Cal where is Cal where is my phone I need to talk to Cal I've done such bad things I need him to help me Z. why won't you help me Z."

"Kiki," said Z. "Caaaaalm down."

"I did it Z. I did everything it was so bad and I hated myself afterward and then somehow I did it again I let him touch me pull me apart pluck off pieces put them in his mouth and chew I let him do it inside outside all over I'm so filthy Z. I need Cal I need you please help me please."

"Kiki. Kiki. What are you talking about. Who is he, what are you talking about."

Kiki lifted her head, her face streaked by venomous purple, her eyes a black mess, an immense ugliness sheltered her features. She mouthed the first syllable of the name Z. had feared. Z.'s body sagged, if she had liquid left in her dehydrated ducts they would have flowed, it was too nightmarish to be true, when did this happen, Max and Kiki—when did they become these contorted visions of themselves? When had she missed it, when had she let them too long out of her sight?

"I need you Z., please, please teach me, show me how, please—"

Z., like an automaton, fled to the bathroom, locked the door, turned off the lights, and after too long fell asleep in the tub.

Untitled I

Second Day

Untitled I

She woke with welts inside her lips, rough hardened nubs of wrinkled flesh that rolled incessantly between her teeth. Someone had jammed a thousand cotton swabs down her throat and consciousness bid her retch and tilt and leak a trickle of strep onto the carpet. Her ulcerated stomach tried to invert itself through the perforations while her liver drained bile into the narrow cavity among her intestines. Her eyes blinked involuntarily to clear the glitter and mascara congealed on her lids. The muscles in one hip drew taut and refused to slacken. She rolled onto a side. Slowly, taking accumulated bedspread with her, she slid to the ground.

The light offended her sorely, but when she put her head under the blankets the air thickened and her strained esophagus failed to filter the carbon dioxide until her nausea intensified and she had to surface or vomit.

Lucifer. His name, derived from light.

She had done it. She had no right to remember, the alcohol should have burned her most recent cells, but she maintained vivid images in her head of the night prior. She groped Z. The word lingered in plain Luciferian illumination: GROPE. Coarse, guttural, assuredly derived from the German. She had molested Z. Another dandy word, molest. Like a combination of mole and incest, connotations of burrowing, digging, drilling, sin.

Kiki entertained notions of suicide for purposes of catharsis.

At some point—her conception of time was nebulous—the bathroom door opened and Z. emerged, slouched, shamefaced. The ossifying paste between Kiki's joints forced her to maintain an ignoble position splayed on the carpet amid her own expelled fluids. She tried to think of a phrase, a word to preempt Z. and bury the previous night, but witticisms failed her. Her brain raised a middle finger to herself.

Z. didn't speak at first. She didn't look at Kiki. She swayed trancelike to her bed and searched for something, maybe her bag, even though she left it in Cal's jeep and Cal was too far away to save either of them now.

"My shirt ripped," said Z. in perfect monotone, each syllable equidistant from the previous.
"Can I borrow one of yours."

Say it. Form the word in your abominable throat: Sorry. Atone for your heinous degeneracy. Own up to it at least, admit to her that you're depraved, seized by the throes of nymphomania, that you desire to fornicate with anything male or female that strikes your fancy and that at any time anything may brush against the sensitive patch of your titillation and ignite that small spark that draws you inward to your own oblivion, admit that temptation means nothing to you so little does it register in your mind before your base mammalian instincts

seize you in an iron grip. Confess and receive absolution or a shade of it. Oh, she was so sick! What did a confession mean if she had no way of preventing herself from acting again? If Mitchum came to her could she even hope to resist him, if Z. remained intimate with her—if, because in no way would it happen—could she prevent her head from bubbling with perverted thoughts?

"Sure," said Kiki, and extended a hollow arm toward her bag.

Z. ruffled through it, retrieved a garment, and retreated to the bathroom. Nothing worse than mornings. Sober, imbued with light, she faced reason and lost every time. Nights she could hide from it but in hiding only mole-burrow deeper into the things that, when exposed in the morning, sickened her soul. Thus her paradox of day and night. Alcohol—Alcohol was the problem. No, alcohol only loosened her tongue. She couldn't blame a scapegoat when she knew full well her own thoughts.

In Kiki's blouse, Z. appeared somewhat undersized, the collar sagging down her sternum. The intimacy inherent in the gesture of wearing someone else's clothes—it didn't escape her. Like the girl wrapped in the man's t-shirt post-coitus. Among girls it was a more casual thing, Kiki knew of girls who exchanged clothes all the time, but she had never before reached this level of connection with Z., perhaps because Z. showed no interest in fashion, but more likely because despite the long years they had never established close enough ties. They had always maintained an aloofness, a superficiality that made them "friends" through proximity and familiarity rather than compatibility and mutual geniality. Mostly Kiki's fault, of course. Sure, Z. had never fully disclosed her infatuation with Max, which was blatantly obvious to everyone, but that was because Kiki refused to broach the subject of romance with her in any serious capacity—the best way to stifle unwanted notions is to stamp them out completely, turn the spigot full closed, prevent even a sullen drip to eke an existence on the white porcelain of the washbasin. Cal, at least, was right on that account. But what was last night? No drop, but a whimsical tap-turning to let a little splatter stain the pure surface, and now the liquid lingered there, a permanent blemish on their relationship—but water evaporated over time—but it was just an analogy—but time heals everything—but once the cat is out of the bag—or the can of worms is opened—things don't easily go back in anymore—it all depends on whether drunkenly groping her best friend counts as water or worms and Kiki right now tended to think it tilted more on the worms side. Diet of Worms and Martin Luther. *Go Eat Worms* by noted American man of letters R. L. Stine. "Waiting for the Worms" by Pink Floyd:

Sitting in a bunker, here behind my wall.

Waiting for the worms to come.

In perfect isolation, here behind my wall.

Waiting for the worms to come.

Someone once told her Pink Floyd was a euphemism for cock.

Z. moved for the door. Kiki lurched up and, teeth gritted through pain, extended a hand. "Wait, wait. Don't leave. Wait." She sounded so desperate, fragile, and needy. The words rang

pathetic in her ears.

"What," said Z. She stood near the door, frozen with a cool terseness, her face turned away so no extraneous emotion or sensibility could bleed through. For even dorky, oblivious Z. to be able to affect such posture, surely tables have turned as the proverbial cliché goes. Even though she knew full well why and how stupid and hypocritical it was, Kiki warmed with resentment.

"Nuts night last night eh," she said. Immediately she realized she had adopted Mitchum's fake Canadian tic, even though she hadn't meant it in a Canadian way but in a rib-nudge kind of way.

Z. said, "Yeah."

Two single-word responses in a row. Kiki had no right to blame her. Let's be honest these internal ramblings were geared toward delaying the inevitable. She knew what she had to do, the one thing she could do that Z. would accept as the beginnings of mending: A sincere apology. Not half-slurred, not laced in sarcasm, not mollified with humor. Or was that perhaps the one thing Kiki would accept from herself? The one piece of penitence she could believe in. But even a wholly sincere supplication became soon forgotten, by the end of the same day, the same hour, and here's Kiki returned to her old tricks, that devious whore. But knowing she would act this way caused her then to forgo all apology whatsoever, which then denied her the closure the religious ceremony was designed to bring, which sometimes shredded her to pieces and sometimes seemed a just reward for her evil; if atonement begat salvation, then perhaps she deserved neither. But was it not the height of arrogance to believe oneself unworthy of God's grace? Well, Kiki didn't believe in God, or Allah, or Shiva, or any of your haberdashery of deities, so these philosophical arguments eventually went to tatters and she remained with the guilt of her thigh-caked filth. Had she but a goldfish memory! Committed to a cycle of transgression and self-flagellation, able to believe the penance of the latter blotted the shame of the former. But when such a pattern persists a month, a year, a lifetime, who but a fool could know the worthlessness of either action? Had she the humility to believe in her own insignificance, then perhaps she could swallow the notion of a God or Goddess. But with the ends severed both forward and backward she was left holding a worthless tassel and wondering at the paradox of her actions meaning nothing and her sin wearing heavily upon her. She was, of course, a truly selfish person, enamored of her own self-perceived excellence, and her inability to marshal her urges and longings bespoke a critical flaw in her person, a long crack down her bronzed colossal form, because—get this—her actions had actually offended someone, or would once he learned of them; Cal would be deeply wounded by her infidelities, and had she but one thought for him this entire rhapsody? Of course not. A true sociopath.

Z. began to leave again and Kiki cried out, "Wait, Z. I'm... sorry what I did to you. My head was bad. Is bad. It's a bad head." Her confession bordered on farce, could either take it seriously? She tried, more frankly: "I have a problem, Z."

"What?" said Z. "It's whatever, you were drunk, I'm sure you didn't mean it."

"Z. you dipshit, that's not what alcohol does, it makes you do exactly what you mean to do, that's rule one of alcohol."

"Look, I don't care," said Z. "But please, stay away from Graves okay? I think he's—"

"Mitchum has nothing to do with anything—"

"He's clearly doing something to your brain—"

"My brain!" Kiki grabbed her brain and dug her fingers in. "Is he mind controlling me, Z.? Has he stolen my soul? Yes, let's blame everyone else for my misfortune, nothing wrong with me personally, of course."

"Kiki, I know you pretty well. You haven't acted like yourself."

Haven't. Acted. Like herself. These words, what do they mean? Does Z. know what she's saying? Does she know the least thing about Kiki Radney? The question of absolution became moot fast when confronted with a deaf confessor. Z. had the luxury of living in a rather confined world, she never had to venture from her precepts and prejudices, but surely even she must suspect things were not up to snuff with old Kiki? Surely she must have thought something about all the times Kiki left a social event early to rendezvous with some guy or girl, or the times she showed up at school reeking of sex. Did Z. just reject these things from her memory? What about all the times Kiki had gotten too frisky with Z., gotten too close or said something too lascivious, because Kiki knew full well sometimes she had little intention toward subtlety in these manners, she had considered blatantly asking Z. to fuck and the only thing that held her back was Z.'s bizarre androgyny, and yet somehow despite all the hints dropped for the past—what, three? four?—years, Z. remained oblivious. Why was Kiki surprised! Z. would probably forget about the groping incident too. Anything to maintain her perilous idealizations of her friends, from a time when they were nine and pheromones sparse. Maybe Z. never aged, puberty never worked its wiles on her. It explained her minuscule physique and total lack of breasts, which Kiki had always attributed to her being half-Asian, although given her childlike psyche perhaps an alternative explanation was not so farfetched. Kiki briefly wondered if Z. lacked pubic hair either, if her pelvis was soft and smooth, and the arousal this momentary glimmer of an image caused met an immediate blowback of revulsion.

"I'm... fine." The feeling passed, the spine shuddered. "I'm me."

"You said weird shit about Mitchum last night," said Z.

Kiki tried to figure out what she meant by this. She didn't remember saying anything particularly weird about him, but she had been rather blotto, so who knew what she might have mumbled or what Z. might have misheard.

"Look," said Z., "Whatever you did last night, you're still my friend, alright? We're still friends, right?"

"Nope," said Kiki. "We're lovers now, obviously."

Z. blinked. Please please get the joke you dense dolt. Get it. Understand that it was a joke. Oh my god she doesn't get it. Maybe she was right to, because Kiki wasn't even sure if it was a joke. Kiki wasn't sure of much, as anyone privy to her thoughts might discern.

"Just say safe, Kiki. I'm gonna talk to Max."

Ah. Of course. It all returned to Max, did it not? Always the foremost of her concerns, the first served yet the last to desire service, the insufferable prick of Z.'s affections, around whom her unhealthy obsessions revolved despite his ineffable, inexorable gayness, had she ever really spoken to the guy in all these years? What lengths did her mind go to construct a tent around his blatant homosexuality? Was it the same tarpaulin that canvassed Kiki's own sexuality, did the notion of sex register a sudden blankness in Z.'s head, was she incapable of comprehending the simple three letter word, was that it Z.? Had Kiki stumbled upon the mystery of the complex mechanism of your mind, did it stem from a latent suppression in your debunked Freudian subconscious? And for Max, Z.? For MAX? FOR MAXWELL MOTHERFUCKING RODDLEVAN, DO YOU EVEN UNDERSTAND HOW MUCH HE DESPISES YOU, DO YOU ****ENJOY**** HIS TRAMPLING ALL OVER YOU, DO YOU ****LIKE**** IT WHEN HE SQUATS OVER YOUR FACE AND SHITS INTO YOUR OPEN MOUTH?

"Tell the faggot I said hi," she said with a cordial, hateful smile.

Z. charged her with a fist raised overhead, howling, "Stop calling him that you CUNT!" She spoke with comical dorkiness, nay farcical, the vicious c-word expelled from her throat with the same amount of weight as though a kelpie risen from a lake pronounced it without context or qualification. Kiki could only cackle as Z. beset her and pummeled her face with fists, cracking her eye socket and her jaw, swelling bruises—why not?—spurting blood, peeling back flesh and revealing a skeletal face, grinding bone to paste and digging fingers into brain, scooping out pliant chunks, ahahahahahahaha.

The assault ended, Kiki lay sprawled upon the ground as a collection of mummified organ jars. Z. stood over her, fists hooked around her body, her body breathing and heaving.

"An angel of mercy!" said Kiki. "Have you ever seen *All Dogs Go to Heaven* starring Don Bluth?"

As predicted, Z. ran out the room. The door inched closed and condemned Kiki to an eternal Jean-Paul Sartre damnation between the beds of the hotel room. Kiki laughed until she could not conjure anymore humor to stave away the self-loathing.

And then she loathed herself, because she had hurt her friend's feelings for no reason and she had no defense for any of her actions. All you flighty mindreaders peeping on a teenage girl's sordid brain, what do you think? Is Kiki good or bad, can she be redeemed? Clap your hands if you think she can be redeemed. Go on, clap! Clap your hands!

...

Oh come on you douchebags. Don't you know faeries die if you don't clap? You're all as cynical as old Kiki, aren't you? Z. would probably clap. Or maybe even she would consider the whole affair too stupid to indulge—or she would explain how clapping actually had no effect on faeries, if you wanted to bring them back to life you had to go to hell and have Mephistopheles drop their bones in a stew to transform them into a kinky succubus that

nobody likes except as a sexual object. Hm. Perhaps Shirou Japanese guy knew more about the world than he let on.

Who here has seen *Kiki's Delivery Service*, starring Sabrina the Teenage Witch?

Nobody?

She's all alone in this hotel room?

She lazed in repose a significant while, or maybe an insignificant while, and counted the crisscross lines on the ceiling. She made up numbers whenever she lost count. When she reached $2\pi - i$, the silence of the room shattered and a familiar jingle blurted:

Hey! Hey! Hey!

I'm your perfect girlfriend

Hey! Hey! Hey!

Love is such a fool's errand

Kiki lurched out of her blankets and scoured the beds for the source of the noise, loud enough for nearness but muffled slightly. She pulled Z.'s blankets off and in doing so upended the pillows, beneath which clattered out her cell phone. How did it get under Z.'s pillow, did Z. hide it? The cretin!

She tapped the code and answered the call. The voice of the man she betrayed said:

"I am in Las Vegas. Where are you?"

MY EYES ARE BILLIARD BALLS

MY EYES ARE BILLIARD BALLS

Sitting in a bunker. Sand in the shoes. Propped upon a metal stilt. Infernal sun ablaze against the nape. 100m + putt for birdie. Parabolic motion in elegance and spray of turf from swung club. Glitter and sand and sand and glitter. A skybox broken by sentinel structures. "Round the decay of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away." Leafy palms sway.

Stand. Posture. Back legs arms eyes. Breath. Smoke in lungs. Smoke in sky.

Up—

Down.

Ball lost in a murk of Post-Expressionist Gauguin (late Monet) (none of that Van Gogh—overrated—awarded in death what undeserved in life). Atomized integrated into the atmosphere uncertainty principle.

Splash.

No more balls. Fish. Spare suit in case. Drag roots from bunker shamble onto lawn. Undulation of hillocks knolls dales. "Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting." No hitters now. A desolate oasis.

Waterside. Balls glitter the bed and banks. Reach club in. Scoop. Ball slipped. Try again. Slipped again. Shoes sink in mud.

—Sir.

Could wade. Short wade. Spare suit in case. Rub nape.

—Sir.

Voice hails. Humanity! Lurches from the side and shuffles hands over suit uh "Back to reality oops there goes gravity" ha ha ha ha ha who is he man in a golf cart nimbus polo visor and aviators one hand perched atop the wheel other hung like ask for alms okay Maximillion prepositions again let's remember prepositions okay all square all square.

—Hello good sir [thus spake Maximillion], have I disturbed your excursion on this fine golf course? Have I interrupted your game? I apologize if I have interrupted your game.

—Please slow down, sir.

—Slow down? I can slow down. I. Can. Slow. Down.

—Sir, are you on any substances?

—No no no no no.

(Authorities?) The man buzzes a radio. Mutters a syllable. (Police?) Police are alright. Breathalyzer. Walk the line. Maximillion can walk the line.

—Sir, you're aware the course is closed, correct?

—Closed? No sir I was unaware that the course is closed. The lights were on after all. Nobody came to stop me from golfing and I was golfing all night.

—All night? [The man lowers his aviators.] All night, you say?

—I left my hotel room sometime last night for a sport of late-night golfing sir. And I came to your fine establishment. I paid my dues.

—Sir, have you been playing the same 18-hole course for the past ten hours?

70 par. Bogey bogey double bogey bogey triple bogey triple bogey triple bogey bogey bogey double bogey par bogey triple bogey bogey bogey double bogey par—

—Sir. Please answer me.

—I've played multiple times around the course. I can't be sure exactly how many times I've played around the course but it's multiple times. Perhaps two or three. Perhaps six—

—Sir. Please slow down.

(I can slow down. I can slow down. I can slow down. I... can... slow... down. I... can... slooooooow... down.)

—It's been a. Few. Times. [I can slow down.]

—Sir. You're aware that the fee you paid is only for one set of 18 holes?

—Nobody. Told. Me. That.

—Sir. Have you ever played golf before?

Cal Comes

Cal Comes

Khalid Bhandari, at the culmination of a mythic quest, begrimed with desert soot and seared with sun-heat, mounted the gilded steps toward the obelisk of Mbuji in this the den of thieves and sinners from whence may come a contemporaneous Elijah. This the city of empire. An aberration in the desolate waste. This the handful of dust clutched in Eliot's palm; these the sands that sift between his fingers. These fragments have shored against the ruins, this the Ozymandias buried on a lone and level plain.

Obelisk of Mbuji. Mbuji Obelisk. Metropolis. Monopolous. Monogamous. As I enter the metropolis—my thoughts monopolous—monogamous.

Out a sand-swept metropolis an obelisk rises;

My monopolous thoughts seize on monogamous prizes.

He entered the Babelian tower through translucent panes of glass and from the inner breast pocket of his camouflage coat retracted his notepad and pen, the latter of which he uncapped with his teeth before scrawling into the former the composed couplet for later revision—not fond of "monogamous prizes". Cap returned to pen and both pen and paper returned to pocket.

Costumed loons congested the lobby, although he expected no less from an environs that attracted Coulter and her anemic compatriot. Environs was a good word, a good replacement for environment when strapped for syllables. He did not need to write the word down because it was already a staple of his vernacular. The trick was not knowing the mere definition of words, it was the capacity to call forth the correct one at the proper juncture. Neither memory nor chronicle could help in that respect.

He slapped a hand on a counter for attention. "Where are the elevators," he asked. "Or failing them, the stairs?"

A burgundy baboon made a placid smile. "Sir, you'll have to wait your turn in line."

The complex mechanism of humans strangulating the lobby made any attempt at deciphering a "line" Gordian at best.

"The elevators," he repeated, "Or the stairs."

She relinquished a sigh and pointed. He ventured for the spot and, armed only with his elbows and forehead, butted a way to the fore and slid between the closing doors with due elegance. Elegance, elephants. Relevance. Malfeasance for a slant rhyme. With the proper enunciation he could make it work. Malkwon had skewed far further this our English tongue.

Once the elevator began to rise, its stifled silence shattered at the voice of a young man central to the gathered assemblage.

"Anyone in here seen these kids." From above heads, two arms raised, holding photographs. "Either of them, anyone seen either of them? I can't go home until I find them. I want to go home."

Nobody spoke. The photographs were so small, likely only those directly next to them could discern any greater detail in their imagery. The symmetry of imagery shows Pharisees their heresies. Liturgy, energy, bitterly, chitterling.

If chitterlings comprise your liturgy

The hypocrisy of your energy

Will bitterly depict the imagery

Of a Pharisee committing heresy

To the face of Christ himself.

Oh, good, very good. He attended the ritual of pen and notepad. With an additional note to recite in double-time.

He knocked on Kiki's door and waited while observing left and right the long corridor of the intricate conch interior. Conch was not a good word for rhyming. Haunch, paunch, launch. But the stillness and inactivity of the landscape gave him few other recourses for inspiration.

The door opened. Kiki stood before him slipshod, garbed in loose and lazy swatches of pastel-colored cloth, her hair strung in tangled clumps with only her purple bang still cognizant of order or structure. Her mouth hung slightly open, marked by a smear of lipstick. She wore no shoes; her petite toes tucked inward. Even so ramshackle, she appeared beautiful. Coulter nor the other were present, so Khalid embraced her in his arms and held her close to him. She pressed her hands against his chest and lowered her eyes.

"You never should have left on your own," said Khalid.

"I know," said Kiki. "I know, I know, I didn't want to, but Z. insisted—I couldn't let her—"

He kissed her on her consternated brow. "Why didn't you answer my calls? I must have called at least twenty times yesterday."

"Z. hid my phone for some reason, I don't know."

"Tell me nothing went wrong," said Khalid. "Tell me you didn't do anything."

Kiki remained silent. A vortex opened in Khalid's chest, it enveloped his heart and the pulsing ventricles, stomached his blood into its maw. "Cal," she said finally, and tried to pull away.

But he held her. "Did you drink?"

She gnawed her lip, she refused to meet his eye. "Yes. A lot."

"Marijuana? Ecstasy? Cocaine?"

"Do we have to do the checklist, Cal."

"Answer me."

"I took a lot of pills, I don't know what they were."

A beleaguered breath crept out of him. It displaced her purple bang. "Who gave them to you? Z.?"

"She only gives me Adderall, Cal. She's innocent, don't be mad at her."

"I'm not mad at her. I'm not mad at anyone yet."

"I can tell by your voice you're mad at her."

He released Kiki and folded his arms in one brisk motion, gritting his teeth to prevent himself from raising his voice. "You didn't answer me. Who gave you the pills?"

She crumpled, her legs folded beneath her, her skirt rose to her thighs with her luxurious brown flesh radiant beneath the light. Likewise, one strap of her shirt slid down her shoulder and her body unraveled before him, infuriatingly submissive, infuriatingly unlike Kiki.

"Mitchum Graves," she whispered.

"Who," said Khalid. "Did you fornicate with him?"

She rubbed at an eye and blinked with the same dull expression, luster and life sapped from her erstwhile vivacious gaze. The moment's pause was enough to answer the question and Khalid felt his skeleton crash down inside him, the bones jumbled at his feet while his body swayed formless in the pungent air.

"Don't make me answer, Cal."

"Two days," Khalid's lungs managed to eke, "One and a half days. Can you not display restraint... for even so short a stretch?"

"I know I know I know I know," she said concurrently. "I know I know I know."

He raised a fist and levied it at the wall. The starchy plaster scraped the skin from his knuckles and he let the bloodied stump hang beside the rest of his useless body.

"This is not the first time you've done this."

"I know I know I know I know I know I know I know I know."

"Is it a game? Is it play? Do you not consider the implications of your actions? Are you so unaware?"

"I know I know I know I know I know I know."

"Or are you simply so undisciplined, so poor at self-governance, that without me constantly standing nearby you devolve into the most depraved, animalistic bacchanalia?"

"I know I know I know I know I know I know."

Oh, if only such a piteous display could continue to evoke the pathos in him it once did. If only he could be suckered into that same tap dance routine. Cry your purple tears, Kiki Radney. Cry them until they glisten like rainbows against your cheek.

"That's exactly what I'm asking. What do you know, Kiki."

Her refrain stopped and she sucked in a sob. Her big bright eyes peered at him and her wrecked beauty effected a sullen change in his emotions, but unlike her he could reck such feelings with the rod of reason. Hya! Andhya again, beat down these unruly passions which, like the opiate addict, grope for the pipe that has wrought their suffering even to stave that suffering a second longer.

"Please, Cal," she said, shuffling on her knees up to him, unconcerned with her appearance, even as her clothes twisted and knotted around her, revealing the full crest of one buttock as her skirt hiked upward—perhaps this was by design—she clutched his knees. "Please, forgive me, it was such strange circumstances, I'm not normally alone like this, if Z. didn't fuck me over... Cal, I loathe myself even more than you loathe me, you have to believe me."

How easy it would be to believe her. To reconcile in each other's arms, to hold themselves in that tender embrace. His being cried out for such resolution, it wanted Kiki no matter the price, it wanted this beautiful girl and her beautiful ways, her mystique, her self-assuredness, her bitter humor, her lightly chafing personality, all of these elements that compounded into one fully-formed Kiki Radney but without that hamartia that seems to encompass all otherwise magnificent figures. And he could see in her eyes, in her essence, that she herself was not unburdened by this flaw, that she was of a like mind as him regarding it; that ounce of self-awareness endeared her all the more to him, and yet he could not stand and let this imperfection continue in such a state. Kiki had displayed admirable will and rectitude over the past months, but it seemed as though this will was an illusion; it was his will personified within her, his own life force quaffing her fouler humors and straining them through his own staunch liver; but one day without his support and she descended to such a state.

She began to grab at his belt. "Let's do it Cal, let's do it right now, I swear—I swear—"

"Get off me!" He seized her wrist and jerked her away. "What are you doing, what's happened to you?" He flung the hand far from him. Her body lurched dramatically alongside it and she flopped onto her side. "This is so disgusting, you are disgusting me right now Kiki."

"I know I know I know I know I know—"

"If you know, do something about it," said Khalid. "If you know, get off the ground and act! Better yourself!"

She began to sob, big blubbering boohoos that splattered on the carpet. His bile rose, this was not Kiki, this was not her.

"Clap for me, Cal," she said between the bursts.

"What?"

"Clap for me. Please clap for me."

"I'm leaving," he said, and grabbed the doorknob. "I'm going to the Malkwon concert tonight, and I am leaving tomorrow. Either you can join me or you can go home with whomever." This was not the first time they had discussed her infidelities and nymphomania. This was not the first time they had triangulated the problem and set a course to correct it. But where before she had tackled it with a cool and collected demeanor, now she... was this globule on the ground before him.

As he opened the door, she extended a scrawny, trembling hand. "Please clap," she said. "Please clap for me."

"Clap for yourself," he said, and exited.

In the hallway, a man leaned with his arms crossed. He had a beard, glasses with no lenses, and a Canadian flag. As Khalid passed him, he winked.

Somnolent, cromulent, fraudulent.

Who's in Bunker?

Who's in Bunker?

I wake up, yeah, and under each arm there's this gorgeous, and I mean *gorgeous*, fucking broad, each slumbering peaceably like a widdle tyke, you know, and each with tremendous Christ Almighty knockers, we're talking watermelons, pert teats at the end nearly dripping with that warm maternal nectar, so of course the first thing I do's grab the plumpest of the four and give it a light squeeze. I'm kidding, of course. Under one arm's a pillow and the other a bundled blanket.

Who am I, you surely ask. This tale has heretofore been related in strict third-person limited, what is this newfangled shit, some kind of gimmick? Oh god, don't tell me the author's stepping in for a self insert, oh god anything but that. Martin Amis, you know, or maybe you don't know, but he was a British author, or is, considering he's still alive in the year this story's set, well his father was Kingsley Amis, another British author, and Martin had Dad read his humble work, and that learned Kingsley, likely with a pipe stashed in the corner of his mouth to wobble alongside his kingly jowls, got to a part in Martin's novel where a character named Martin Amis appeared, and Kingsley went and hurled the book across the room. Kingsley's dead now, as befits a man named Kingsley.

But fear not, it's only I, your good friend Andrew Hussie, and I'm not actually breaking the fourth wall, it just so happens that I converse with myself in inner monologue structured as though I am speaking to a fictional second-person "you", as this way of thinking best allows me to ping pong ideas off the silent but ever-watchful edifice of my own imagined reader.

Surely, you ask, this whole metatextual dialogue, even if a fabrication of your mind, is rather trite no? It might've been funny once when Borges broke the fourth wall, but by now doesn't the conceit illicit groans and, as in the fable of the Amises, wanton disregard for the book or e-reader device we currently hold in our hands? Postmodernism is *so* twenty years ago. But see, by preempting your groans, I have delved a layer deeper into the onion of metafiction—I am discussing metafiction itself within a fictional work, and by so removing myself also remove myself from the unawareness of postmodernism, which ironically believed itself to be self-aware but simply moved the first tier inward.

There's a story by Kafka—fun bloke, Kafka—of a man who wanted to enter the gates of the law—this is in *The Trial*—but the man is stopped by a guardsman, who says the man cannot enter. The guard tells the man don't even think about trying to force your way in, because there are many more chambers beyond, each with a bigger and more imposing guard than the last, and he (meaning the guard) is but the littlest. The man, undeterred, decides to wait. He waits years and years to be granted access, he lives outside the gate lest his name be called, but the guard never wavers and nothing changes. Eventually, the man grows old and begins to die, right there in front of the gate. And at this point, the guard steps aside and lets him enter.

But as you remember, that was only the first chamber, the outermost sanctum of the shell. Postmodernism was that dying man granted access through the first gate; they crawled on

their elbows into that blessed waiting room and believed themselves the purveyors of true knowledge because they suddenly knew slightly more than all those before them. But for true awareness, and thus true self-awareness, you must be aware of how you are self-aware, and furthermore aware of how you are aware you are self-aware, and so forth unto eternity, because the grand joke Kafka never told—perhaps he did not know himself—was that the chambers of the law never end, and we are forever waiting at a more inward gate.

I sound smart now, don't I? It's easy to impress people, I literally read 1) A Wikipedia article on Martin Amis and 2) *The Trial* and I look smart as shit, rofl.

Into these thoughts a foot intrudes, like a real foot, one that kicks me in the shin. I jolt up and say OW even though it didn't hurt, y'know, for the sake of theatrics. And who should be standing over me but Andrew Hussie himself, with that classic Hussie glower behind the glare of his glasses?

"Off the ground," he says.

I don't really feel like getting up but Hussie's a changed man of late, something queer has settled over him, and I don't mean like HOMOSEXUAL, lol! Giving one of the chicks on my shoulder a final tit-jiggle for good measure, I catapult to my feet—being, you must know by now, the last catapult standing in the land of cookie cutters—and perform an obsequious bow for my liege and sovereign.

"We have work today," speaks the Hollowman himself, like a great god idol in the Congo.

"Correct! Last night's party had only about fifty girls, tonight's needs twice that."

His Holiness pauses at the door and gives a sidelong sweep of the room. "This place is a sty. If the hotel charges us for damages, you pay the bill."

Hm. This won't do, my lovelies. You see, while it's incontrovertible fact that the damage to the room is my doing (were I a less self-aware sort, I may blame my roommate for luring the riffraff that composes his buttpuckered fandom, who assuredly committed more than their fair share of the revelries), it is also incontrovertible fact that my dear amigo has a lot of money and I have not so much money. In the interest of charity, you see, I must fleece the fool. I am a Dickensian villain.

Before I can even settle my hooks in, though, he's out the door. I stagger after him, but being somewhat hungover, wind up derping into a wall and barfing down its side. Like this: BLUUUGH. Except not really. I can hold my liquor—but these niggas can't handle me. Besides, I need a plan before I can beg alms of Hussie. The man is utterly immune to promises of flesh, which is the business in which I, Shylock, King of Jewry, most expertly peddle. Thinking about flesh reminds me of Kiki Radney.

Oh, come off it. Don't get offended at *that*. Sure, you've just been subjected to a few scenes of a more sympathetic Kiki (interspersed with that weird Maximillion scene—pretty sure that guy is literally retarded), but remember the scenes before that in which Kiki was a total bitch. Isn't that a chapter title? Kiki's a Total Bitch. Let's be honest, it's true. I am uniquely qualified to identify rotten, awful people, being one myself. And her whole redemption shtick? All that

woe is me stuff. What a load of shit. Trust me, I've lived it before. You get over it. You embrace your horridness, because you have no other recourse. She already has 1) No belief in God, 2) No belief in her family, and 3) No belief in herself—the ligaments that moor her to our pre-modern notions of "truth"—she now floats freeform in the womb of human understanding. She'll slide out on the afterbirth sooner or later.

I think I'll impart this wisdom to her, actually. Our situations being so similar, I'm in a prime position to make an actual improvement in her happiness, unlike the other goons in her life. With a few oblique hints dropped in jests and japes, I'll deliver a code for her to decipher.

On the elevator's a lanky, slouched fellow in a trench coat. This poor guy has been in this elevator all day, looks like he has no choice. Overbearing mothers, I tell ya. Once the doors close and we start going up he asks everyone in the elevator if they've seen the kids in the two photographs he's holding. It's Z. and her fuckboy friend! I nod judiciously and stroke my chin.

"Mhmm, oh you betcha. I sure did seen them fellows not yesterday morning, mhmm, right in this here lobby."

Max's brother looks royally pissed off, like he wants to knock my block off—pardon my Quebecois. He squints and says to me: "Why are you talking in a fake accent."

"Ohhh you betcha, fake accent? Not on my life no it ain't. I hail from the wee town of Brainerd Minnesooooota don'tcha know? County seat of Bunyan County you're darn tootin'."

The other people in the elevator do their best to pretend they're not listening. Frederick Roddlevan remains squinting but I can tell he's bought the accent now, it was the Bunyan County detail that sold it, which is funny because it's the detail I pulled out my ass. It's especially hilarious because I'm holding a Canadian flag and it doesn't seem to affect his perception whatsoever.

"Alright, you saw them in the lobby. Were they together. When was this, where were they going."

"Ohhh, saw 'em about yesterday, yes definitely yesterday afternoon, you betcha. They asked me for directions to Circus Circus."

"Circus Circus." If the guy doesn't know Minnesota, what are the odds he knows Circus Circus?

"Oh yah, definitely Circus Circus, you betcher bottom dollar."

"Why did they want to go to Circus Circus."

I stroke my beard again, like putting serious thought to this answer. "Hmm, I do think they said something about wanting to hide from this feller was lookin' for 'em, don'tcha know. Big scary guy in a trench coat, don'tcha know. That feller wouldn't happen to be you, now would it?"

And with the auspicious providence that our nonexistent deity bestows primarily to his most ungrateful knaves, the elevator doors open on Kiki's floor and I swag the fuck out with Freddy befuddled in my wake.

As I approach Miss Radney's penthouse, someone starts shouting on the other side of her door—some dude too. That kinky Kiki! Unsatisfied with one cock, she's turned to another. I say this in a completely non-judgmental way, mind you. Kiki is a mature female, she can gobble however many donguses she so chooses, in fact the thought of Kiki doing so quite titillates me, she is a handsome specimen of humanity after all. She has taken great pains to idealize her body and I respect that. You may not have noticed, but I, the doll Babushka, have also idealized myself through assiduous toning and disciplined workout regimens. But Babushka, you say, I recall on page so-and-so Z. described you as "tall, lanky, sinuous, wiry"—Well, let's chalk that to a Barthesian Death of the Author, shall we? There's no absolute truth, after all. Only endless, fragmentary, divergent perspectives that refuse to unify. Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf nowadays?

You may also say, Babushka you dolt, get on with the story—what did the man say in Kiki's room? But dear reader, you read that scene already, I hardly need tell you what's what. The more shrewd of you may have in fact said, Babushka you dungaree, skip to the part where you wink at Khalid "Lil Cal" Bhandari, your scene is already overstaying its welcome and you've informed us of no new information whatsoever. What's your conversation with Kiki like after Khalid "Lil Cal" Bhandari leaves?

But you see, dear reader, you're the dolt/dungaree, because that question doesn't matter. What'd I say to Kiki? Who cares. I'm sure you can figure it out for yourself, or supply a more palatable answer in lieu of the obvious one.

No, no, the important thing is actually what I heard shouted on the other side of the door, despite me saying moments ago it wasn't important because you already read it—classic misdirection, this is the city of smoke and mirrors after all. Here's the key phrase I caught:

"I'm leaving. I'm going to the Malkwon concert tonight, and I am leaving tomorrow. Either you can join me or you can go home with whomever."

So when Khalid "Lil Cal" Bhandari exits the room, and I wink at him, and he keeps walking, and he's almost around the bend, I say:

"Malkwon, eh?"

And he says:

"So you heard."

And I say:

"African Daimyo."

And he says:

"You know him?"

And I say:

"I was alive in the 90s."

And he says, almost unbelievably, almost to the point of farce:

"He's got a concert two blocks from here at eight. If you're interested, pay some respect."

He leaves, and I, Petruccio, cackle until my head falls off.

Ouroboros & Mephistopheles

Ouroboros & Mephistopheles

She had serpents inside her. There were two of them and they coiled around each other within her womb. They rubbed their ribbed scales against her inner flesh and bit each other's tails. In the bustling amphitheater, at the base of the statue of happy hero Mr. Mbuji, she clasped her hands, bent inward, and prayed for perseverance. After the amen, she wiped her icy brow and straightened her collar. An inner flame raged against her gelid exterior. This fire would melt her into a goopy mess of colors, with only the two coiled serpents remaining.

They rumbled. They whispered. She heard their tongues wag as she slid around the side of the statue's pedestal and bid the many people pardon. They did not pardon and she waited for them to move in patterns that provided narrow access forward. She was reluctant to leave the statue and she remained beside it for a long time. However, God would not hear her prayer if she did not harness herself toward the fruition of his benison. The moment she slid into a corridor between the flocking masses, the pathway behind her closed and sealed her into their ranks. The crowd moved like a serpent and she was inside the serpent like the serpents were inside of her. The walls of its belly forced her deeper. Its hard spine scraped her body. Every sensation was amplified by the hardness of the serpents inside her. She could not move her foot without provoking them. The serpents lived inside her, but most of the month they slept.

With unmerited deliverance, she surfaced at the end of the lobby and entered the stairwell. Inside the oddly bare space, lined with exposed pipes and flecked paint, she had a moment to sit on the steps and collect herself. She smoothed her skirt against her legs and crossed her ankles. When she sat down, the serpents flicked with less ire. She wiped her brow again. She breathed heavily, but in time it diminished. She prayed thanks.

Eventually, her friend Zee descended the stairs. Cecily stood and despite the pain tried her best to maintain a smile. "Hello, Zee! It's nice to see you this morning."

Zee wore a blouse that fit her poorly and sagged around the middle, displaying a rather surprising amount of her chest. Given the slatternly state of Zee's hair and face, however, Cecily believed the blouse to be more a result of general dishevelment than deliberate lewdness. Should she inform Zee about...? She did not wish to be rude.

"Oh." Zee noticed her only upon reaching the very base of the stairs. "Cecilia. Hi."

Oh no! And how to deal with the complication of correcting her about the mistake of her name? Well, it was a minor mistake. Assuredly a more natural correction would come eventually. The matter of the shirt was more of a problem—oh, but she had an idea! "You must be freezing in that blouse, Zee." The serpents roiled her blood. "Even though it's hot outside, the management keeps it deathly cold. Here! Take my coat." She began to unbutton the doily-textured overcoat she wore over her own blouse.

"I don't need a coat."

"It's no bother. My clothes are warm enough as is." Actually, as she removed the coat and handed it to Zee, a chill gripped her, but it had perhaps more to do with her insides.

Zee brushed past her for the door to the lobby. "We have to find Hussie."

Hussie was the name of the man who wrote *Homestuck*, wasn't it? Cecily was about to ask what Zee wanted with him when she remembered something else of terrible importance. "Oh, wait, Zee! Before you go outside, I have something to tell you. I met a strange man in the elevator who was looking for you. He had photographs and asked if I had seen you. He scared me a little."

Despite her previously aloof demeanor, this confession caused Zee to stop. "[Phooey]," she said as she absentmindedly seized Cecily's proffered coat and wrapped it around her neck like a scarf, "Trench coat?"

"Y—yes. And—pale." Cecily tried to remember more distinctive features without being mean. "He carried a box under one arm."

"Frederick," said Zee. "Alright, we just gotta be careful. Stay close and keep your head low."

Shoot! Cecily remembered another thing of importance she had to tell Zee, but she had already made so many interruptions and Zee seemed set on her purpose... But like the others, this detail could not go unsaid. "Zee, I hate to be a bother, but I may not be able to enter the convention. I don't have a badge."

"That [whoops]ing Maximillion," Zee shouted with sudden fury. The word echoed in the industrial stairwell chamber. "What the Hell was he doing all night? We clearly asked for a badge, yeah?"

"I'm sure Mr. Maximillion was very busy. It's not—"

Zee seized her wrist and yanked her toward the stairs. "Come on, we'll see him."

Stories upon stories loomed above. The collar of her blouse became like a tourniquet on her esophagus. "N-no, Zee, please, it's not a problem, I wouldn't want to intrude, oh, Zee, please—" She had already been dragged up five or six stairs and the pain in each step surmounted.

"You're right, he's already left, we'll just sneak you in. We have to find Hussie."

Zee yanked her by the wrist into the smorgasbord of sounds in the lobby. She had to almost run to keep up, and she kept swinging into people in costumes. The butt of a plastic polearm jabbed at her eye and she clapped her free hand to it. It would definitely turn black. Water poured down her face. Oh no... What would her sister say? Or her parents? She barely had time to think about the injury because Zee continued to plow forward. Cecily was amazed at how deftly she weaved a path through so many people. She didn't pause or consider her actions at all, she just did them, and somehow they always worked.

Finally, Zee stopped. When Cecily straightened her skirt and collar and patted her hair, she realized they were surrounded by booths—they had entered the convention! Cecily felt bad

for sneaking in, but she felt powerless to do anything about it. She tried not to be negative.
"Wow, Zee, you moved really fast!"

"I'm not wasting time today. They must have maps."

Cecily looked carefully and found a stand of brochures nearby. The brochures mapped the floorplan of the convention center and its various sectors, with a key to the location of all the hardworking authors and artists. It was really neat to see a full list of the convention, so Cecily stood on tiptoe to look over Zee's shoulder as her finger ran down the list.

"Mr. Katsumata's booth is in Sector 8A," said Cecily. "I hope he's here today. I would really like to meet him. Wouldn't you, Zee?"

"Hussie. 7C." Zee glanced up and surveyed the aisles. "That way."

Cecily hoped to avoid Mr. Hussie and his "Homestucks," especially after what happened the previous day. After they walked in silence for some time and the lull caused her pain to flare again, she decided to broach the subject and ask why Zee was so set on meeting Mr. Hussie.

"Because," said Zee, "Because... Look, it's too complicated to explain."

"Zee, I'm worried you might get hurt. If something's the matter, maybe you should talk to the convention security."

Zee stopped in the middle of the aisle, which made Cecily uncomfortable because they were blocking the way for other people. Then, Zee began to chuckle, although it soon became a laugh.

She turned to Cecily. "Are you a real person?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Are you real?"

"I think so," said Cecily. "Why do you ask?"

"Nevermind," said Zee. "Do you believe in souls?"

"Oh! Of course. Who doesn't believe in souls? What else would you call the essence that makes every person who they are? That's what a soul is, don't you think?" She tried to scoot toward the side of the aisle as a hint for Zee to do the same.

"Alright, we're on the same page," said Zee. "I think Hussie is stealing the soul of my friend."

Cecily bit her tongue to keep from saying something that might be construed as impolite. She thought perhaps she misheard Zee and asked her to repeat herself. But Zee said the same thing: She thought that Mr. Hussie was stealing the soul of her friend.

"Maybe not just his. Maybe others too."

At first, Cecily wasn't sure how to respond to this admission, although if Zee really believed it, it explained her unusual behavior. "Zee, I don't think mortal men have the power to take the souls of others. Only God and His angels can."

Zee lowered her head and spoke darkly. "What about the devil?"

"Not even the devil, if he exists! God's power always exceeds Lucifer's. Even if, like in the old stories, a man sold his soul to Mephistopheles, it is God's judgment that decides whether a soul goes to heaven or Hell. If the man repented, even at his deathbed, God has the power to absolve him. It's only the man's foolish pride that prevents him from accepting that love! You see—"

"So I can save him?" Zee asked. "I can save Max?" By Max, she must mean Mr. Maximillion.

"No, you can't," said Cecily. Zee immediately became dejected, so she continued: "But God can. That's what I'm saying! You can help turn him toward God, but it's his decision ultimately."

Someone shoved Zee aside to pass, but Zee didn't react. She stared deeply into Cecily's shoes while her eyes went blank and blurry. Clearly, something was wrong with Mr. Maximillion. Cecily had intuited as much from his rambling, drawling speech the previous night, but perhaps the situation was worse than she feared. He had seemed rather depressed... Could he perhaps be... suicidal? Oh no...

"He won't listen to me," Zee said at last. "I've tried everything, but he won't listen. He only pushes me away. What can I do, Cecilia?"

If Cecily's assumptions were correct, this could be a serious situation, so she wasn't sure she was comfortable giving suggestions that might affect lives. Besides, she barely knew Mr. Maximillion or the core of his problems. But if someone's life truly was on the line, then it was important for her to try her best and help as she could.

"Well." She must choose her words carefully; misunderstandings and miscommunications must be avoided. "First, if he truly won't listen to you, then perhaps try to find the thing that is hurting him so much and fixing it yourself. Or, you could ask someone else that he respects to help you—Oh! That must be why you want to speak to Mr. Hussie, isn't it?"

"Exactly, exactly," said Zee, with a loose hand gesture as she made noncommittal half-turns. "It's his story that's done this. He exerts an influence—I had a dream—"

"Oh, I love dreams," said Cecily. "What was your dream?"

"Unicorn. It's on his shirt. Replicants—fake people. Then Maximillion appeared..."

"In your dream?"

"No, in the mountains." Zee seemed to dream as she spoke. "Hussie has some sort of power, he used it to... It's like in *Gaidan II* when you bring back Lu and she's a totally different

person."

"But Lu went back to normal by the end of the game."

"You have to kill Mephistopheles first."

"He was controlling her the whole time..." Cecily began to see the logic in these disconnected and unusual statements. "But it's just a game, Zee. Mephistopheles isn't real."

Mephistopheles lived inside her, he was a thorny and pernicious evil. He ruptured her innards and caused blood to run from her orifices. Lulith looked so painful. She had spikes jutting from her joints and knuckles. It's no wonder she was testy all the time.

"You okay?" said Zee. "You look sick."

She noticed! Cecily immediately straightened her back, smoothed her skirt, and adjusted her collar. She brushed her hair back over her ear and smiled. "Oh no, I'm fine, I was lost in thought."

"Alright. Let's go."

Although she braced for another confrontation, Mr. Hussie's booth had only a few stray Homestucks strewn around it, most of whom were girls. There was no sign of the man in the red suit who attacked Zee the previous day. There was no sign of Mr. Hussie.

"What!" Zee punched the table and shook her fist with a painful wince. "Where is he? Where did he go?"

A pair of nearby girls in costumes explained that Mr. Hussie was preparing for a question-and-answer panel in a half hour. The panel was to be hosted in another room on the far side of the convention center, which after much cajoling from Zee they finally marked on the map brochure.

"Alright, this changes the plan but I can wing it, nothing's off the rails yet." Zee tapped the brochure against her elbow. The glossy paper crinkled and snapped. "We'll go to the panel. I have a question in particular I want to ask Hussie. Actually..." She nibbled the tip of the paper. "Actually I have another idea about that, I'm getting lots of ideas here, it's important to keep knowing what I'm doing right now."

"So what will we do right now, Zee?"

"Wait. Thirty minutes."

Cecily smiled. "Well then, I have an idea for what to do in the meantime!"

Festival of Souls

Festival of Souls

Shirou Katsumata folded his napkin of doodles and slid it into his inner suit pocket as he disembarked the plane and exited the terminal. Mr. Nishimura, who was many years Katsumata's junior, but also portly and balding, greeted him.

"I was surprised to hear that your plane was delayed," said Mr. Nishimura. "I waited in the terminal for hours before I received the message." He spoke with no reproach and an affable, easygoing attitude that must have been his sole defense against his unlucky appearance. Actually, he seemed oblivious that his words might even be interpreted as reproachful. But if he had truly been in the terminal yesterday as he said, he must know the truth of the matter.

"In reality, the plane was not delayed," said Katsumata as Mr. Nishimura held the door of a sleek black economy car for him.

"Oh?" said Mr. Nishimura, again with that genuine attitude.

"I actually decided not to board yesterday."

"I see." The car started and they pulled out of the airport parking lot. The gray sky of the city obscured its famous hotels and towers. Katsumata took a cigarette from his inner suit pocket and smoked.

After a long pause, Mr. Nishimura added: "You must have had a good reason for not attending. The employees at the convention center were dismayed by your absence."

Again, Katsumata could not discern Mr. Nishimura's intention from his speech. Was he being accusatory, or making polite conversation? Both were understandable.

Katsumata rolled down his window. "I decided to check what Fukada did in the office when he thought I wasn't there."

"Oh," said Mr. Nishimura. "Is he a slacker, then? That's a poor look for the Vice-Chairman, isn't it?" Now he spoke with a tone of confidentiality, like two old friends sharing a secret. Katsumata had never met Mr. Nishimura before.

He blew smoke out the window. Which coalition of board members and directors was Fukada meeting with now? For only one reason would they send Katsumata out of the country: They wanted him far away while they discussed an ouster. True, the announcement of *Festival of Souls* necessitated good marketing and fan outreach, but there were conventions in Tokyo, Kyoto, or elsewhere. Now, in the name of so-called "Western" outreach, Katsumata was too far to return in a moment if his subordinates called with news of an ouster. He checked his phone but the only message was from his secretary wishing a pleasant trip.

Mr. Nishimura made several attempts to renew the conversation, but Katsumata retrieved his napkin and pen from his inner suit pocket and added more doodles to his Jolly tableau. He considered an idea for a story in which Jolly is cloned. Or, perhaps, Calofisteri has created an illusion that makes her Unseelie army effect Jolly's appearance. *Faerie Endless: Panorama of Jolly*. Every boss would be a twist on Jolly's character, or better yet, each would embody some facet of her personality. No, he had to fight the urge within him. To force Jolly into such limelight would cripple her. Similar to how she hides her own fragile ego behind an abrasive and confrontational mask, she must also hide her fragile character behind the mask of Rel. Perhaps, however, that could be the very conflict. To inundate the game with Jolly, to expose her every shade and angle, would be the most damaging thing to her psyche. Was this an inherently bad thing? By braving this trouble, Jolly would emerge stronger. If she faced herself honestly, perhaps she grew as an entity.

Fukada and his lackeys never discussed such considerations, however. They discussed changes to Jolly's costume. Perhaps she should wear these stockings. Perhaps we make her skirt shorter. Why are you babbling about these things, Katsumata. We are trying to discuss the things that everyone can be interested in. We want to reach a lot of people. Don't you want to reach a lot of people, Mr. Katsumata? Katsumata wanted to know who these people were. They were not Setsuko. Perhaps today he would get the chance to see them. Perhaps today he would get to speak his mind.

"Have you been to America before, Mr. Katsumata?"

At the hotel, Mr. Nishimura led him through a parking lot to a place where he had to check in and receive a special badge and itinerary. Katsumata stood around and thought about Jolly and Fukada while Mr. Nishimura and the convention employees spoke in English. Then Mr. Nishimura translated what they said, which was regulations and expected etiquette, and asked if Katsumata had any questions. The conversation in English continued. They were in a boring room. It reminded Katsumata of the boardroom in Tokyo, except now they were encased in a golden sepulcher.

Finally, Mr. Nishimura took Katsumata into the convention center. They had to go to their booth so that Katsumata could shake hands and sign autographs, and then he would be in a question and answer panel. The timetable was tighter than Katsumata anticipated. If he arrived an hour later, he would have missed the panel. He suddenly felt bad for having not attended the convention the day before. Maybe some fans had been disappointed. They may not have been able to come any other day.

No... These people ought to know better. They were older teenagers or even adults, men and women, but especially men. They wore costumes of superheroes and monsters. They surged through aisles in rambunctious waves and they swarmed in frenzies around popular booths. They were slaves to their hobby. They bent to its will. It controlled their minds. It captured their souls. It twisted them as people. They were misguided and distracted. They had been led astray by the industry Fukada represented. As long as they sold more Jolly figurines, as long as they pushed more cartridges, as long as there was a market for an anime adaptation, Fukada did not care what he wrought. In fact, he might not even know what he was doing, as depthless a thinker as he was. He, maybe, considered his endeavors harmless. He, maybe, told himself that if they were happy and he was happy, he was doing no wrong: win-win.

These were the people who ought to be in school, or work. They ought to be preparing themselves for their futures and maturing as human beings. Entertainment was not for these people, yet they choked on its consumption. These were the people for whom entertainment was the least useful. What did they receive from it? *Faerie Endless* was a game for young girls. It was a game for Setsuko. It was designed so the vulnerable demographic that society trampled upon could receive a little hope and a little confidence in their own ability. It was not a replacement for a fuller education or something that should ever be a fixture in their lives, but Katsumata hoped that by playing his game they would develop an extra component of their character. That had been his dream for Setsuko. Who, then, were these men who played it instead? What perverted purposes did they derive from it? Men in Japan or men in America. How had they coopted and consumed his message to Setsuko and the girls like Setsuko across the world? A deep despair suddenly opened in Katsumata's heart and he lit another cigarette. That, then, was the benefit of Las Vegas over Los Angeles—you could smoke indoors.

At the booth, a crowd of fans already gathered. Some donned the tight dress costumes of the faeries with colored wigs. Others simply wore t-shirts expressing their fandom, while others were mere slob. They clustered with memorabilia, posters, and drawings. They wanted Katsumata to draw, so he entertained them with humble sketches of Jolly, Rel, Calofisteri, and Melusine. They were so happy to see him that he felt bad because of his animosity. He wondered if his heart's enmity stemmed from his own defect, as by the same token he often wondered about his feud with Fukada—perhaps, to give people what they want, to make them smile, was best. In fact, when he traced his philosophy to its core, he wondered if his precepts and ideals had grown ragged like a gnarled root around the nucleus of Setsuko. Had he planted her corpse? He was sentimental again. He tried to light another cigarette, but Mr. Nishimura advised him that his fans may construe such an act as impolite. Likely he would report to Fukada that Katsumata had shown rudeness toward the fans, which would then be used as an additional missile in the evidence prepared for the ouster.

"Oh dear," Mr. Nishimura said in Japanese, "There appears to be a of scuffle."

Indeed, some of the fans had caused a disturbance. Their bodies heaved around the booth in counterweighted swells. As the squabble became a skirmish, the unaffiliated fans gradually parted to leave the belligerents in a circle of open space. For such disruption, it surprised Katsumata to see only three people there. One was a typical fan, a rotund and bearded adult, who held a young girl by her slender wrist as he jerked her arm roughly. He shouted and brandished an admonishing finger, which he slapped against the crown of her head. The attack seemed marginally effective, because the girl kept crying out and twisting her head to pull away. Another girl, even slighter than the first, tried to pull her friend from the man assaulting her.

Mr. Nishimura sued for peace, but only when Katsumata barked a command did they silence themselves. In a stammering voice, Mr. Nishimura implored Katsumata to leave everything to him, but Katsumata abruptly stood and leaned over the table and demanded to know what was happening.

The players babbled in English. Mr. Nishimura deciphered: "There appears to have been an incident between this man and this young lady. The young lady destroyed some of the man's

merchandise."

"The man's merchandise?" said Katsumata. "Ask the man what merchandise he sells."

Mr. Nishimura did so. The bearded man, when he spoke, quivered all over. "He says he sells fan art for *Faerie Endless*. He is a great fan, he says."

Katsumata nodded. Despite whatever Mr. Nishimura might caution, he retrieved a cigarette and lit it. The crowd stood transfixed as he slowly dragged and exhaled. The smoke surrounded him in a wispy plume and he tossed a hand backward to dismiss it the way Calofisteri dismisses her summons. "Tell him to show me his art."

"Mr. Katsumata, it would be best not to create controversy—"

"Tell him to show me his art!"

"Yes, Mr. Katsumata."

The bearded man-fan, who ought to be a species of monster in the game he idolized, maintained none of Mr. Nishimura's reservations. He strode to the booth and produced a manila portfolio of glossy printed images, which he handed to Katsumata with a reverential bow. The girl he had accosted, at the bidding of her smaller friend, tried to slink away, but the crowd prohibited it. They leaned spellbound at the performance Katsumata exhibited for them. They awaited his proclamation. To these people, Katsumata considered, he was something of a lesser deity. They submitted to him willingly and proffered their souls for his consumption. Sometimes, however, he felt as though they had instead transmuted his body into wine and wafers, like the tradition of the Catholics. Something inside him, when he interacted with these creatures, always grew diminished.

It was thus with great weariness that Katsumata rifled through the portfolio. The topmost images contained simple dark-hued constructions of his characters, framed with much light and shadow, albeit technically proficient, perhaps better than he himself from a standpoint of pure craft. An irrevocable sadness was latent in their features, and the further Katsumata delved, the more faded their luster became. The sorrow deepened as the images became more complex. They depicted ominous, unsettling scenes, where Rel or Jolly or another character were in some kind of imminent, albeit inexplicit, danger. They lay on their sides in cavernous regions of nebulous dimensions, their eyes wide and empty while vague silhouettes crept in the background.

Katsumata slapped the portfolio onto the table. "Tch."

"Mr. Katsumata..." said Mr. Nishimura. He busied himself with sorting the images neatly back into the envelope, handing them back to the bearded fan, and bowing graciously.

"Tell the girl to come," said Katsumata.

"This incident's gone on long enough," said Mr. Nishimura. "It would reflect poorly on the company if you—"

Katsumata exited the booth. The crowd parted around him. Nobody dared enter within a certain radius, as though he were polarized or unclean. He moved toward the two young girls, who moved backward in tandem, until they were pressed against a rigid wall of people. He extended a hand to indicate he meant them no harm. Their attitude toward him did not ameliorate—the curse of his position, for gods are feared as much as loved. Ah! What great ego, comparing himself to a god. Before such things he was a father.

He knelt and took the foremost of the girls, the elder, by the hand, despite dithering protests from Mr. Nishimura. Her thin, tiny fingers clasped around his and her small dark eyes gazed into his face. Her mouth opened, as if to speak, but then closed.

An energy passed between Katsumata and this young, disheveled girl. He felt it leave through his fingertips and pass into her. At the same time, something, a similar qi, came into him. Their communication was nearly telepathic: *You are the one who deserves this.*

Katsumata relinquished her soft hand and stood. He faced the crowd and the bearded fan with the portfolio. Mr. Nishimura tried to whisper something but he ignored it and said, in his native tongue, "You all should be ashamed. If you want to consume my work, that is alright, I can't stop you and it would be the height of ingratitude to try. However, that you have the arrogance to stop these young girls from enjoying that same thing, which was made for them, is utterly unacceptable. Caravaggio himself may paint my fan art, I would not accept it if he trampled upon the dreams of those young girls for whom I have expended so much of my energy.

"This game, *Festival of Souls*, which I have come to speak to you about, will likely be my last in this franchise that I created with my own blood. The ingrates who have coopted my company will oust me into the streets and an ignoble fate awaits me. I have worked very hard on this game, because it will be my last. I have given you a game that you will hopefully love. But most of all I hope that these two young girls love it, that they learn from it and follow it as an example for their own lives, that they are unafraid to express themselves and that they understand their own worth and power. I want these girls to grow up strong and to be the masters of their own fate. Please respect them. Thank you. That is all."

He coughed politely and snuffed his cigarette on the face of his watch. All eyes turned toward Mr. Nishimura. Mr. Nishimura tightened his tie to lift his head, spoke a single sentence in English, and bid Katsumata sit back down.

DOTA

DOTA

It took two hours, to attend to all detail, to wash, to pluck wanton hairs/flatten wayward creases, to spray moisturizer, to apply primer, then concealer for acne and raccoon circles, to insert contacts, then blink them into place, to blot out his eyebrows and redraw them teal, to shadow his upper eyelid aqua, second color turquoise, a black line for the upper lid, with a little pointed wing for flair, and a line on the lower lid, to stick in the false lashes, and enhance them with mascara, to sponge on the liquid foundation, to finish with powder, to blend, to contour the jawbones, and the cheekbones, and the nose, to mix in bronzer (and bring himself to life), to blend, then—he consulted his notes, drawn from online tutorials by Jamaican and Japanese women—to brush on the blush, to line the lips, to rub the lipstick, then the lip gloss. Fortunately, he didn't have to reapply the nails, but when he inspected them, he noticed some errors, and filed them until they looked like more even coffins.

He put on the wig. He twirled in the mirror. Every time, he improved at sculpting his person, to creating a Max Roddlevan that was beautiful and whom everyone adored. *This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.* Who speaks? The hero, Balzac, Barthes? No, Max speaks! When he whispered, his voice sounded feminine. He pirouetted from the bathroom and into the elevator. He and his scythe stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Mitchum Graves and his Canadian flag. Mitchum Graves winked and loosed a flirtatious comment; Max trilled with pleasure and a bashful bend of his knees.

"I can't be at the booth long," said Andrew. "I have to prepare for a, what do you call it, panel."

Someone once whispered on a forum, about a similarity between something called *Homestuck* and a few avant garde, post-postmodernist works, which Max previously enjoyed. It planted a seed of interest, but not enough to water, because overall, Max preferred earlier works—*Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow*—which felt thicker, and more authentic, as though the authors of those bygone times brimmed with some essence of gravitas lost today, where novelty replaced meaning. Life continued, for a time. The situations provoked tensions that mounted. He noticed flaws within the people around him, in his mother. He grew resentful inside, it became difficult to breathe. The name lurked in the back of his mind, turned over on occasion: *Homestuck*. The bleeding heart beat upon the operating table, the madness festered inside him. His brother sharpened knives in the kitchen. Kiki stripped in the bedroom. The television said: "Only one of you will be crowned champion." The heart beat, and beat. He dreamed of unicorns, and woke unfulfilled. He considered the most artistic form of suicide.

When he began to bleed under his fingernails he seized the heart and devoured it. Boredom drove him to it: boredom and unease.

At that time, *Homestuck* was 6,739 pages long. It contained 11,016 image files, of which 1,946 were animated. It included 3 hours and 7 minutes of full motion video, spread across 36 flash files. Lastly, it had 7 segments of interactive video games, approximating a further 1.5 hours to complete.

Max Roddlevan devoured the heart in 86 sleepless hours. Gorged, distended, he rose from his chair. He placed his weight against the armrest and the chair fell from under him. He toppled onto his bed and struck his skull against a board. It bled. He lay on the bed for a further 13 hours, some of which he slept.

First he knew: He had no hope to ever create something that would surpass it. Not Joyce, not Pynchon provoked a feeling like this inside him. *Homestuck* resolved them both. It answered Eliot, Duchamp, all of them, all the century's worth of uncertain authors and artists, who knew something was wrong, but had no solutions. At once, he knew both himself and the world around him. The world—a spire of Sargasso Sea amalgam—required renewal. Max Roddlevan—a stack of papers and pencils—required renewal. That was Andrew's theme: the renewal of the world. Everything we cake upon ourselves is mere matter to our pristine and beautiful souls. These trappings are those of the false god YHWH—Yaldabaoth—Samael. The names meant nothing. The stories were mere allegories. An atheist could understand.

When he walked past Mother in the hotel lobby, she did not recognize him. He walked deliberately close to her vast shadow, under which lingered diminished forms. He passed beneath her shadow and emerged unscathed.

(Have you finished your homework? Did you go to school today? I received a message that you missed school today. Are you sick? Do you need rest? Frederick didn't do well in school and now he sells knives for a living. You have a good future ahead of you. Has that Coulter girl been speaking to you again? You know that I have prohibited you from speaking to her. Spend more time with Miss Radney, Maxwell. She has such great grades and is very polite. Isn't she cute, Maxwell? You've been friends with her for a long time, why don't you ask her on a date? [You dumb fuck, are you just going to stare? It's cold standing here like this, will you touch me or what, you fucking faggot?] Are you unhappy, Maxwell? What's wrong, Maxwell? What books would you like for your birthday, Maxwell? Did Frederick do something to you, Maxwell? I'll kick him out of the house, it's time for him to go. It's time to think about college applications, Maxwell. We'll start with the Princeton Review. You have to try especially hard because you're white. If you were like Miss Radney you would have an easier time of things. But isn't that so wonderful of Miss Radney, that she tries so hard when she doesn't have to? I love you, Maxwell. Goodnight, Maxwell.)

He stepped outside the shadow and continued. Mother did not recognize him.

"Yo wanna do something tonight?" Strider sidled an arm around Max's midriff. "Tons a slick shit round the city. Could go to a concert I bet."

"What kind of concert?"

"Uh if I roleplayed would say rap concert," said Strider. "To be honest can't stomach that junk."

"Me either."

"Nice voice by the way. You, like, practice it or what?"

He wobbled across the bathroom. Practice perfected dress, makeup, movement patterns, but nothing cohered the heels. He must revise his costume—a more sedated style of shoe.

Oh, the voice? All he did was whisper. If he adjusted the ratio of exhalation to vocal reverberation, he sounded almost naturally feminine. Nobody ever hears their own voice, the way others hear it. He practiced the sounds to make, during sex. As of yet, the acts he had performed, gave little opportunity, to produce utterances.

"What else you into sides *Homestuck*," asked Strider.

"I suppose... I'm a writer," he said.

"Fanfic?"

Like *The Student*, the story of a quiet, reserved young man on the brink of suicide, who at the last minute is saved by a more confident, self-assured doppelganger. The doppelganger berates the protagonist for his weakness and teaches him how to live by looser rules—parties, drugs, sex—but the protagonist cannot reconcile his own stout morals and precepts with this livelihood. The novel ends with a diluvial event that wipes out the entire town except the local belltower, where the protagonist and his doppelganger escape. They face the world, now an ocean with no end at sight. The doppelganger decides to swim for help. He goes out, turns around, returns with no news. He rests, and swims out a second time. This time he escapes the protagonist's sight before returning. He thinks there's something just a little further than where he went before. He rests and swims a third time, and this time he does not return.

The protagonist ends the story by asking: How can I omit the needless words when all the words are needless?

What a horrible novel. He tore it up, with his other crap. A good thing, too. He had slaved over that novel, too many hours, editing, rereading. He considered himself so clever, for bits of wordplay, obscure allusions, application of literary devices. But he had missed, that his entire premise was flawed. *Homestuck* altered his perception. Its rains flooded his catchments. He moved by gradation, toward a better understanding of truth.

Yes—his new mission. When he returned to Denver, he would sit again, and write, but in a new direction, for a new purpose. The initial shock of Andrew Hussie subsided now. He met the man—a great man—but a man. The veneer, of godlike infallibility, diminished. Maxwell Roddlevan, at 16 years of age, was still a student, he had to treat himself like one, but one is not a student forever.

Two years later he went to university. There, free of Mother's influence, his life began. He counterbalanced his studies with more rigorous delves into the deeper waters of canon; composed theses, theories of literature; practiced execution and the technical aspects; wrote one, two, ten novels only to tear them to pieces; continually renewed himself into better and better iterations, until Maxwell Roddlevan became a man of the fiber and character to rattle

history. Hussie, because of his status as an internet author for young adults, would never receive the praise he merited from the mainstream literary community. If Maxwell Roddlevan took his literary project, his answers for modernism and post-modernism's grandest quandaries—presented them to the mainstream—

"I'll save you, Max," said a voice.

"Save yourself," said Max.

"I will save your soul."

The Odd Gentlemen

The Odd Gentlemen

"Oh my God." You know that uncanny feeling when your own creation starts to speak to you? It's the ninetieth Dave this week. He—no, it's actually a she, disguised—is wearing a more obscure costume from Dave's wardrobe, that black tie tuxedo from a panel in the 3000s or something. They keep better track of it. "It's unreal to meet you like this, Mr. Hussie."

Handshake and a signed print.

"A great honor, sir." This one, a John, makes great obeisance. It's vanilla John. He wants to be included.

Handshake and a signed print.

"I love you." She loves me. It's flattering. I'm flattered.

Handshake and a signed print.

"You gotta tell me what happened to Roxy in the update last week." The unidentified creature in the costume of a comical salamander side-character leans confidentially over the table. He presses his bulky mascot head almost against my face; the odious fuzz scrapes against skin in an agonizing moment of pure despair.

Handshake and a signed print.

"Is it true? That you have afterparties and sleep with your fans?" This Roxy doesn't care so much what happened to Roxy in last week's update. Her picayune pipsqueak voice barely carries and she tucks her chin under a book clenched in her crossed arms.

Handshake and a signed print.

"Tell a joke." Strider ninety-one.

"What did Vriska say to John after they opened the third planet's gate?" Beat. "She didn't say anything. She's dead."

Dave ninety-one, and several others in line, grow hysterical. The salamander-person, who lingered, falls on the floor and rolls around. I'm like a fun version of the pied piper, who has the kids dance instead of that lemming business. The kids all wear purple pastels and tie-dye, flip nasty ollies off the half-pipe, and slam a corn syrup fruit drink while mom shakes her head as if to say, those darn kids—I forget what this had to do with the pied piper metaphor. I'm trying to whimsy up a joke, dissatisfied with the one already told, and kinda fumbling in the dark seeing what proverbial spaghetti sticks. My wit feels dull. I couldn't cut butter with this wit. This wit is a useless piece of trash. This wit is a hot garbage extravaganza. That's better, mostly because extravaganza is a funny word. Okay, question: which has more

inherent funny value, extravaganza or bonanza? One might be tempted at first to say extravaganza on account of it being the longer word, and the more goofy syllables you can cram into a word the more latent humor contained wherein. But bonanza has several subtle advantages only a true goofball word connoisseur can appreciate. For starters, it looks and sounds similar to banana. Secondly—

There is no secondly. It just looks and sounds similar to banana. That makes it chiefly more comical. A word's humor is strictly defined by its proximity to the word banana.

There's also that goofy old western show called *Bonanza*. I can retool this discussion of bonanza to make some oblique reference to the show. No, things don't click. Forcing too hard. Nothing flows naturally.

"When's it end?" Equius, one of the less important characters, no more than a one-note joke character. The story never presented him otherwise, but a certain subset of fans lament his unceremonious death via autoerotic asphyxiation.

"Tomorrow," I say.

"What ships are endgame?"

"All of them. We reach gay singularity, everyone exists in one polygamous pansexual orgy."

"Is Equius coming back?"

"Yes. He's the most important member of the final battle. When the heroes are on the brink of defeat, when Lord English is about to claim ultimate power over the universe, a solemn breeze blows. John and Dave look up. A plaintive note plays, the kind douchebags play; the clouds part. Out the void emerges the spirit of Equius, who in death has been granted the body of equine perfection he so strongly desired in life. The plaintive note turns out to be the opening wail of 'Riders on the Storm' by Johnny Cash. As Cash's gravelly voice croons with full orchestral accompaniment, Equius soars over the battlefield, streaming the colors of the United States of America. Our battered heroes gaze longingly at this magnificent sight, their souls growing inspired with Equius' simple devotion to all horsekind. The spirits of a thousand ghostly stallions stampede like a meteor shower and everyone rises to strike down Lord English once and for all."

Hoofshake and a signed print: *NEIGH! A.H.*

I'm still in a good mood when the next fan approaches. "Can we talk about art?" It's Roddlevan, the same getup as yesterday, apparently using Karkat as a base, but with so many customizations you can hardly call it the same character anymore. The scythe bears the sole familiarity. Alright, I can appreciate a fan who stokes their own style. When Roddlevan emailed me a picture of his cosplay (and dodged questions about how he stumbled upon my email address), and mentioned his difficult home life, I felt sympathetic enough to offer him a plane ticket—huge mistake, by the way, I keep doing this to myself, I know what these people are like but I let them in anyway. And lo, he arrives and keeps wanting to discuss "art." I majored in art at a liberal arts college, you think I know *anything* about art?

Roddlevan moves behind the booth, because we're "chums" now. Compadres, buddies, homies, dawgs. We rock bling and sunglasses and backwards hats in the aforementioned 90s music video. We've got a nifty name that replaces a C with a K and stirs in a few Xs for pizazz. We—I forget where I'm going again. My luster continually dwindles.

He wants to expand on his thesis of *Homestuck* as a response to *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. He wants to discuss the fundamental and irresolvable problems of post-modernism. He wants to frame *Homestuck* as a unique form of expression that reaffirms meaning in a seemingly meaningless existence. He's a nice kid. He's earnest. They're all nice kids. They're all earnest. I don't want to, you know, sound ungrateful. But I'm so exhausted. It's been a terrible year. The magic departs me.

"Actually... I need to prepare for a question and answer panel. Sorry I can't stay for longer. I'll be back in the afternoon."

They groan. They're disappointed. They want more of me. Some people waited in line for hours. Roddlevan starts to follow me.

"Sorry, you can't follow, sorry."

"That's fine," says Roddlevan, and he sits in the chair I voided.

When I escape into a side room, I feel like a Grade A tool. As though a USDA inspector stuck a thermometer in me and said, "Ayup, that's Grade A alright." They paid money to be here. The question and answer panel thing isn't a terrible excuse, I *should* prepare. They'll ask questions similar to what they already asked, except now I'm obligated to actually answer. I sit at a random folding table with the saddest half-imbibed coffee ever seen on it. I check my phone. There's a message: lawyer.

I call my lawyer back. He says settle. I say really? He says yeah. The contract's too vague. Litigation a nightmare. No certainty which way the pieces fall. I say it's a lot of money. Over two million. He says it's a lot more if it goes to court. I says it's not even my money. My fans donated that money. They want to see a good video game. I hired that studio to make it, they didn't make it. Lawyer says it's not open and shut like that. I say why not. He says because the contract's too vague. He says settle.

I ask the status on dad's estate. Lawyer says he's still sorting the paperwork, he'll keep me posted.

I thank him.

The room is filled with filtered air. It has a powerful crispness to it. Its bland accoutrements—collapsed folding chairs, metallic paneling—exude a dismal pallor. I adjust my glasses and stifle a cough as I slump onto the table and roll the bony plate of my forehead against the surface. It grinds with a gravelly sound until it resolves into a sticky paste. With a strong whisker I whisk the cranial plate fragments with the viscous brain-jelly. Gotta get the texture just right. Place mixture into oven and set temperature to Sylvia Plath. Watch the lobes rise like dough. Let cool for twenty minutes then varnish with parsley for a Thanksgiving feast.

I could disappear. Become a different person. Take a different name. Write something different. I don't want to exist as Andrew Hussie anymore. I could use a pseudonym. They'd never guess. (They'd guess immediately.)

Because a convention for traditional fantasy doesn't know what to do with a newfangled "web comic" artist, they crammed me (and, assuming he shows, Mitchum) into an already-crowded auditorium with the following sign:

ESCAPISM IN THE INTERNET AGE: EXPERIMENTS IN ALTERNATIVE FANTASY MEDIA

Who approved this? Mitchum? Had to be Mitchum.

The five other writers (Mitchum in absentia) and I assemble at a table decked with microphones. I know none of the others, but they seem like okay dudes. The convention staff administering the panel even make sure to lob the tutorial questions their way, aware all too late about the nebula-devouring vortex that comprises my fandom.

Then it begins.

As I hide behind my hand while *Homestuck* aficionados blurt questions out of turn, as the other five authors give me the fabled "who's-this-guy-again" look, the doors to the panel burst open and Mitchum saunters inside. On one shoulder he holds a 90s-style boombox that blasts a techno remix of the Canadian national anthem while his other hand waves aloft the exalted maple leaf. If nothing else, he draws attention, although the whole theatrics is only an iteration on the same joke from a day or two prior. Shoddy craftsmanship, but Mitchum and I alike fall prey to certain follies.

The distraction, only a temporary respite, soon ends. Mitchum takes his place among the other authors and some people actually ask him questions, such as "Who are you" and "Why are you here," which Mitchum answers the way one'd expect. But his irrepressible magnetism can only resist oppression so long and although he splays his body across the table and does all he can to provoke everyone in the room, the catechism begins in earnest.

Q: Do you plan ahead?

A: There seems to be this distinction everyone makes about planning versus making up as you go along. I kinda span the median on this one. I have a general idea of where I want to wind up, I have these ideas building up sort of like storm clouds in the distance. I know I want to get there. But a lot of the minor details are spontaneous. I think that's for the best, especially with a serial work like *Homestuck*. It allows me to play off the fandom at any point in time, all its new memes and peccadilloes. A lot of people seem surprised due to how much I callback to minor details thousands of pages earlier, but I chalk that up more to how the story is so large, with so many characters and details, that I can almost always find one floating around to bring back at a pivotal moment.

Q: Do you take notes?

A: Other than a few scribbles here and there, no. My philosophy is, if I can't remember it, it wasn't anything too distressing to forget.

Mitchum: [Kanye West voice] That means I forgot better shit than you ever thought of.

Q: Did you expect from the beginning that the story would be as long as it is?

A: At first, I expected to finish the whole thing within a year. It's definitely spiraled into a much more epic endeavor. However, I think that's a major part of the appeal. It's a story that starts about a kid and his friends playing a game. Somewhere along the way, it becomes something else. The gradual build of scope and scale is something I've always wanted to do and I think *Homestuck* afforded me that opportunity.

Q: You kill off so many characters. Do you hate your fans?

A: I think there's a disconnect between what fans think they want and what they actually want. My job as an entertainer is to find what fans really want, even if that means withholding what they *think* they want. Because of that, I sometimes have to kill a character or two. Overall, I'm thankful for my fans and I seek only to serve them.

Mitchum: If you want to serve him back, check out his hotel room upstairs—ladies preferred, of course.

Crowd: [Awkward laughter.]

Q: When will the story end? What will you do afterward?

A: I'm planning on wrapping the story soon. It'll probably be within a year, assuming everything goes according to my plan. As for afterward, I already have an idea for a bigger story. That's right, even bigger than *Homestuck*. Keep an eye out.

Q: Um, Mr. Hussie, thank you for calling on me. I would like to ask, um, is the—how is your story saved? For instance, um, if the website went down...

A: I got this question a lot during the uh, hurricane last year. I have the complete webcomic backed up in three separate locations. The first, of course, is the website. The second is my computer. The third is an external hard drive that's nigh indestructible—trust me, I've tried.

Mitchum: Ladies, again, you can check out his external hard drive upstairs tonight—

Crowd: [Boos.]

Q: *Homestuck* is now in the top ten longest works of English literature by word count alone, not counting its images and videos. It's the longest webcomic by far and it's only been ongoing for four years. Do you ever want to take a break?

A: If I took a break, I would never be able to resume. The only reason I keep moving is momentum. If I hadn't done the same thing for the past one thousand days, I wouldn't be able to do it tomorrow.

Q: What's your favorite real world horse? Not a fictional, I mean, mythical horse.

A: Okapi.

Q: A major part of John and Dave's stichomythia is the interplay between Dave's irony and John's sincerity. Do you subscribe to the New Sincerity movement and would you classify *Homestuck* as post-ironic?

A: Uhhhhhhh

Mitchum: David Foster Wallace killed himself, you should consider it too.

Crowd: [More boos. Increased rowdiness. Calls for Mitchum's removal.]

They move en masse, undulate as a wave toward the table. Chairs overturn and people fall under the trampling feet. The five other authors flee as Mitchum, cackling like mad, is hoisted into the crowd. They lift him high and it's hard to tell whether they're devouring or exalting him. Convention staff rushes in to demand peace. I sink into my chair and massage my temples.

As the staff corral my fans into a corner and Mitchum makes himself scarce, I glance toward the door and notice the lass from earlier, the one who stammered her question about the hurricane. She scampers with a slight limp, dragged along by none other than Zelda Coulter.

Sad Sad Mr. Graves

Sad Sad Mr. Graves

Mr. Hussie's fans nearly flattened Cecily against the wall, but Zee pulled her away at the best moment and they escaped the auditorium. Her pain remained, but she did not mind a quick step to flee the mayhem. However, she didn't know what to make of Zee's decision to fortify themselves within a broom closet.

With all the mops and cleaning materials, and yellow caution signs that also said *cuidado*, it was difficult for both of them to fit although they were so small. Cecily lost her balance and sat hard on a wide bucket. Her bottom slowly sank deeper into the orifice, and her knees slid upward until they tucked against her chin, and her feet first lifted onto tiptoe and then left the ground entirely. Zee said nothing but breathed heavily, a little like this: Huff. Huff. Huff. Cecily tried not to say anything to inconvenience her, although her bottom dampened with some sort of liquid in the bucket. It was really rather uncomfortable, but she was worried if she struggled to escape she might hurt Zee or herself due to all the things piled in the closet. She hoped the liquid was only water, because otherwise it might make ruin her dress, and she had already ruined one dress so far. Either way, she would look foolish when she eventually pulled herself out. She felt very sad suddenly.

"Good work," said Zee.

"Pardon me?" asked Cecily.

"Excellent bit of reconnaissance you did there. Hussie fell for it hook, line—sinker."

If Cecily wiggled her left foot, she kicked a mop or broom handle. "I don't really understand, Zee. What is it we're trying to accomplish? What does it have to do with Mr. Maximillion?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with Maximillion," Zee snapped. "Look, Hussie revealed his biggest weakness. All the backup copies of *Homestuck* exist in this hotel. His computer is in his room, and so is his external hard drive—I saw it when I went in there, it's this boopy beepy box thing. And I bet you can access the, like, source code for his website through his computer—that's all three."

Oh, Cecily was so confused. She really enjoyed when they got to see Mr. Katsumata. Why couldn't they go back to his booth? She read in a flier that he would be at a question and answer panel too. It would probably be far less rambunctious than Mr. Hussie's panel, and Mr. Katsumata might slip new details about the upcoming *Faerie Endless* installment. He seemed like a passionate person who cared a lot about his fans. He even gave Zee a handshake!

Zee continued, almost like she talked to herself: "It's a matter of sneaking into his room and guessing his password. Those are the problems to overcome. Okay, okay, how can I overcome them?"

"Zee, I don't understand, what are you trying to do?"

The response came after a significant lull. "I'm going to destroy *Homestuck*."

"Destroy..."

"You said it yourself. Mephistopheles was controlling Lu the whole time. The only way to save her soul was to kill him."

Mephistopheles—? Oh, yes, the game, it was so hard for Cecily to think clearly with half her body crammed in a bucket and her pain amplified by the contortions. "I... I think this is a bad idea, Zee? You mean to say that you want to destroy Mr. Hussie's copies of *Homestuck*, right?"

"Exactly," said Zee. "It's simple. If we get inside his room, that's two of the three copies right there—and if we guess his password—it's probably the same for his computer and the admin account to run his website—then we have the third copy. And when it's destroyed, Max—he'll turn back to normal. The spell will break."

"Oh no, oh no, Zee, this is a very bad idea. It's not good to break someone's property, or to sneak into their room when they don't know. Mr. Hussie must have worked really hard on *Homestuck*, and if his fans are a little odd that's no reason to—"

"It's only on the internet, it's an internet story, that's how Max described it—there are no physical copies—there's only those three copies. Only those three."

The door to the closet opened and Cecily blinked. Zee herself stood in the frame. Her figure became a stark silhouette within the bustle of the convention. Cecily got a good view of her own tucked knees and helpless feet.

"I know a way into his room," said Zee. "Come on!"

"Ah, wait, I'm stuck!"

After a few embarrassing moments, Cecily once again followed Zee on a dash through the convention. The snakes in her womb were so riled by now; they twisted their scaly bodies up all her googly guts. She felt so tired and hurt, and she wanted to sit down and ask Zee to please go on without her, but the things Zee spoke about alarmed her a lot.

Destroy *Homestuck*... Cecily struggled to write a short story for class once. She couldn't imagine the toil and pain under which Mr. Hussie must have endeavored to create what was, as far as Cecily knew, a rather lengthy work. Zee clearly harbored a vendetta against *Homestuck*, having to do with Mr. Maximillion's soul (except maybe not? Cecily was so confused), but that was no reason to do such a mean thing. Zee herself wasn't a mean person, so she probably had an important reason. There must be a better way to resolve her problem—right?

Zee led them back to the auditorium where the question and answer panel had been. It was mostly empty, besides the overturned chairs and tables. A few young people in *Homestuck* costumes lingered near the entrance, and Zee accosted them.

"Where's the guy," she said. "The Canada guy."

The Homestucks said security threw him out, so Zee and Cecily made a beeline for the entrance. They easily found the man with the Canadian flag near the Mr. Mbuji statue.

"Graves, you hosting another afterparty tonight?"

Mr. Graves, as that seemed his name, put his phone away and clucked his tongue as they approached. "Well-well-well, if it's not my old friend Zee Colter." His eyes flitted toward Cecily. "Ah, you brought a fresh sacrifice for my altar."

"Afterparty, yes or no."

Despite the directness of the question, Mr. Graves did not answer. He unwound from his perch and, frighteningly quickly, swept Cecily into an embrace. His breath smelled acrid and Cecily tried not to flinch. She also tried to smile.

"M-my name's Cecily, I'm pleased to—"

"Cccccccccccily." The bristly tips of his beard prickled her forehead. "Candy in my trunk, wanna—"

Zee's fist hurtled from the periphery of Cecily's vision and landed squarely on Mr. Graves's jaw. He jerked back, released her, and allowed Cecily time to hide behind Zee. She hated to admit it, but she didn't feel so bad about Mr. Graves getting punched.

He recovered in an instant, and even laughed, which was rather unsettling. His jaw had slanted to the side and stayed there, which Cecily was pretty sure shouldn't happen, but she didn't know so much about punching. Hopefully, the damage wasn't permanent. The slack jaw rose and fell like if a skeleton skull were speaking: "Now that's what I'm talking about! Just what we needed, some good old slapstick. Zee, you're on fire today."

"Answer the [whoops]ing question, Graves. Are—you—having—an afterparty—tonight—or not?"

"Now Zee, that information's exclusive. What aspect of your virginity are you willing to relinquish in exchange?"

Cecily wondered if it was okay for Zee to hang around this man. He was not what Cecily would consider a nice man.

"I'll relinquish these fists if you don't stop [whoops]ing around."

"Afterparties are so last year, Zee darling." Graves said "darling" as though the R were an H. "The cool kids nowadays go to rap concerts after the nerd convention."

"Rap? Rap concerts?"

"Cheerio dear, are you appraised of the living hip hop legend Dennis 'Malkwon' Toombs?" His voice had changed. He made finger quotes around "Malkwon."

Zee dropped to her knees. Cecily ran to her side to ask if she was okay, because her face went blank and expressionless. Then Zee flopped facedown on the tiled floor and when Cecily tried to grab her shoulders and pick her up she started to thrash her legs and arms. Her hand hit Cecily's lip, which made Cecily draw back and hold her mouth.

"She—she's having a seizure! Mr. Graves, help me put her on her side—"

"MALKWON!" Zee raised her upper body like a mermaid and bellowed to the ceiling. After the frightening scream subsided and the people in the crowd averted their stares, Zee somersaulted back to her feet and jabbed a finger in Mr. Graves's face. "How do you know about Malkwon? Who told you? Kiki told you, didn't she?"

"I haven't the foggiest what you're on about." Mr. Graves adjusted an imaginary monocle. He was a really weird guy! "I have long been a connoisseur of urban street poetry, and Malkwon is simply a titan of the genre. I am especially fond of the gritty realism with which he renders his subjects in 'Quick, Black, and Dead', as well as his elegant wordplay in '[!] with Triggers'."

Cecily looked all around—what if somebody heard Mr. Graves speak in such a way...? It was an especially bad word, Cecily felt embarrassed for knowing, she wasn't supposed to know a word like that. She only knew because of Huckleberry Finn and her mother told her never to say it. Cecily did not want to leap to judgment, but everything about Mr. Graves made her insides curl up sick and gross, the snakes kept coiling and uncoiling and making a grand nuisance of themselves. Zee went after Mr. Graves again, swinging her fists at him left and right while yelling a lot. Mr. Graves avoided the punches, everything was so topsy-turvy and seemed wrong. Zee accused Mr. Graves of knowing something about Mr. Toombs, and Mr. Graves kept discussing Mr. Toombs's career; neither spoke to one another, but they continued to talk. If Cecily only understood... If she understood, she could help, but to help without understanding... blind leading the blind.

Zee, as her fist swished through air, instantly petered out of energy. She slumped her shoulders against the base of the Mr. Mbuji statue and plodded her feet in place like she walked on a treadmill. "Fine," she said, "I'll go with you to this concert."

"Oh, Zee, do you believe that's a good idea?" Cecily said. "Those rap concerts, they say a lot of bad things. And... and... You said you want to help your friend, but what does this have to do with that? Why don't you talk to him? I'll go with you, Zee. We can talk to Mr. Maximillion together."

"I'd be careful around Maximillion, girls," said Mr. Graves. "He's a pedophile, you know."

She only kind of knew what a pedophile was. "Mr. Maximillion seems like a nice person."

"They always do."

Zee lurched from the statue and grabbed Mr. Graves's wrist. "Are we going or not?"

When Mr. Graves pulled his wrist away to check an imaginary wristwatch, a big purple bruise spread where Zee seized him. Cecily realized for the first time that Mr. Graves was a

very sick man. Something was wrong with his skin—so gaunt and yellow—and his body seemed so abnormally bony, all the tendons visible whenever he bent his limbs. Patches around his forehead, almost hidden under his scraggly hair, were coming off in flakes, and behind his glasses his eyes were bloodshot and discolored. A huge welt covered his jaw where Z. punched him before.

"It's not for another hour or so," he said. "Why don't the two of you lovely ladies saunter up to my bedroom and we find a way to whittle the time, eh?"

Cecily stepped forward and placed her fingertips gently on Mr. Graves's wrist, where the bruise was. "Does it hurt, Mr. Graves?"

Mr. Graves blinked and stared at her. His smile went away for a moment. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and then spoke. "What?"

"Your body, Mr. Graves. You seem like you're in a lot of pain." As she turned over his arm she noticed a long gash that ran along the length, which cut across a tattoo of some friendly horses. "Did you get this when the Homestucks attacked you?"

"Who are you again?" said Mr. Graves.

"I'm sorry this happened to you, Mr. Graves. Why don't we get it bandaged—"

A rough shove from behind forced Cecily aside. "There's no [sigh!]ing time for that," said Zee. "Malkwon concert now. Come on Graves, we got a lot to talk about."

"It'll be hard to talk with my [?] in your mouth," said Mr. Graves. Cecily dropped his wrist; had she been close? To anything? Or nowhere near? She sensed a lot of anguish, fear, and uncertainty. It pervaded the air around the Mr. Mbuji statue, it was immune to the statue's stolid and secure presence. Zee leaked all her good emotions, like someone loosened a spigot. Mr. Graves bled from so many wounds. Everything felt sickly, desperate, and Cecily recoiled from its clotted pungency. Her foot slipped and she fell against a bystander, who was very nice and helped her back to her feet.

Zee's cajoling struck Mr. Graves eventually. With another quip that Cecily didn't understand, he seized his flag like a royal scepter and wrapped his arm around Zee's waist, pulling her to his side as he sashayed toward the hotel's exit. "Try not to say the word [!] while you're there, Zee, they don't like that kinda talk."

"Come on, Cecily," said Zee. "We got work to do."

Oh no, they were leaving! The idea of actually attending one of these concerts, with music her mother forbade her from hearing, flooded her with indecision. She stammered, shuffled her shoes, she heard her sister tell her to hurry up—decide; she didn't want to leave Zee, it was so clear she needed Cecily's help, what would happen to her with Mr. Graves and his lugubrious disease...? But Cecily stood still like God struck her dumb.

Mr. Graves's bony hand curled toward her. His nails were jagged and unkempt, like he nibbled them a lot. "Ay bay-bee, I got vim enough for you both."

"Uh, um, I, uh," said Cecily. She had to do it! She had to stay with Zee. She imagined the concert, her mother told her about them. She saw them, men in t-shirts, shooting guns, they used bad drugs, what would they say? Gangsters, thugs, dangerous men, a sweat broke on Cecily's forehead, the pain dragged its claws through her inner flesh, she bent slightly to stifle it, she pressed her elbow against her kidney and balled her fingers into a fist.

"I, uh," she barely heard her own voice, "I don't know if I, uh, should do that..."

"She hates black people," said Mr. Graves.

"Cecily, hurry," said Zee.

But Cecily didn't move, and they didn't try to talk to her again, and they left her at the base of the Mr. Mbuji statue as she slowly sank down its side and felt the cold copper on the base of her spine until she landed on her knees and clutched her stomach and bit her lip to plug the awful, awful things growing inside of her. A nice man asked if she needed help and she whispered she was okay. A big cicada clicked in her heart. The people passed in big droves, they moved very fast. The sweat crept down Cecily's chin and neck and collar. She put her palms on the tile and her tongue lapped the air for breath. Help me, God! Please help... She cast her eyes toward heaven and the face of Mr. Mbuji gazed upon her, larger than life and imbued with serenity. In the movie, he saved so many people... Save me, Mr. Mbuji...

"Save yourself," said Mr. Mbuji.

Then save Zee, please...

Mr. Mbuji said no more.

The episode dwindled. The cicada silenced. The snakes grew dormant. She realized what she did—she abandoned Zee. She used Mr. Mbuji's pedestal to help herself to her feet, but her balance remained unsteady.

Zee was doing such bad things. But Zee wasn't a bad person, right? She didn't know any better. Cecily had to help her. Even if it meant going to Mr. Toombs's concert... When she started for the door she realized she had no idea where the concert was or how to get there. She had hesitated too long, she was so frail... There had to be something she could...

Then she remembered: Mr. Maximillion. Such a sad man... Cecily at once knew what to do.

I, the Wizard Hussie

I, the Wizard Hussie

You know that uncanny feeling when you think you've read something before, and now you're reading again? There's a French phrase for it, let me think... *crème brûlée*. Definitely that. Those fans sure tire you out, don't they? Who knows what rambunctious shenanigans they'll get up to next time. Dressing up like my characters, sneaking into my room, forming a living wave of bodies and lynching my best buddy at a question-and-answer panel, I tell ya. It makes a man want to go home, hang his hat on the coatrack, and give his theoretical wife a smooch before unwinding with a cold beer and a spot of late night sportsball. Alas, for a hardworking high-earning young lad like myself, I'm afforded no such luxury. Instead, I have boring adult stuff to accomplish, like taxes, and calling my lawyer, and arranging the lands of my dead dad—the worst kind of dad, lemme tell ya.

If only I were a simple fool with no fans and no money. That'd be the life! I could pick up chicks by the Mbuji statue, saunter down the Strip with a delectable morsel under my arm, and enjoy the delights of this city's most famous diabetic rap artist. No such munificent kismet shines upon me, for I am shackled to the dirtiest of human inventions: moolah. Here I sit at my desk, beside my laptop and my external hard drive, counting the fat stacks I've accrued since attending this convention—one thousand, two thousand, three thousand! I weep. Another hooded sweatshirt kachings the e-cash register on my humble website; another sucker swindled forty-five smackers for a plain black hoodie with a single simple image plopped on the chest, the only purpose of which is for coded identification to like-minded fans when stranded on the side of the road and in need of a sleek red sports car to ferry you to your destination. No, instead of receiving money for absolutely nothing, I could be a penniless rake on my way to waste what little funds I have on simple pleasure. A nubile female under my arm, an asthmatic 90s rap star in my sights—*crème brûlée*, non? Allow me to wipe my tears with my wads of—

"Hey—hey, hey! You. Hey you. Hey!"

What's it now? A man emerges from behind a streetlamp and accosts me. Homeless, no doubt. Actually, I've seen him before. The trench coat, the box, the mad and disheveled hair. Passerby stop and eye the freakshow, an arena opens on the sidewalk amid the fallen pamphlets for nudie shows.

"May I help you, friend?" I say.

"You *fake* Canadian, I've been inside Circus Circus for *days*, found absolutely nothing, you know *how* much you've wasted my time? She won't let me go home *until* I find them, you understand?"

He tugs my shirt, less with rage than a pathetic appeal for aid. He looks a lot older than he did in the elevator, his eyes are bowered in wrinkles, his skin has grown gaunt around his

cheekbones, his long hair is flecked with strands of gray. His jaundiced, cracked fingernails break against the completely unbruisable bulk of my torso.

Then his eyes lower and he notices the pretty dame half-hiding behind me. His entire demeanor alters in an instant, he seizes her hair and yanks—quite the unchivalrous action for a young man, aging though he is! I, the knight Redcross, shall ride to milady's aid.

"Hands off," I protest valiantly, "She's *my* bitch. If you want her, we must duel to the death!"

"Ow-ow-ow," said Dame Coulter predictably. She kicked Frederick in the shin, except her foot got lost in the black hole trench coat.

"I'm not spending *another* day, another *week* because of Maxwell's bullshit. Where is he!" he screamed into her scalp, the great gangly brute, a gigante yclad in armes all divelish black!

Whom when I, the slie *Archimago*, spide
Accost so faire and free a sprightly lasse,
I heued mine heauie lance, by right warres tride,
And smote upon his skull that temperd brasse;
He, of death afeard, spoke words lothsome crasse,
Which praysefull angels did cease ioys to heare,
And raisd his yron bladde for blow to chasse:
Myghte lockd ganst myghte, bloodie dint sonded cleare;
So beganst such woefull ioust for such lovellie deare.

Actually, Sansquoi releases Zeldessa and rubs his skull with his free hand; he whispers a sullen gripe under his breath and glares at me with unmitigated but impotent ire. He's aware he's got something in his box sharp enough to shut me up (anyone ever see *Seven*, sometimes stylized *Se7en*, starring Kevin Spacey?). He's also aware a bevy of onlookers have ringed us round. Some take pictures. He slinks back, his head retracts into the cylindrical aegis of his trench coat collar.

"En garde ye piebald fiend!" I chuck in for flavor, "I challenge thee to dubious battle on these concrete plains of County Clark. Work what unholy wizardry thou must wrought, for the blessings of this my betrothed virgin shall safeguard me from hex and charm!"

He's livid. He hates me. He hates Z. He hates his brother the crossdresser who he doesn't know is a crossdresser. Who knows what his mother does to him. The failed son. The marijuana smoker who sells knives. This is his Spring Break too, y'know. He wants to go home. He wants his time back. He can't do a thing to me. I'm gonna walk out of here with Z. under my arm and he'll have to watch. I know it. He knows it.

"Don't let that creep touch her," says one of the bystanders, to prove my point the moment I thought it.

Frederick steps back. He wants to say something. Despite his appearance, despite his current status as a knife vendor, he's an intelligent man. Perhaps as intelligent as his overachiever brother. He wants to point out the hypocrisy of this crowd implicitly taking my side over his. He wants to scream that I'm a pedophile, that she's sixteen and I'm—I'm gonna—*sex her*— But he can't. He wants to accuse these pedestrians, some of whom are filming the scene, of siding with me because of the way I look and the way he looks. But he's lived a life of this. He knows what these appeals net him.

I stand there, holding my flag aloft, the pointed tip aimed at his heart, the glorious colors swaying in the breeze. I effect a jaunty pose and flip a matador hand. The crowd snaps pictures, I wink, more encouragement comes from them, they want to see me beat this trench coat guy to a pulp.

He flees the scene.

The crowd, disappointed, disperses. I, the showman Liberace, lead my well-won woman onward.

So we go to this Malkwon concert, except it's not a concert, that's the hilarity. This whole time Khalid "Lil Cal" Bhandari was *so* excited for this concert and it's more like a single room in a rundown shack five blocks behind Caesar's Palace, in the broken windows ethnographic research district of town, and when the lights dim and Dennis "Malkwon" Toombs shambles his diabetic forty-something-year-old fatass onto the "stage" and the grody ginger DJ with a 13-inch solid chrome Jesus piece hits the turntables, the audience consists of four people: Cal, Kiki, Coulter, and Yours Truly. Malkwon supposedly performs every single night in this hollowed husk of an El Pollo Loco, which begs the question: Does he perform if nobody shows? Does he get on that stage and wheeze his asthmatic raps to a row of empty folding chairs?

I like to imagine he does. I like to imagine Dennis Toombs, the absurdist hero. Waiting for an Audience. He's got the surname to set the tone. Toombs and Graves rather than Vladimir and Estrogen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. A tragicomedy in two acts. The first act he steps onto the stage, accompanied by his deaf-mute DJ. He performs, he sings his famous songs. Lucy, baccy, blow, snow have taken their toll on him; his career, once admirable, is now a shambling corpse. He genuflects to nobody. In Act Two—well, you're reading it now. I need a mock epic tone to accompany this stellar performance. Something Pope, something Swift. I need more literary references to piss off the reader. Actually—actually—I know how to piss you off, it's easy. I need merely call attention to Z. Coulter (the Z stands for Zestful, as in the taste of her puss) under my manly muscular arm, the side of her head pressed between two of my ribs, her fingers playing with my jean pocket. What! You say aghast. Surely you fabricate, Mr. Graves! You unreliable narrator, you Nabokovian pedant! The Z. "Zoophilic" Coulter we know and love (do you love her? She's rather annoying) would never stoop to such fawning gestures with a cretin like you. Well, sucks to your ass-mar Malkwon, this exquisite pubescent androgyne is teething *my* cock tonight.

I wish I could get aroused about it, but it's just sad. She's like an actual kid, a puppy dog. An emotional retard, possibly an actual retard. I never paid attention during the early part of this story, mostly because it was so fucking boring, but wasn't she peddling Adderall to Kiki? These are the kind of children who transform into Maximillion. I see all of you, you think I'm obnoxious, you think I'm an asshole, alright. But as you eat this buffet sample smorgasbord of characters, do you really think I'm the worst? Me? It's jokes, guys. I'm joking about the pedophilia. I'm joking about the rape. I'm not going to fuck your heroine. And don't talk about Kiki, because none of you even clap for her. You liked it when Cecily said I was sick, didn't you? Well, I am sick. We're all sick. You're sick, he's sick, she's sick, welcome to our entropic postmodern reality. Everything's falling apart, Malkwon isn't the only absurdist hero.

Ha! See that? The classic sympathy card. A dash of self-awareness, an ounce of self-justification, and you're back in my camp. Back thinking Mitchum Graves ain't so bad a guy. Yeah.

Sometimes I wish I could say I was a real human being.

What's getting me so depressed? It must be this living memento mori in the form of a bloated do-rag tactically colored to avoid gang affiliation. He rasps:

"Killers in the hood [Breathes] / Ain't doing what they should / But hell I'm in the mood / For a little attitude. [Breathes again]"

The beat has this goofy, twangy synth line and a feel-good vibe that marks it as instant novelty. Diabetes rubbed the edge off this man, he has adult children now. I try to see how Khalid "Lil Cal" Bhandari reacts to this obvious shoddiness. He's in the row ahead, his arms folded and his back hunched, ignoring the despondent Kiki beside him. At this angle I can't see his face, which is disappointing, because the moment his heart breaks must be worth a good laugh. He can't have been so ignorant as to not expect this, right? He's at least heard the albums Malkwon put out in the 00s? It's not a surprising revelation. Sorry, readers, I don't know why you were kept in suspense about Malkwon so long.

"Saddle up and cock your guns / We ain't ride today for fun. / Hispanics down the block set up shop / Nigga thought I loved called the cops."

Monosyllabic, grocery bag couplets, half pat moralizing and half woeful braggadocio. Come on, Lil Calcium. You're not so delusional to think this fine? I'm almost bored enough to end my chapter prematurely and see whether his inner monologue is cracking apart. But my screen time's precious. This Malkwon concert has been built up since the damn story began, something must happen. I wave to Kiki, but she's basically a zombie, her lipstick is smeared and her eyes drift.

Boredom continues. Kiki is bored, Z. "Zygote" Coulter is something else, the literal only person in history who might be engaged is Lil Calculus and even he's iffy. It's time for Mitchum Graves Andrew Hussie to liven the party, I vault the seat ahead of me and sumo squat onto the stage. Malkwon and the Dijon Mustard hold the mic and the music cuts out with an old-fashioned vinyl scratch. Whatcha doing on our turf punk, says Malkwon as he slathers his sausage with the Dijon and takes a great big diabetic bite out of it. Show's over nigga I'm in charge now, I say. Malkwon swallows his sausage and demands to know where

my colors at. Red or blue he says. Red and white I say, MISSISSAUGA REPRESENT! And I wave the banner high, one titty hanging out like Liberty leading the people. Marquis Mal de Qu'on discards his pince-nez and rococo schooner hat, he removes his kidskin glove (he ate the rest of the kid) finger by finger and slaps it upon the ground at my feet, making great offense to my baroque high-heeled riding boot. The sound of the glove reverberates through Le Poulet Foule (coucher avec moi, ce soir), Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton regard it with stunned wonder, uncertain of the history. But in the end, I retrieve the glove. Lady Zebulon Colleter of Middlesex County produces two loaded glocks upon a velvet cushion. I and my rival for the lady's hand seize a gat each and take the requisite ten steps, we turn and at that exact moment each glock bursts—

By now, obviously, you realize none of this happens and I'm inventing a ridiculous fantasy to stave off my urban ennui. However, allow me to relate to you a far more interesting event which actually, and I mean in the real life world (of this fictional work) transpired, which is that somebody else enters the concert hall. Not a single somebody, either, ten somebodies in fact.

The first thing you think is, how can I trust such an unreliable narrator? Your entire chapter is an exercise in the limits of annoyance and good taste, your metafiction strains the patience, and you only just now led us on a rather banal tale about dueling Malkwon, after you previously dueled Frederick Roddlevan. The second thing you're thinking is, really? Ten people enter this concert? Who could they possibly be, we're a zillion words into this story and suddenly *more* characters show up? We're all so bored and tired, can everything end already so we have our catharsis? Well, the people who enter the concert are—

Cal Kills

Cal Kills

As though it anticipated the arrival of these unfamiliar figures, the melody dissolved into a thrum and the last lyric (Falsified life comfort systems) subsided on a forlorn note. The spiritual energy that connected creator and consumer crackled between them and Khalid Bhandari rose with an empathic sense of alarm. Although the figures stalked like assassins, although little in their posture or demeanor merited much scrutiny—at least at first—they were nonetheless sensed.

Essence of physical false Yaldabaoth

To purge idol Yahweh toss salt about.

Perhaps such a metaphor served too lofty intentions. Perhaps Khalid, lulled into a rapture of attunement, better sensed shifts in the equilibrium of his environment. Regardless, the interlopers appeared as a gaggle of black males in ghetto chic (designer hoodies, diamond-encrusted chains, Gucci parkas, custom Nikes). One with a tableau of tigers and peonies etched into his close-cropped hairdo clicked a lighter to the benefit of others, who leaned forward with blunts clenched between bedazzled incisors. Their sway and swagger sifted them among the chairs; they fanned into groups of two or three; they communicated amongst themselves. Their nouveau riche apparel belied the surprising respectfulness with which they took their places among the audience.

Malkwon, maintaining the entertainer's discipline, segued unfazed into the next song, "Columbian Exchange," the first he had performed that night from one of his classic albums (1990's *African Daimyo*)—and, Khalid thought he saw, with a meaningful glance toward the turntablist beforehand. The newcomers, in divers positions around the auditorium, reclined or leaned forward but issued no interruption. The opening notes, scrabbled and chopped by the vinyl's forced counterrevolutions, altered anew the room's inner fabric, changed the hue of its aura. Malkwon's head nodded to the beat. He turned so that his side faced the audience. His lips pursed; he spoke:

"Boom blap, I smack pills back to a heart attack

Paddywhack, collect bills and head home outta whack

Fantastic spastic plastic wrap its baby back

Ribs I call dibs hey won't you micro that

Chicken dipping finger licking loving that

Drip gin on chins crumbs drop down for parlor rats

Floorboards and bread dough heckle hoes take off they clothes

Feet with paint toes bend em down grab on those

Big bouncy ass cheeks slap sweet parakeet

Tarot read

That's one card two card three card for living hard

Make them bake them cut down with scimitar

Chaff wheat that's some beat it's you in the back that car

That cops drive it's your life now you behind them bars

Cuz guess what you out luck you ain't shit when you a nigga

Millionaire you still in prison cuz the color of your skin's

A vision of your fortune since the day we became Christians

Now sins is what we living guess what God ain't listening"

The verse ended prematurely and the beat looped for a few silent bars while Malkwon scratched his throat. The original cut lacked this interlude, and Khalid wondered if its inclusion was meant to draw especial attention to the preceding line, or bring focus upon the disk jockey. Khalid nudged Kiki and began to whisper a fact of this song's inception—that it was, in fact, the first song Malkwon wrote entirely on his own—but Kiki's lithe, gleaming body quivered in her chair. Her mascara-muddied eyes roved in her head; she beseeched Khalid; on her other side sat one of the newcomers. He had a head of Jamaican dreadlocks. His rippling, tattooed arm inched around the back of her chair; he clutched her by the shoulder.

Malkwon resumed his rap. Kiki mouthed a word; Khalid rose. The dreadlocked man tilted back his head and unleashed a prismatic grin of many gleaming colors. "Oh shit, this yo girl?" He relinquished her shoulder and displayed an open palm.

"She's nobody's girl."

"Alright alright, then it's no big." And he put his hand back on her shoulder and pulled her ragdoll body closer. Kiki's head lolled, her neck covered in ashy contusions.

Khalid alternated between multiple possibilities of speech; he had failed to notice Kiki's appearance, a dusky, autumnal pallor, of leaves on the cusp of decay; she effected that same anti-effervescence as the kid in the car, Coulter's friend—Roddlevan. Light and aura drained into her antimatter corporeality, a black fringe thronged her. Had this—had he—He looked to Coulter and the Canadian in search of a shared moment of epiphany, an answer; but Coulter had cozied close to the Canadian, her head in an arc of intimacy against his chest, her legs bundled beneath her. She wore a shirt Khalid instantly recognized as Kiki's, it had somehow transformed her body, what was once an androgynous infant exhibited sudden sexual characteristics, a pronounced collarbone, a soft swell of breast.

The Canadian winked at him.

Malkwon coughed, his song ended. Khalid sat down. He massaged his temples. Had his words sundered Kiki so deeply? A villainous strain of satisfaction crept along his stomach but he suppressed it. Above all he wanted her to experience felicity, to love her life, she was nobody's girl—he provided guidance, not slavery. He seized her loose, upturned hand. He tried to gaze into her eye. He tried to say, Kiki, wait, you're beautiful, I love you, don't fall into another of these depressive stupors—this the third—but the moment her head tumbled in his direction a voice cut through the silence:

"This it?"

A distinct, well-coached voice, accustomed to speaking, laced with a degree of cocksure insolence. A chair scooted, one of the men stood. His anorak zipped almost to chin, forming a cuplike collar from which his bald pate rose. Piercings ringed his ears, his eyebrows, his nose. He propped one foot on a chair and stooped on the upraised knee.

"I came cuz I heard a great man was here." The augur of his stare bored through Khalid and into Malkwon. "I thought I'd hear a great man rap."

Khalid recognized this man. It would be difficult not to. The moment he thought the name, the Canadian blurted it aloud:

"Ashley 'Fly' Jackson!"

Ashley "Fly" Jackson. Los Angeles-based hip hop artist, posterchild for the Underdog rap collective, seven-time chart-topper, featured alongside names as untouchably bourgeois as Eminem, Kanye West, late Jay-Z, Lil Wayne. Designer of his own fashion brand, his own cologne line, his own basketball shoes. Investor and part-owner of the Anaheim Angels, proud prostitute of the once hallowed name of Compton. Adorner of GQ, Billboard, Rolling Stone, Vibe. Darling of hipster internet critics and mainstream middlebrow alike. Fly Vodka, Fly Wristwatches, Fly Airlines. Twenty-seven years old.

Fly ignored his name's evocation. He acknowledged only Malkwon, alone onstage.

"Well? Anything to say?"

Malkwon's disk jockey tried to interject, but Malkwon said: "You think you tough shit cuz you top the charts now, do you? I was where you were twenty years ago. That shit don't last forever no matter who you are, ya know I mean?"

"Nah. I ain't never gonna wind up in this sad sorry shack," Fly said. "I thought I might learn something here, seems the only thing to learn is how to get old fast. Sad. Old greats indeed."

Malkwon lowered the microphone. Khalid waited for his response, his invective, his vitriol to pour forth and consume this interloper, his rage and posture, his envenomed tongue.

Malkwon said nothing.

"Well," said Fly. "I got nothing else. Let's move." He motioned for his posse. They rose in unison, they murmured under their breath in muted tones, chuckled laughter. The one beside Kiki hoisted her body along.

Khalid knocked his chair aside. He said, enflamed, spitting in fury: "You hack! You whore of a rapper—you prostitute!"

Fly, halfway toward egress, swiveled on the ball of his thousand-dollar Louis Vuitton sneaker. He jingled with zippers and hidden alloys within his dark emperor sweater. He held forward a hand half-extended, the fingers forming the shape of a pistol.

"Who said that." He pointed at the Canadian. "You say that?"

"I sure did," said the Canadian, in a perfect facsimile of Khalid's own voice. "I called you a tenpenny quean, if you know what I mean."

Khalid stepped in front of him, as the Canadian had not sought to rise. "No, I said it. I'll say it again. Because for someone like you, a spout of glitzy bling rap about women and cars, for someone like you to come here and dismiss a legend, a foundation of the very genre you bastardize, for you to disrespect him as though he were nothing, such an action is not only the height of hubris, but a foolish severing of the chain that moors you to this earth. You now float, distended with your own hot air—hence, I suppose, your dubious moniker."

A low, simultaneous whistle emerged from seemingly all nine of Fly's posse at once. They trilled with the guttural peal of a Capella vocal harmonies that coalesced into a single intelligible syllable, strained upon the rack of their ignorance: "Oh." Fly himself, a wolfish grin, swayed a sidewinder sway, his shrugged shoulders revolving in arduous counterclockwise motions while his hands transformed into little snakeheads of their own, all four upper fingers pressed against the thumb.

He lifted the fingers, closed them. He said, "Yap. Yap. ...Yap." His head twisted, his neck made an audible crack. "Nigga. You gonna come in here spout this iambic pentameter motherfucker. This William Shakespeare looking ass nigga."

The nine members of the posse encircled him. Khalid refused to break his gaze from Fly. Fly, his body composed of only liquid, sloshed a slow revolution around Khalid.

"Excuse me," said the disk jockey, "We are doing a show here."

"What's it matter," said Malkwon. "They paid. They do what they want, ya know I mean?"

The disk jockey, unsatisfied, left his turntables and approached the first of the nine gatekeepers. "I'll have to ask you to leave, the other audience members want to see the performance."

He indicated the Canadian; the Canadian said, "Fuck the performance." He bounced out of his seat, he maintained Coulter welded to his hip. The flagpole perched upon his saucy shoulder, he sashayed between Khalid and Fly.

"Alright alright alright," he continued. "I know exactly how this has to go. But first, I gotta ask a question: Have either of you seen the Academy Award-winning film *8 Mile*, starring Alvin Nathaniel 'Xzibit' Joiner?"

"Yes," said Khalid.

"Shit everyone seen that," said Fly. "Get rid of this Canada ass motherfucker." Another viperous movement motioned at the lackey who had his arm around Kiki's waist.

Before the goon took a step, the Canadian flicked out his flag. In a flash of red and white, he held the pole's sharp point at the tip of the goon's nose. His extended arm maintained absolute steadiness.

"All y'all motherfuckers gon listen." The Canadian's voice changed, husky and baritone. "I heard y'all like raps so I'mma put some raps in your rap concert so y'all can rap while ya listen to rap. Rap battle, thirty second verses, three verses each."

"This bitch ass can't rap," said Fly.

"I can rap," said Khalid.

"Nigga you don't rap, you write sonnets."

Khalid commanded the disk jockey to play a beat. The disk jockey protested, they had a performance, people paid to see it, he wanted everyone to leave.

From the stage, a looming, omnipresent presence, a spectral figure upon the mottled auditorium air, Malkwon interceded: "Play the beat."

"Dennis—"

"Play the motherfucking beat. Fuck it, I'll play it myself. These motherfuckers think they can put on a show, well let em put on a show. Let em shoot some fucking *life* in these veins, ya know I mean?"

Malkwon descended the stage. He rose behind the turntables, an obelisk.

The Canadian reached into his pocket and retrieved a silver coin. He flipped it and caught it in the hand that held the flag. "Call it," he said.

"Heads," said Fly, the instant before Khalid was going to say heads.

"It's..." The Canadian opened his palm. "Heads. Well Mr. Fly, you rap first or second?"

"I rap second," said Fly. "If I even gotta rap. I know these keyboard warrior types, bent over their desks all day chitter chatter oh me oh my, gotta give Fly's new album a negative review, I could *totally* do it better than him. Well let's see it asshole."

Malkwon commenced the beat. "KKKilo Gambino," off *Malkwon X* (1999). An element of the intimately familiar. Khalid entered his zone of words and letters, immersed himself within

the rhymes and patterns he studied his entire relevant life.

A microphone soared from somewhere and landed in his hand. He had this.

"Yo. Yo.

You've entered this establishment

Dragging all the rabble in

From Assyria to Babylon

Now I'm bringing Babel down

My name if you have not heard it

Is Khalid Lil Cal Bhandari

My business here is murder

My pleasure's more variety

You see, Fly, I can rhyme

In sonnets, couplets, and mime—"

[Khalid makes a rude gesture.]

"—Then sit back, relax, nosh cigars

While you search the dictionary

For words that rhyme with nee-gar

Or invoke the big dick fairy

To wake one night and find she put

Beneath your bed your missed manhood

I've heard all your songs, Fly

By which I mean, I heard four lines

On the radio, hard as palladium

Rappers like Malkwon domed craniums

Guys like Fly stick tongues in labia."

After he flipped the mike to the Canadian, who had established himself in a central location like a referee, Khalid became aware of his sitcom scenario reality, the stadium upbraiding him with its dense pack of smoke, its intoxicating, hallucinogenic odor. He, Lil Cal, stood opposite Fly, under the watchful eye of Malkwon. Static sparked within his fiber, a transmogrification of soul into energy, vibe into voice.

The simplest words spurred him: Play it cool. One buckle and from a lofty precipice he tumbles. Although he knew from the smoothness, the ready flow of verbiage, that he had done well, he sought not approbation, he remained careful to leave his eyes level and contort his face into a stoic mask.

Fly's goons, as one might expect, did not applaud his effort, or wince at his barbs. They could, Lil Cal understood, leave at any time; they held the numbers, they held nothing at stake. Malkwon or the Canadian's kind words made no matter here. The position, inherently biased against him, weighed his pride, ambition, and hope upon the scale of the man his verses were designed to destroy. This was not a rap battle. This was a culmination, an examination, a test of his abilities. The world, like Fly, had no reason to hear him. If he could not seize one ear, what hope had he for a multitude?

The microphone changed hands in syncopated circuit, timed to the lingering beat. "Aight aight," said the Canadian, "That's some aight shit, few dope disses, sounding a little like vintage Fly you know I mean, like circa '08 Fly you know I mean? Fly back when he was hungry, you know I mean?"

Fly rolled his eyes. He received the microphone and flicked a finger over his head at Malkwon. The record scratched, a new track played: "Jujubes," *Unlawful Imprisonment* (1996). A candypop crackle reverberated.

"Nigga think he know me
But Osama lookin lonely
Dawg, my goon swooped your bitch
Plus you ain't got no fucking homies
I get it, you mad that you ain't rich
Push, but don't push until it click
Cuz, I got shooters in the squad
But, til they shoot you don't know which
Ooh—don't look so damn surprised
You think I'd be quadruple platinum
If I couldn't fucking rhyme?"

You think I play in fucking Anaheim
Cuz I ain't hood enough for Compton?
Nigga, only posers glorify the ghetto
You ain't never walked outside
With them whores in they stilettos
And Crips in they cars they hang beside
Saying Nigga where you from?
Nigga, nigga, where you from?
Yeah you, I wanna know, where you from?"

He held the microphone to Lil Cal. Lil Cal, Argus eyes upon him, had no recourse but to answer truthfully.

"Hot damn, this motherfucker from Denver?
Yapping and he from somewhere no one ever been there
I swear, haters these days can't even grow their chin hair
Yo there, cut the fucking beat, this battle ends here."

Fly dropped the microphone and his posse went wild, they hooted and hollered a tempestuous din of brazen braggadocio. They thronged around Lil Cal and shoved their faces in his face, they battered him with puffs of hot air. Lil Cal stood moratorium still and accepted their torment. Fly, as a professional, likely had many stock lines to deploy when needed.

The battle was not over; when Fly dropped the microphone, the Canadian somehow caught it. He passed it to Lil Cal and said, "Aight now, aight now, calm down, calm down, I said you both get three verses each, otherwise who win the coin flip win the battle you know I mean?" He buffeted the implacable disk jockey with his flag to silence a protest. "Let the man have a rebuttal, that's fair you know I mean?"

Fly pulled back his sleeve to reveal a watch of indescribable gaudiness. "Yo I ain't got all day."

"Then let's quicken the pace, you know I mean?"

The microphone landed in Lil Cal's upturned hand. Fly's posse rolled their eyes and spat their remarks but Malkwon, beyond all that, made an almost imperceptible nod of encouragement Lil Cal's way.

"Jujubes II," *Malkwon X* (1999).

"Yo. Yo.

Denigrate Denver, where the winds blow hard

Then I go hard on this flow with a fauchard

Like a modern Crusader, Holy Land

Be damned to the sands of atrocity

While the paucity of your bars rebrands

Animosity into medieval monstrosity

Who's Fly?

A negus indige'ous to bring us Adidas?

A latter-day Jesus turns pitas to diadems?

To whom the whole world means only as much

As the diamonds encrusted on all of his stuff?

I have no posse, sure, I lack nine hype men

So why'm I still murd'ring you without them?

If all you say is true, then why you still wasting time

With an eighteen-year-old Persian straight outta Columbine?

You talk about guns, but that's where I've been

The school where they gunned down thirty-five kids

So spit your prewritten lines 'bout life in the hood

They're sure easy to use when you're always accused

Of fakeness, whackness, whiteness, and street cred abuse

But when ev'ryone says it

It just might be true."

The microphone disappeared, his skin felt as though it undulated upon his coursing veins. The more he delved into this rabbit hole, the more displaced from reality his soul became. The auditorium crawled with rapid shadows, vibrant swatches of darkness that broke pieces of furniture and walls at the seams. He submerged himself in the swallowing silence and the blank stares of the audience. Futility—futility. Because Fly was Fly and he Khalid "Lil Cal"

Bhandari of Denver, Colorado—the structure of the narrative was as writ as Fly's last verse. He had fought his way here, over mountains, through desert, propelled himself at times with sheer force of will, abandoned by everyone, despised and crumpled underfoot by their own plodding ambitions, shorn by amorous Kiki, all this and more had he suffered to place his cheek against the pulse of the scene, these creators, these men of bright lights and big names, and yet the membrane that separated him remained impermeable, this verbal joust would be the literalization of his failure.

(The nerves, they seized him. How had he spit two verses already? He prophesied a clot in his own throat, and surely it scratched like sandpaper already.)

The silence cracked into bombast. A single, momentous, rafter-shaking voice bellowed. An animated blob of humanity obliterated the stillness. A fleeting moment's folly caused Lil Cal to somehow believe it was Malkwon who cheered for him, Malkwon who stood to his aid. If not Malkwon, Kiki; some solace. But neither—it was the Canadian.

He bounced upon the tiles, he swung his limbs in boneless motions, he forced his face into the face of Fly and the faces of Fly's flunkies and roared directly into each, he launched his flag as a javelin at one of the subwoofers on stage and pierced it through the driver. A spray of static erupted across the rickety wooden platform, the disk jockey screeched, the Canadian hurled a punch at him, the fist connected with the goon who held Kiki, the goon relinquished Kiki, Kiki flopped onto her side and rolled on the ground, people puffed their peacock chests, the Canadian continued unbounded to pirouette among them, their fists fell upon nothing but air. Malkwon held a fist to his lips and coughed.

This chaos, this Pandaemonium enveloped him, it seemed a minor squall compared to the hurricane raging in his head, rhymes and lyrics recycled and repurposed in preparation for the final round, ideas strung together into creative and impressive forms, punchlines delivered in unique yet still forceful motions, the pains and divestitures of true creation, the pieces of Khalid "Lil Cal" Bhandari cracking off the melting glacier to plash upon a sea of icebergs.

"Shut the fuck up," whispered Fly.

The pierced subwoofer belched a spurt of flame. The tangled coil of the Canadian flag burned.

"Shut up, y'all." Fly lowered to a knee. He picked up the fallen microphone and rose. "This battle ain't over."

A beat began to play. Lil Cal could not identify it. A susurrant, a low murmur, a mesmerizing guttural rumble that slowly developed within the iron ribcage of a dragon. The Canadian wrenched his flagpole from the subwoofer and heralded it, aflame, to ward away the men who lumbered after his blood.

Fly began.

"You dunno who you fuck with motherfucker

I ain't no coconut rapper, I'm a real bloodsucker."

The subwoofer exploded. The flame swiftly caught across the stage. The disk jockey fled and returned with a fire extinguisher.

"Lowkey I'm known as a real animal
A dangerous nigga, a modern cannibal."

The cloudy white filling spurted into the inferno and became nothing, as though it never existed. Tendons of flame sprouted up the sides of the walls.

"I don't bring women home I dine on em
Cut em up on a table snort lines of em."

Fly changed. His eyes hardened into rubies, his collar parted and exposed an unhinged jaw. A second speaker exploded on stage; the disk jockey fled.

"Plunge knives in em, make mimes of em
Tongues wagging like dogs for a slice of meat."

Roofbeams along the ceiling charred to black husks. Ash and soot dropped in dark dollops. The Canadian chased a black man across the room at lancepoint.

"That degeneracy, you know, it harrows my soul
I put out fly shit it's all fun and jokes
But nobody joking when the blunt that I'm smoking
Ain't making me high as it fucking used to
And I sit around with all this fucking money but nothing to do—"

He advanced on Lil Cal; he no longer used the microphone, but wielded it above his head as a mace. The stage collapsed under the weight of its immolation, the pyre leapt to the foremost row of chairs.

"—Thinking of new ways to entertain myself and the masses
Training humans as ferrets or saluting like fascists
Together we feast on one another's entrails
Come with me Lil Cal, lemme show you what entails."

Part of the roof formed a red hot convexity. Lil Cal's eyes watered for the smoke; he tucked his head and held a fist to his lips.

"We have to leave," he said.

Fly tossed him the microphone. "Your goddam turn."

Lil Cal opened his fist and caught it. "No, I'm getting out of here." He stooped over and plucked Kiki off the ground. She slid her hands around his waist and rubbed her forehead on his shoulder.

"Oh, I see, you can't take it now," said Fly, advancing. "Now it's too much for you. Now hard ass motherfucker from Columbine backs up. To me, this, this—" He spread his arms and indicated the inferno. "—This ain't shit. This Tuesday. This my hotel room when I too turned up. This my motherfucking *life* day in day out."

A corner section of the ceiling caved and dispensed a torrent of beams and insulation. The chairs bent and swayed as their metal limbs melted. Lil Cal's body, and Kiki's body, poured sweat. The turntables span, unattended, a skipping and devolving beat. The room had voided of all but them.

Lil Cal turned for the exit. Kiki refused to move her legs so he had to hoist her dead weight upon his side, and then she kept sliding and entangling on pieces of things.

"Oh, now you leaving boy? Now you leaving?" Fly's voice dogged him; it reverberated in the smoke. "Where your third verse boy? You choking on me boy? Where you at boy? Where the fuck you at?"

Another loud crash silenced the music. The blaze snarled, conflated with Fly's voice.

"You nothing boy. All y'all nothing. Wannabes. Posers. Fakes. Fire don't burn me, motherfucker. I walk through the fire and I do not get burned."

Lil Cal exited.

Khalid placed Kiki against a lamppost opposite the flaming building. The wail of sirens inundated the starless air. Only an oppressive moon beat down on him. Soot-caked, the scent of smoke. Kiki's entire face had obscured beneath the black paste. He wiped away a swath on her cheek with his thumb.

None from inside remained around, except the disk jockey at the far street corner, who spoke vociferously into a cellular phone. No sight of the Canadian, of Fly or his minions, of Malkwon. Bystanders, dark-eyed creatures, blinked from windows, ducked when sighted.

"Malkwon," said Kiki.

"That was it," said Khalid. "That was him... a phantom."

She loosed a cackle. "That's all you can say? That's all! And your story ends."

When Khalid looked down at her, he noticed the microphone still clenched in his hand.

"If I tell you that you did well," she said, "Will you forgive me?"

He stood, he turned westward. Fire engines rolled down the street, ants in black slickers skittered off the shiny sides. He lacked a necessary component. An element of his character. The fire burned him. Where had he failed? Resolve. He perceived the pillar of his dreams, atremble in the wind. The loose column's stories shuffled in and out, they shed pieces and people who plummeted as flecks of ash.

A shadow spread upon them. Khalid glanced up; a large man, the goon who had clasped Kiki, eclipsed the moon. His lips spread in a chalky smile and an agile flick of his wrist sunk a card in the denim on Khalid's thigh.

"Regards from Fly."

Khalid examined the card. It gave the name of an agent for a well-known label in Los Angeles—Fly's label.

When he tried to ask a question, the goon had already departed. In his place, as though through a spell of transfiguration, stood the Coulter girl and her giddy face of smiles. She too held in her upraised hand a card, which caught the moon's glint and shimmered. Her other hand pointed to the object to bring unneeded emphasis upon it. The card, as far as Khalid could tell, was an ordinary hotel keycard. It read Grand Mbuji Hotel & Casino.

She said, "I'm going to save Max."

"Save us all," said Kiki.

SAVE ME Z. COULTER

SAVE ME Z. COULTER

Knees upon the ground. Gaze upon the light. Remove sunglasses and imagine a beautiful woman. Her name is a letter. Imagine wrists ankles legs and arched back. Lithe supple soft. Imagine a letter opener. Imagine an envelope. The words contained therein. My dearest Z. I have so often. Considered how to. Express my feelings toward you.

[They cut him out of the rosary.]

I sense in you. A kindred spirit. The first. Of my life. I believe you. Understand. My unique. Affliction. I believe you. Suffer too. Imagine these words. Writhe at their atrocity. Their shameful pathos. Imagine Maximillion Ackerman! Imagine Literary Agent Boston Massachusetts! Imagine Spirit of America! Imagine PEGASUS! Imagine coat rack, upon which he hangs.

[Together they form a rosary. He is cut out.]

She is sixteen years old. He cannot even pretend his affliction is important. It is only the expected character trait of a decrepit and filthy old man who has never been redeemed nor whom anyone would ever want to see redeemed a man who is. Mitchum Graves: "A man who is a comic sidekick." Andrew Hussie: "A man who is unreserved." Ian West: "..."

[Each name flows into the next. He alone is left out.]

The children love Ian West. The children love Maximillion Ackerman. When he is Ian West. Ian West is not a man. Ian West is an idea. Z. Coulter is an idea. Z. Coulter is a letter. "Thou whoreson zed." "A tailor made thee." If Z. is one, Maximillion is the other.

The privacy of the mind. Nobody need know. Z. never need know. Burn the letter. Contain the delusion. Within the mind. The wrists ankles legs and arched back. Hold them close. Touch only air. Tomorrow leave. Tomorrow never see her again. Tomorrow return. Massachusetts.

But Mitchum Graves touches those women, those girls, Mitchum Graves does everything, one folly of Maximillion Ackerman...! Long ago he learned. Never to be jealous. Of how the world treats those. Who are not him.

[Contemplate suicide.]

Massachusetts first.

[It will be special here.]

It does not deserve to be special.

["Imagine coat rack, upon which he hangs."]

A tailor made thee.

["Thou whoreson zed."]

She could salvage his loneliness. Return with him. Let them be tailored whoresons together. Imagine a home. Imagine a husband and wife. Imagine a single entity who loves him. Imagine tenderness.

[How does it feel when they called you a creep and you were always one anyway?]

Imagine interlaced hands. Imagine laughter. Imagine movies on the couch. Imagine friendship. Imagine companionship—

Imagine knock upon door. Except imagination unneeded. Rise. Fix dishabille. Sunglasses. Tie. Pants. Check check check. If they knocked. It must be her.

[Room service.]

Her I say!

[Smile.]

Yes smile. Yes yes yes. Open door.

Not her. Other girl. Sicily. Long dress buckle shoes ribbons. Hair in single knot. Alone.

[Supposed to get her badge.]

—Hello I am so sorry! I was so busy last night. I had unexpected trouble. I didn't intend to forget your badge. I'll get you one right now. Let's go to the front desk. Get you one right now.

—Oh no, Mr. Maximillion! I actually... I actually have something else to talk about. Ah! I understand you must be really busy, and I didn't want to bother you if it's too much of a hassle... I hope I didn't come at an inconvenient time?

So polite. An uncomfortable shuffle. Lowered eyes, toes tucked inward. The word. What's the word. Demure.

—The time isn't inconvenient. By no means is it inconvenient. Come in come in come in. Please come in. Please come in and talk to me my friend. You're my friend right.

—I'll be your friend, Mr. Maximillion. She entered. His friend. Sicily. Wait. Sicily—an island. Name too? Nobody is named Sicily. An island. What's her...? Oh. Cecily. Made sense. He's her friend now.

He sat. She stood. Shuffled. Clenched her wrist. Fidget fidget. Nervous. Afraid of Mr. Maximillion. Mr. Maximillion the pedophile. Afraid of what he thinks about her. Her name is

an island. The other name is a letter. "My mother is a fish." Ha ha ha ha ha! Faulkner. Now Faulkner. When one speaks of odd names. Names from YA Fantasy queries. "Dear Mr. Maximillion, [line break] Corporal Darl Vardaman is a 17-year space pilot with a mission: Restore the galactic confederacy [...] SKIES OF SARTORIS: THE NEBULA REACTOR is a 179,000 [!] word standalone novel with series potential." Treading water in a dying industry.

—Why not sit. You should sit. There's no reason to stand. Here sit on the bed. Not the bed. This chair is fine too.

Pull chair. She sat. She thanked him. Thank you, Mr. Maximillion. For a chair. She joined him. She linked her link of the rosary. Mr. Maximillion! She wanted to speak. To him.

—Thank you for being my friend, he said.

—Oh...! You're welcome.

High per capita ellipses. Demure! A precious treasure. Precious Isle of Cecily. Hidden. In sand.

—Mr. Maximillion, I, um, I actually wanted to talk to you about Z., if that's alright with you?

My friend the letter in the bottle message from my friend the island.

—You see, well, how should I put this. I think she's really concerned for you? She keeps talking about how you're in trouble. She says things like she needs to help you. I think she said she needed to save you?

Me.

Me? Mr. Maximillion? Maximillion Ackerman? Literary agent? PEGASUS?

She said. She needed. To save. Me.

Save me.

Smile. Smile wider. Smile, smile, smile. Don't stop smiling. Z. will save you. She has come to save you. She has come...! [Thank you Mr. Maximillion.]

She knows. She knows me. She understands me. Me! She knows I need to be saved. She knows that I. Am a descending spiral of wreckage. She knows. That I am. A coat hanging upon a rack. She knows a tailor made me. She knows I am treading water in the death rattle of a dying Ian West. She knows I am the lump in Ian West's throat. Ian! Ian West! My friend. He has fallen into the sea; he writes and I sell his works. I disseminate his soul across America. The Spirit of America. PEGASUS.

[Who is Ian West?]

He fell. To his knees. Seized Cecily's ankles. Bowed before her. Smile! Always smile. Tears erupting from his eyes. Filling his sunglasses. Aquarium orbs. Choked sobs. Gratitude. Love. Z. Coulter. Saving him. Him! An unworthy man. An imitation. A facsimile. His eyes are

billiard balls. All the art critics knew. Him! Save! Fingers hooked into Cecily's socks. Her pale buckle shoes. Toes tucked inward. Fidget. Save him! Who is Ian West. Who is Mr. Maximillion. Saved.

—I have to find her. I have to have her near me.

He stands. Staggers. Eyes so watery. Water and shade. Dual filters of his vision. Door—desk. Door! Open. Where? Her room? Must—

—Mr. Maximillion! Mr. Maximillion, wait!

Hit door. Pound door. Z.!

—Mr. Maximillion... Mr. Maximillion, she's not there.

Not—Where? Where?

—Mr. Maximillion, it's not good. That's what I'm trying to say. It's not good.

Not good. Not good that Z.—save him. Not good.

—How can it not be good. How can it not be good, Cecily? In what way could it. Possibly not be. The best thing. That someone in this world. Cares enough. To want to save. ME.

Cecily shirks. Afraid. Mr. Maximillion. Dangerous Mr. Maximillion. Idiot Mr. Maximillion. Hold hand out. Careful. Communicate: Mean no harm. No Cecily. Don't flee.

—Mr. Maximillion...

Mr. Maximillion.

—I think she has a... distorted perception. I think she's not seeing things clearly.

No. She sees. She must save me. Save me...!

—She thinks that, to save you... She thinks she needs to destroy Home Stuck.

Home. Stuck.

—Home Stuck.

—It's Mr. Hussie's story.

—*Homestuck*.

—She thinks Mr. Hussie is stealing your soul? I think. She thinks he's controlling you.

—Me. Mr. Maximillion?

—She said Max.

She said Max.

She said Max.

She said Max.

She said she said she said she said she said she said she said

Max.

—I want to help her, Mr. Maximillion, before she does something bad. She's not... You're not being controlled by Mr. Hussie, are you?

—Mr. Hussie. He's my friend. She said Max.

—Is it not you? Are you not Max?

—

—I'm so sorry, Mr. Maximillion. I had a misunderstanding... Oh no, I've made a mistake...

Not him. Not him. Not him.

[Selfish. Of course not.]

Why? Max? Why him? What does he need saved from? Hussie? Andrew Hussie? *Homestuck*?

—I don't understand anything, I'm so sorry for bothering you...

—No. Wait. She thinks Andrew Hussie stole Max's soul. That makes no sense. Why would she think that. What is she thinking. Destroy it? He worked so hard. He put his life into it. Destroy it?

—I, I want to stop her, Mr. Maximillion. Everyone will be so sad.

—Where is she now.

—Mr. Graves...

Oh God! She was tumbling. Down a dangerous tunnel. Oh God how had she gone from saving him. To herself needing saving. In mere seconds.

He had to save her.

[Save yourself.]

Untitled II

Untitled II

Why won't you clap for me?

Chapter 14: Rebirth of the Author

Final Day

Chapter 14: Rebirth of the Author

Z. Coulter woke on the final day of the convention, everything came together, everything made sense immediately. She checked her pocket to confirm she still had Mitchum Graves's key, she had it. She needed nothing else, the plan made perfect sense, she knew exactly how to destroy *Homestuck* and reclaim Max.

Outside her room, it was Cecily and Maximillion.

"Hi, Z.!" said Cecily.

"Z. it's come to my attention that you've gotten strange notions in your head I think it's time we slowed down and talked about this as an adult I can see things from a perspective that children like yourself may ignore as such you should listen to what I have to say."

Cecily had ratted. Z. wanted to throttle that silly girl, she had *trusted* her with top secret and highly sensitive information and now Maximillion, one of Hussie's chiefest goons, was on the prowl. The pegasus in Hussie's horse gimmick. Graves, too, must have some relationship to horses—the ponied arms.

"I'm uh, gonna get breakfast," she said.

"Z., would you mind if we come too? I don't want to be bothersome, but it's important." A shiny spanking new convention badge swayed from her neck, a bribe for good behavior.

"Uh well actually I'm gonna meet Kiki so I do mind." She ducked between them and ran for the elevator. She got to it way before them but had to wait and they caught up.

"Now Z. first off I'd like you to know that my friend Hussie is an upstanding gentleman of the finest order he works hard and dedicates his life to making others happy in many ways he embodies the ideal that all artists and authors strive for and his presence at this convention is a testament to that fact for instance my client Ian West refuses to attend these types of events and I believe that's because his fans have destroyed so many parts of him that he clings shadelike to his own land afraid that the remaining corporeal elements of him will be divested and nothing will remain ha ha ha ha ha."

"Mr. Hussie worked really hard and would be really sad if you ruined his work."

This stupid elevator! She seethed under the unfathomable slowness of the blinking light and gave up and stormed for the stairwell.

Maximillion's polished shoes echoed sharp clacks behind her. "Your friend Maxwell to say that his soul has been stolen regardless of by whom well that doesn't really make sense now

does it Z. I mean I am a man who believes in many things that could be empirically disproven I believe in pegasi I believe you can clap to bring faeries back to life but Hussie is not a malicious entity who has performed a satanic ritual."

"*Faerie Endless* isn't real life, Z." Cecily had not kept up with them, her voice filtered from a distant level. "Lu and Rel and Jolly are just characters..."

Z. took the stairs three, four at a time, Maximillion kept up, he assaulted her with more bullshit, he said stuff about how sometimes people change when they grow, they seem distant, he said it without any punctuation, he babbled about that Ian West, he talked about how Ian West changed and how Maximillion reconciled such-and-such perspective with such-and-such you get the idea, a whole lotta bullshit, and because Maximillion said it Z. knew he knew jack dick about whatever he was saying. He missed the point entirely, it didn't matter if Hussie meant it or not, it mattered that Max changed and *Homestuck* changed him.

The lobby teemed. Many of the big attractions had departed for the final day, but enough fandom remained to muster a festering mob.

Among the horde, Z. ducked Maximillion nigh instantaneously and doubled back to the stairs. She wondered if Hussie hadn't left his room yet. No, the convention had started, and his punctiliousness had remained consistent thus far. But if Maximillion alerted Hussie to the plot...

On the way up she rounded a corner and knocked her head into Cecily, who she had entirely forgotten. Cecily fell back and alternatively clutched her forehead and her stomach even though Z. didn't touch her stomach. "Ah, sorry about bumping into you," said Cecily. Her mouth scrunched into a grimace.

Z. scrounged her pitilessness but found it no match for Cecily's cuteness, so she extended a hand and helped Cecily to her feet. "You look real bad, how hard I hit you?"

"Oh no, we didn't hit hard at all, I'm perfectly alright in that regard. It's my, um, stomach, you see..."

Gross! Z. continued onward and Cecily hobbled after.

"Oh, Z., please reconsider what you're doing." She panted for breath at every pause. "Why don't we talk to your friend Maxwell together? Everyone has trouble communicating. If we all sat down and really talked everything out, we'll reach some kind of resolution?"

"Cecily, I can tell you're in a lot of pain," said Z. "Stay here and rest and leave this to me."

But Cecily kept going and they reached Hussie's floor before Z. could put enough distance between them. Cecily provided no physical threat to Z.'s ability to execute her plan, so Z. didn't bother about her too much. She peeked into the hall in case Hussie's legions had gathered, but the hall was empty save a dumbwaiter with towels and linens. She better keep an eye out for room service, what a way to boondoggle a plan if a maid barged in at an inopportune time.

She reached the door to Graves's room. Hussie's room was right beside.

"Wait, Z., please," said Cecily. "It's not a good thing."

Z. slid Mitchum's keycard into the slot. The light above the handle turned red to green and a deep mechanism clicked. She opened the door, slid inside, and shut the door behind before Cecily reached her. She entered a languid space, a cool and crepuscular cavern, embowered from daylight by the soft flutter of drawn curtains. A ceiling fan swirled a lazy revolution, clothing and detritus caked the carpet. A pungent whiff of vomit and ash circled the stagnant air. A shape breathed within. Her eyes by degrees adjusted, an object rose and fell on the bed, sprawled and elongated, a long vein parched for blood. She hadn't considered *Graves* might not have left for the convention, she recoiled from this critical oversight, always something like this occurred, always she missed something. No, it was fine, she need only be quiet.

The bathroom door was unlocked on Mitchum's end. The next worry was that Hussie had learned that the doors locked on both sides. She put her face to the bathroom tile and peered under the crack into Hussie's room, the lights were off. She opened the unlocked door.

Hussie was not inside. A silent bed, a silent desk, a silent laptop and the blinking metal box beside it: the external hard drive. She shut the door, a sudden urgency filled her as she breached Hussie's placid chamber, a time limit appeared above her head.

Homestuck had three copies. The website, the computer, the hard drive. She had both the computer and hard drive, she could destroy them at leisure. The hard part was the website, but she had seen the website before, it was the shittiest piece of shit in the history of shit, it looked like some prefab forum configuration Hussie purchased for twenty bucks, the kind most of her *Faerie Endless* fansites used. Those things had no security, the Admin CP held the keys to the castle, and they had switches to erase all content in case you stopped wanting to pay the monthly fee. You need only the administrator account.

She sat in Hussie's seat and opened the laptop. It blared into her face with a pure blue sign in screen. Believe it or not, she had already considered that Hussie's computer would require a password, she did not freak at this development. Without a pause, although her fingers slipped on the keyboard and she had to start over about four times, she typed: unicorn.

The password you entered is incorrect, the screen said.

Alright. Fair enough. She typed, with fewer errors: unicorn1.

The password you entered is incorrect, the screen said. It added: *If you enter your password incorrectly again, you will be locked out.*

She had not considered this whole "locked out" thing, she had a rather long list of possible passwords to try, if she knew it would lock her out she wouldn't have fucked around with vanilla unicorn, passwords ALWAYS require a number, she checked over her shoulder at the silent bathroom door.

She typed: un1corn. Before she hit Enter, she erased it and typed: Un1corn, with the capital letter.

The screen locked, the password bar disappeared. Her hands froze in hooks around her temples, she stared wide-eyed at this offensive piece of technology, this antiquated bullshit, it wasn't even that old but she hated it. She got up, took a step, sat down again. She clicked keys, clicked the mouse. Nothing happened, the screen remained frozen. She scanned the laptop and found the power button. She held it until the laptop powered down, waited not enough seconds before pushing it again, and resorted to frantic mashing until the laptop powered on.

It took at least FIVE MINUTES for it to get through its startup bullcrap and return to the sign in screen.

She cracked her knuckles and her neck and got down to some serious hacking/password-guessing. The more minutes passed, the more exposed she became, the more dread mounted. How long until Maximillion alerted Hussie? She saw it: Hussie on the elevator, flanked by Maximillion, the numbers rising... She leaned over the keyboard and typed un1corn, no capital this time. Wait. Did she type it with or without the capital the first time? She hit Enter before she psyched herself into a frenzy.

The password you entered is incorrect.

Crap, crap, totally off, nothing to do with unicorn, she ruined everything, if she had thought harder she could have... she didn't know, done something, spied on Hussie, watched him type it, she wiped her forehead although the room was too cold to sweat. Hussie wouldn't put a number in a word would he? Or would he double down on whimsy and go with un1c0rn? She hadn't tried straitlaced Unicorn1 with capital.

Her fingers graced the keyboard. She closed her eyes and tried to feel some kid's movie mojo magic. She tried to summon a faerie charm, the kind of Peter Pan trash that lazy writers fisted into their turgid tales to explain the manifestation of utter horseshit. She typed: Unicorn1.

The password you entered is—

She immediately typed: un1c0rn.

The screen changed and her finger already went for the power button when a series of icons blinked onto a background from an old cult video game that Z. never played. She immediately hit the ground and rolled, she kicked her feet against the ground, she opened her mouth and uttered a silent scream. She reclaimed control of her mind and body and climbed back onto the chair.

Leet hacker Z. Coulter opened a web browser and rifled through Hussie's bookmarks, which were banal to the point of incredulity. The guy had Google bookmarked, did he not understand computers or did he do it as an ironic joke on himself? She found what she wanted fast enough: a bookmark to the Admin Control Panel for .com, the site *Homestuck* was on.

The CP prompted her to enter another password, the same one worked. The octogenarian interface assaulted her with its boxy design and characterless font. It had a suite of options for modification and management of the entire website and its content. She basked in the

glory of this hideous piece of Hitlerware, spurred to action only by the certainty that fate would deliver Hussie back to his room at this precise moment. The control panel settings had esoteric, hieroglyphic labels ("Portal Manager," "Topic AutoTools," "Shoutbox") and nothing leapt out as a big blinking "delete everything" button.

She clicked the options, at first by what seemed most likely to be pertinent, then by starting from the top and moving down because it became clear the option to delete everything would be nestled in the bumfucked realm of the CP. The top-down approach didn't take long, she found something useful in the generic "Categories" category, it listed all of the subsections of the website: News section, Shop section, Forums section, New Reader? section—and the Story section.

Add Subsection. Edit Settings. Hide. Delete.

She pointed the cursor at Delete. The cursor quivered.

She remembered Max. His costume. With the scythe. On his knees before his bed. His expression in his room when she first found him. Blank, zombielike, deathly. Surrounded by a heap of shredded papers. His books, his own stories. *Homestuck* wormed into him, like a taper, it sucked up his substance, it drained him of his essence, his Maxness. It replaced the void with... with...

She clicked Delete.

The gravity of the situation dispersed when a message popped up warning her that this option deleted the section and all content within it permanently. It asked her to confirm if she wanted to proceed by retyping her password. She typed it and, because she had kinda forgotten which unicorn it had been and was not one hundred percent sure it would work, pressed the button without much hesitation.

It worked. The section disappeared from the list of sections. It was not there, only the other sections. She created a void now, inside Hussie.

She navigated to his bookmark for the site itself, but the story still existed, she could access any page from the archive. She cleared Hussie's cache and refreshed. The archive links now went to 404 errors.

Page not found.

Dead. Gone.

She next went to Hussie's file directory, but it became immediately clear that deleting his obscene promulgation of files and folders and shortcuts and copies was a herculean task. Besides, she had heard somewhere that deleting files on a computer didn't really delete them, that there was a way to retrieve stuff, when her mom watched forensic science murder mystery stuff they always caught the murderer that way (or with DNA evidence, or because the murderer was always the spouse). She would have to destroy the laptop entirely, smash it and its microchips and data processors, and the external hard drive too. Her original plan had been to fill the bathtub and dump them in. However, not only did the bath risk waking

Graves, but the hard drive had a thick sheath of plastic enveloping its inner metal carapace and she had no way to know if water would penetrate.

The only blunt object in the room was the chair, but it'd work. Actually, slamming a chair against the ground might wake Graves too. She also realized that taking down the site meant it wouldn't be long before one of Hussie's fandom figured things out and directed Hussie to the problem. She racked her brain for—wait! Why stand around here? She could take the laptop and hard drive both, get out of the hotel, hide in some alley—the burnt remains of the concert place last night—and then dispose of them. Yes, good.

She ripped the laptop and the hard drive out their plugs and exited, keeping her head low but wishing she had brought a backpack or something to hide them in. She expected Hussie and a million angry cosplayers, but other than Cecily the hallway was empty.

"Oh no, Z., please. Those are someone else's property. He'll be so sad if you break them... Please, Z., will you please talk to me? We can talk about everything."

At the end of the hallway, she hit the elevator button, only to think that she probably shouldn't use the elevator, it'd be more inconspicuous to take the stairs. The moment she had this thought about the stairs, as if his mind had attuned to hers and throbbed with the same impulses, Maximillion emerged from the stairwell door.

"Now Z. I understand you may feel strongly about this—" He was already talking before the door fully opened, before anything but a gilded sleeve glimmered, "—but let's not do drastic things I understand your friends are important and you don't want to lose them and that's a good notion always stick by your friends even if they don't stick by you but what you're doing will affect more than your friends it'll affect an entire world it'll affect a man who does not deserve to be affected in such a way please hand over the computer." He held his hand to her.

Z. wrapped the laptop and the hard drive in her arms and twisted her body away from him, tucking her head over the objects to cover all easily-grabbed edges. Cecily limped from behind, her face draining of color, transforming into a literal zombie, a shambling corpse.

"I'm your friend, too, Z.," she said. "I care about you and don't want bad things to happen to you. We can share our user names online and keep in contact."

"I care about you too Z. you actually mean a lot to me I know that may sound strange especially coming from an older man like myself but I think you understand me in a way few others understand and I also think I understand you and your impulses it's so easy to ascribe the things we don't like in our lives to distant and nebulous forces and to strike at those forces to avoid striking at the tender segments closest to us but your friends I think you may consider that people when they grow older change and our stagnant visions of placid pasts don't always maintain form they are at times subject to the forces of entropy."

She sidestepped between them, sidling closer to Cecily, who seemed less of a threat. "I know Max changed," she said. "I know that exactly, what do you even think I'm doing here?"

Maximillion smiled. Cecily inched near.

The elevator doors opened. Frederick Roddlevan stood behind them, a bogeyman in black trench coat, his hair completely white, he blinked at the scene before him and moved with a sudden urgency.

"You, I found you." He stepped into the hall, between her and Maximillion. He looked around, considered Maximillion, his hands were gaunt, his face full of wrinkles. "No crowd this time. You reprobate, do you know what I've suffered? Mother shook me to pieces. I've stood in this elevator for months because she knew you'd use it eventually." He pointed at Maximillion. "You, leave."

"Sir I believe you're intruding on a private discussion if anyone should leave it's—"

Frederick Roddlevan opened his box. It contained the sixteen-piece Cutco Knife Company premium set of kitchen and carving knives, sized in four different increments with eight different models of blades for a unique and specialized cutting experience. He drew from the grid of containers Model 013, one of the largest, with a lean serrated edge, and pointed it at Maximillion.

"I'm not doing this anymore," he said. "I'm not wasting anymore of my life in this forgotten realm. Get out of here."

"Oh please, you're gonna cut us? Get a life," said Z. Cecily held Z. by the shoulders and trembled.

Frederick tossed the knife into the air, waited for it to revolve, and caught it by the handle as it came down. He lurched forward with surprising agility and seized her wrist with his free hand, pulling her close while dangling the knife overhead. Cecily shrieked and fell away. Maximillion started forward with his irrepressible smile as though this situation would be resolved by an endless tirade of unbroken words but Frederick sliced the knife laterally behind, only just missing Maximillion's flapping gold tie.

"I said get back, this is business of family."

Z. tried to wrench away from Frederick's grip, his hand frigid and clammy, but it tightened around the bone like a vice. She winced, she swung a feeble kick, but she buffeted only the flowing tail of his trench coat.

"Get off me, get off me."

"Tell me where Maxwell is you insipid devil, you shrill succubus!"

"Help her, Mr. Maximillion," said Cecily on the floor.

Maximillion, the tip of the blade aimed at his heart, smiled, took a step back, and then swiftly egressed into the stairs. The door swung shut behind him.

"Oh, fantastic," said Z. "So much for that kindred spirit bullshit, you COWARD!" But he was gone, Frederick's sallow cheekbones loomed in her view. He released her wrist and shoved

her hard, so that she lost balance and fell on the ground, on Cecily's ankle. Cecily pulled it away and drew herself against the wall.

Frederick fell atop Z., the trench coat swallowed her whole, his musky breath heated her face with dead skin cells, he dangled the knife over her forehead. "Where is he? Why do I keep finding you and never him? Where is he, where is he, where is he?"

"You gonna stab me? You gonna murder me if I don't say? And her too, and Maximillion? They saw you, what will you do?"

He had no immediate response and his aged face looked so hideous she hocked in the back of her throat and spat in his eye. He reared back with a horrendous indignant growl and fell again upon her, grabbing her free wrist and holding his serrated knife edge to the back of it. "Oh I'll cut you," he said. "Oh I'll cut you. Tell me you mongoloid, tell me you herpes virus!"

"Get off of her, mister," Cecily whispered.

"I said TELL ME."

"I said... get off of her!" Cecily charged him, she pulled feebly against his arms, she strained her legs and body but Frederick did not budge, he swung a fist into her gut and sent her reeling, she began to cry.

Z. got angry, she got real mad, she wanted to shove her thumbs into Max's turgid brother's eyes and gouge them until the blood ran down his sockets, but he pressed his weight against her, his legs scuffled against hers, and he dragged the knife across the back of her wrist. The line split with blood and she bit her lip until it bled too, if she screamed loud enough Graves or someone would come, but then they would see her with Hussie's computer. Frederick shoved her bleeding wrist against her, the blood smeared across her neck and chest, on the shirt Kiki gave her, then he pulled it back to where she could see and put the edge of the knife below the first cut.

"Tell me where he is. Tell me where!"

Cecily staggered to her feet, shaky and drunken, and crawled across the wall.

"Where are you going?" He barked at her. "Where do you think you're going?" And she went still.

If she gave up Max—but she could not abandon him to his madman brother and the hidden shadow of his mother, she understood these were the very people he fled from, why he came here, why he gave up his soul to Hussie, why he allowed himself to change utterly; this family—that affected him more than she ever had—her eyes widened in epiphany, someone had affected Maxwell Roddlevan more than she.

"Never."

"Never," he popped the bubble of the word in her mouth, "You say never...!" He cut again. She screamed, the skin of her wrist peeled away in bloody chunks, wallpaper in an

Amityville house—starring—she thought of no stars.

"Never still?" He held it to her wrist again, and then he became plaintive, almost despairing. "I only want answers. I only want to go home, don't you see? I only want to leave this place after so long and for HER to leave me alone... Tell me, you sprite, you faerie! Tell me why I can't find him."

Her head rolled against the carpet. She heaved for breath. She mustered a smile, she said, "Because he's dressed like a girl."

He leaned his 64-bit face closer. "What?"

"BECAUSE HE'S DRESSED LIKE A FUCKING GIRL!"

Frederick Roddlevan stared blankly. He blinked, he looked from Z. to Cecily. He lifted himself a little, his chest left hers, he straddled her in the center of the hallway.

He laughed. He tilted back his head and spouted a steady stream of cackles, choked by some clot in his throat, cloaked in splinters. The sound bounced down the corridor, it bounced under the doors, it never ended, in his eyes he believed it, he felt foolish for believing anything else, he laughed as much at his own foolishness as at his brother.

As he laughed, another sound joined him. A long and steady note, distant, growing, something Z. could not discern, like a buzz, a single note stretched:

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA"

The stairwell door flew open. Frederick Roddlevan turned as Maximillion sprinted out, swung a golf club high, blotted a light fixture, and brought it down in a perfect arch. The metal collided against bone. Frederick lurched off her and into the wall, where he bounced and fell into a silent, immobile heap.

Maximillion held the club between his feet and panted. "I did it I did it I did it I did it Z. I did it didn't I do it I did it—"

Z. rolled to her feet, slid past Maximillion, and dashed for the stairwell. Her wrist sang with pain but she made it into the stairs and began to leap down, five steps at a time, bouncing off walls at the bends for momentum. Maximillion's voice chased her: "Why Z. why are you I saved you saved you Z. aren't you proud Z. come back Z." His footsteps clacked behind her, his voice remained steadily close, even as she attempted to jump entire half-flights, even as she rolled and scraped her ruined wrist and scuffed the laptop. He kept at her heels, she chanced a glance over her shoulder to see him right behind her, his golden smiling sunglasses face pogoing like an arcade enemy, he took every single step but he moved with frightening efficiency. Her skin scrawled with cuts and bruises, she felt like a bag of bones rolling down these stairs, the ground floor rose to meet her.

He followed her into the lobby, the crowd moved in long thick strands, shook like cords of yarn. She swerved in search of Hussie or his minions or her innumerable foes, she must have slowed because Maximillion's hand fell upon her shoulder and he leaned close and said:

"Come with me far away together come with me."

They stopped beside the Mbuji colossus. "What do you mean?"

He seized her hands, her blood smeared his cuff. "I mean well I don't mean I don't want to be strange I know I can say strange things and appear a dangerous man I think we can be together I don't mean romantically I just mean together we have a connection please tell me you've felt it please tell me please."

The determination of the previous minutes blipped, his smile struck a tenderness inside her, a tenderness desperate for someone, anyone to want her—Z. Coulter—to want to be with her, spend time with her. That was why she did this, right? And why Maximillion came after her. A pang of remorse infected her, she abandoned Cecily, who also wanted to be her friend, both of them wanted to be kind to her and share her life. Friends. What a friend meant. Kiki said something earlier: friends weren't people who liked the same game, the same book, the same story. There had to be something more. She took in Maximillion, the disheveled suit, the loosened tie, the tussled hair, the strained smile. She saw a sad and lonely man. A man spurned, insulted, trounced, a man who others made into a joke, a man who helped make himself a joke in a last desperate hope that those who already treated him as one might at least accept him for his acceptance of the role, and who for his pains received only further condemnation.

She looked down at the laptop, the hard drive in her arms. If she destroyed these, destroyed *Homestuck*, Max would not love her—no, the opposite. He would despise her, revile her. He would declare her his sworn enemy. He would do everything to hurt her.

She...

...wanted that.

She wanted him to hate her, if that meant he no longer ignored her. Much as Maximillion must have known, deep down, that dressing in gold and speaking so fast and driving his car would make Hussie or Graves or that unseen, phantasmic Ian West hate him. But a hated object becomes a necessary object, a thing to be touched and interacted with, even if crushed and killed. Crushed and killed rather than discarded and abandoned; and she knew, most of all, that neither he nor her knew how to make the others love them. She knew that the task of being loved was so impossibly distant as to be unachievable; but the task of being hated at least she could reach.

"Forget about that Z. forget everything you don't need to do this for him or for anyone you can find those who love you it's not impossible I know it's not."

"And how," she said, "How do you know."

Maximillion only smiled, and then he stopped smiling.

"Because I love you," he said.

She felt like a filthy, repulsive hypocrite because she did not love him back, she did not love him at all, and she did not want his love.

(Cecily would love her too, she thought, but Cecily loved everyone unconditionally, like a saint, and when all are loved the same it is the same as being ignored. Which meant, of course, it wasn't love she craved, which was why she was so fine with achieving Max's hatred; she wanted attention.)

(When it came down to it she was a crying baby who wanted attention, and because of her selfishness she deserved that attention in the form of hate.)

"Z.," said someone.

Cal manifested from around the Mbuji statue. He held his hands in the pockets of his camouflage jacket, his sunglasses tucked into another pocket on the breast. Soot caked his face and ash layered his shoulders. "I'm looking for Kiki. She won't answer her phone. Where is she?"

Z. didn't know.

"Well, when you find her." It was an unusual Cal, his voice was calm, his eyes did not rise to meet her. His hands kept spreading the folds of his jacket through the pockets. "Tell her I can't take her home."

"What?" said Z. "Are you mad at her? Why?" She took advantage of his reserved attitude and stepped forward aggressively. "What right do you have to be mad at her? After she follows you around for your stupid band practice and stokes your damn rap ego all the time? And you're gonna ditch her?" She wasn't even upset that it also meant HER ride back home was ditching her, she had already accepted she would be returning to Denver in a body bag. "You don't DESERVE to be mad at Kiki."

Cal went a long time without saying anything. Maximillion's smile weighed on Z.'s nape.

"I am," he said, "Not mad at Kiki. I want you to tell her that, Z. Make sure she understands it. If anyone can do it, it's you."

"If you got business with her, sort it out with her, that's common sense. After your bull about discipline you'll flake so easily, Cal?"

Cal flinched away, he blended into the shadow of the Mbuji, a vivid chameleon. "I understand. I understand that." He manifested again. "I am moving onward. To Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles?"

"An opportunity has arisen. I intend to take it to its logical conclusion. I must go onward, to Los Angeles."

"City of Smog," said Maximillion.

"City of Fiction," said Cal. "It doesn't matter what it's the city of. It's too close for me to turn back now. I'm going."

She didn't care where Cal went, Los Angeles or Timbuktu or Kathmandu. From over Cal's shoulder she espied the tower's exit, a long stretch of double doors enameled in gold and late morning sunlight. She also saw people moving through the crowd, a bustle rising, a commotion spreading near the convention entrance. "Whatever, sure, we'll figure something out asshole," hoping to dismiss him, but Cal lingered with that same guilty skulk, she regretted calling him out for flaking.

"I am truly apologetic," said Cal.

"Then tell her yourself, she's in her room." Anything to get rid of him, she felt exposed standing here with Hussie's stuff, with Maximillion lurking at her back, with the voices rising at the far end.

"I checked the room a few minutes ago, nobody answered the door."

"Oh she's in there," said Z., moving for the exit. "She's moody lately, her period you know, just scream it through the door."

"It's not her menstrual cycle," said Cal, "But alright."

Mercifully, he left. Z. zoomed forward, the wide paneled doors gleamed with obliterating light. People were shouting now, all around, she folded her body over the computer and hard drive. Her legs shuffled shuffled shuffled as fast as possible without attracting attention, then she stopped caring about attention. Heads bobbed among the crowd, bodies displaced. Maximillion remained at her back. The exit was so close—right there—

Then every glass door opened at once and the fifty costumed freaks emerged. Their arms shot at her. Fingers pointed from every trigonometric angle. The crowd at her side parted and more appeared, the costumes were so disparate and incoherent they could belong to only one fandom, and sure enough at their fore appeared Red!Maximillion and the frost-haired scythe girl—Max.

She had nowhere to go, they blocked the way forward and swarmed at her right, Max did not point but he opened his mouth to speak and he said: "That's her. She has it."

Z. bolted the way she came from, past the Mbuji statue, and everyone went insane in unison, Red!Maximillion hurtled at her and swung his sword but before he connected the regular Maximillion intercepted it with his club, the sword smashed in pieces. A hand snatched Z.'s shirt, she span to break the hold, caromed off the Mbuji pedestal, people pushed and shoved and fell, someone screamed, hotel staff rushed into the mix, Z. dipped beneath the fracas, she had no thoughts but to run.

The Homestucks closed on her, forming a solid wall that swept laterally across the lobby. Max swept past the dueling Maximillions and raised his scythe, his miniskirt flapping around his bare, immaculate thighs, his frosty wig's long strands trailing behind him. "DON'T YOU DARE," he shouted, in shrill falsetto.

She hit the door to the stairwell and ratcheted it open, her body whipped uncontrolled from these external forces working upon it, Red! Maximillion overtook Max and came at her with another sword. She swung the laptop and clobbered him in the face the moment he entered range, and the next moment real Maximillion came out of nowhere and butted him in the gut with the handle of his club, he fell back clutching his stomach.

Maximillion made it into the stairwell behind her, she led him up the first few flights, but soon he passed her, his long adult legs propelling him insane amounts of stairs with each leap. They put distance between themselves and the Homestucks, their numbers turned to their disadvantage as they funneled through the narrow enclosure of the doorway, and as she looked over the railing she saw them two, three flights below. If she dumped the laptop and hard drive over the edge, let them plummet twelve stories to the linoleum below, that would do the trick, but a paranoid fear gripped her that any of the innumerable Homestucks below, perhaps Max himself, would reach out their arms and improbably catch the terminal velocity missiles, or else they would pile their bodies atop one another to soften the fall, and besides the drop might break the laptop but the microchips inside might survive. Plus the hard drive looked like a formidable tortoise of a device, too many doubts, she needed a plan.

From around a bend Maximillion cried out. She reached him to find him locked in combat with Frederick Roddlevan, transformed into a ghoul, his eye sockets empty, his scalp a scarred husk. He swung Cutco Knife Company Model 101 in a pendulous motion, working off centrifugal force as he descended on Maximillion. The two collapsed toward Z., she cleaved to the railing and they rolled past her, although Maximillion's golf club lashed out and cracked her on the ankle. The pain was astronomical, dynamite erupted in her shoe, she screamed and the laptop and hard drive dropped against the stairs.

Maximillion and Frederick tumbled to a plateau between flights, a level square that served as junction. Frederick was on top of Maximillion, he lifted his knife over his head, it shone red with blood.

She leapt from her place on the stairs and landed on Frederick's back. She grabbed his neck, his ears, his hair, anything she could hold, she jabbed her shoes into his back. She leaned her weight and forced him to bring down his knife against the wall. It scratched across the rough-hewn cement and her knuckles dragged alongside it, losing their skin. The knife drove into the ground in the corner of the platform.

"I've waited thirty years for this," said Frederick Roddlevan. He flung her off his back with a toss of his arm. Beside her was the laptop. Frederick lifted off Maximillion and came after her with the knife. She grabbed the laptop and lifted it, the knife slammed through, the point jutted out and pricked her chest. "Why, why are you doing this to me?!" His face loomed close. It looked like a skeleton.

Maximillion rose and wrapped his arms around Frederick. Blood ran down the side of his golden jacket. But his strength was nearly superhuman, he lifted Frederick off the ground, trench coat and all, and Frederick's boots kicked in the open air.

"Go Z.," said Maximillion. "Go!" He leaned back and fell with Frederick down the stairs.

His descent was stopped by the foremost Homestucks, who rounded the corner in time to be bowled over. Z. held the laptop already (the knife remained embedded within it) but she had no idea where the hard drive had gone, she noticed it several steps above and limped to it. With it in hand she continued her ascent.

With nothing left to eat, the faces in her life turned on themselves, they bit into each other's flesh, and she—ha ha!—she had feasted on so many of them without even realizing. Now they turned to feast on her.

A part of her, not laughing, said: I don't want to die...

She limped onto the floor where her room was, by which point her ankle felt better. Cal stood before her door, knocking and pounding.

"No answer in five minutes," said Cal. "You're certain she's here?"

She brushed past him, leaned against the door, angled Hussie's equipment under one arm, and fished for her key. She found it in the third pocket she checked, slid it in, and fell into the room. She tried to shut the door fast but Cal crammed his body between the jamb and wasted five precious seconds following her.

"WHAT," said Cal.

Near the foot of Z.'s bed was a small desk with a chair, similar to the one in Hussie's room. Z. dropped the laptop and the hard drive onto the carpet. Then, she pulled the chair from under the desk and lifted it. She tried to lift it over her head, but it was unexpectedly heavy, and she was unexpectedly weak, so she only managed to hoist it to her waist before she slammed down with full force atop the laptop. The casing, already perforated by Frederick's knife, split clean in two. A second slam drove the chair legs through the machinery, and the third caused the corpse to belch tubing, wires, microchips, and other computer junk. She howled as she lifted the chair again and brought it down, and then she did it again, and again, and again, striking with extreme prejudice every intact bit of electronic and even a lot that weren't intact—who knew what fragment of supercell was needed to reconstruct it? Who knew what particle device contained all nine thousand pages of text, image, video, video game, and whatever other mixed media Hussie integrated into his all-devouring uber entertainment? She swung until her muscles ached, until her breath tore ragged out her throat, until her perspiration dribbled down her forehead, and then, only once she was certain of the laptop's complete annihilation, she turned to the external hard drive, the final component of the trilogy. A small box with rounded edges, coated in a translucent plastic case. She nailed it with a chair leg, but the chair rebounded and knocked her back, the plastic case did not even dent. Undaunted, she lifted the chair again and brought it down, but the exact same result transpired, its effects exaggerated as she tripped and flopped onto her bed.

Only then did she notice that Cal was struggling with Kiki in the center of the room, and that Kiki was hanging suspended by the neck from the chandelier.

She stared at this display, dumbfounded. The tips of Kiki's toes dangled an inch from the floor, Cal had his arms around her and tried to prop her up. She was held by a wound rope of bedsheets. These images entered Z.'s mind, she blinked, then at once she hurled the chair off

her and snatched Frederick's knife from the ruins of the laptop. She leapt onto the bed, bounced off its springs, and swung the knife at the sheets. The blade cleaved through, Kiki's body dropped, Cal caught her and laid her on the bed. Z. continued her airborne trajectory, knocked against the chandelier, something on her shirt caught, the chandelier came crashing down. Z. came crashing down too. Her upper body hit the bed but the lower body got entangled with the wreckage of the chandelier, a shard of crystal sliced her shin. Cal got hit in the back of the head and fell over. The only one relatively unmurdered was Kiki, but Kiki still had the noose around her neck. Z. kicked and squirmed against the jingly tinkly crystals until she was free and then she went to Kiki's side. Her eyes were closed, Z. trembled with the knife until she managed to cut the noose, it formed a red welt around Kiki's neck, Z. chucked the knife aside and tried to think what to do, she put her hands on Kiki's chest and pushed, nothing happened, she leaned close to resuscitate her with air, but before their lips touched Cal tossed her aside and did what Z. had been about to do, a red gash on the back of his head that trickled through his hair and down the nape of his neck.

He pushed her chest, he breathed into her mouth. He pushed her chest, he breathed into her mouth. He pushed her chest, he breathed into her mouth. Z. watched.

Kiki opened her eyes.

"Oh God," said Cal. "Thank you God."

Kiki rolled her head to the side and sighed. Cal fell to his knees and pressed his face to the mattress. Z. watched.

"Why," said Z. Cal clasped his hands over his head and shook them, like he was rolling dice.

Kiki sighed again and turned her face the other way.

"Why," said Z. She crawled onto the bed and grabbed Kiki by the shoulders, she shook her. "Why? Why!"

Kiki opened her mouth to speak and coughed instead. She closed her mouth, avoided Z.'s eyes, and opened it.

"I waited until I heard you opening the door."

Z. didn't understand what this meant at first. But Cal roared upward, his face enflamed with terrible furor, his voice a belligerent croaking howl. He swung a fist through the air, he turned on a heel, he scooped the first item nearby—Hussie's hard drive—and pitched it directly over Z.'s head. It struck the window with a reverberating crack and bounced back between the beds. Cal ran at the wall and slammed his foot through the plaster. He swung back and kicked the fallen chandelier. All the while he howled.

Z. understood what Kiki meant.

"You..."

"Yeah, I know. I'm terrible, aren't I?" She laughed. "That's the whole point."

"I don't understand," said Z., "Where did this come from?"

"Where did this come from," said Kiki. "I wonder."

"This is how you get back at me?" said Cal. "With this petty, this petty *act*? This childish, irresponsible, dangerous, petty petty petty act! Because of my *justified* scorn...!"

"It really has little to do with you," said Kiki. "I did it because I'm a terrible person."

"Petulance. Contemptible petulance."

Z. tried to understand. She thought and thought while Cal raged and Kiki sighed. She stared at Kiki and tried to understand and said:

"Everyone forgot about you. You were so lonely."

Kiki blinked. She looked at Z. "No dear. No, don't get into this, it's over your head."

But Z. thought her head was on the level, she thought this thing was knocking her head off her shoulders. "You didn't want to be forgotten. You wanted them to look at you, to care about you."

"Don't indulge her," said Cal. "Don't indulge the brat, you have to treat her harshly. If you reinforce her she'll keep doing it, she'll—"

"If you wanted people to feel bad for you, you wouldn't have told us immediately that you faked it." Z. seized Kiki's hand with both of hers and held it close. "You would have felt bad if we felt sorry for you, you would have felt guilty. So you wanted us to hate you, that was your plan, you wanted us to hate you because then you could feel better about yourself for receiving the hate you think you deserve." Z. peered inside Kiki and into the murky depths of her soul and saw her own face reflected in that black pool, she understood, she knew! "You want to beat yourself up, you want to be beaten up, because you don't think you deserve better but you don't want to be forgotten. That's it, isn't it? That's exactly it!"

Kiki stared at her. She sighed a third time. "Z., you're the type of child who claps to bring the faerie back to life."

"So what if I am, what does that mean, what does that have to do with anything?" said Z.

"What does that have to do with you and what you want and what you think of yourself? Kiki, I love you, I love you so much Kiki, even though sometimes I hate you, even though sometimes you're a bitch, even though—"

"Shut up!" said Kiki. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"Don't reinforce her," said Cal, who knew nothing.

"It doesn't matter, you're my friend, you're my friend despite the bad things, I do bad things too, we can do bad things together and be friends, we're two people out of seven billion, we don't have to be paradigms of virtue, and we can be friends and support and love each other."

"Seek self-betterment instead," said Cal. "Always strive to improve."

"Not if it KILLS YOU!" said Z.

"It won't kill anyone."

"Z., please don't spin this into a positive thing," said Kiki. "It makes me feel like an asshole for taking advantage of your naïveté."

"It's not my naïveté, if it was that how could I understand exactly what you're doing? I see what you're doing and I ACCEPT YOU DESPITE IT, do you not understand?" She leaned very close to Kiki, their foreheads nearly touched. "I accept you Kiki, I accept you!"

"Why?" said Kiki. "Why would you care about a terrible piece of shit like me? Why not find someone nicer? Someone kind and generous, someone who won't play stupid tricks or say terrible things or sleep around or be an all-around degenerate?"

If Z. gazed into Kiki's soul, then perhaps Kiki could gaze back, the portal permeated in both directions, their murky pools flowed into one another.

"Not everyone can be like that," said Z. "But everyone deserves a friend."

"Spoken like a true Saturday morning cartoon," said Kiki.

"Why can't you accept that? Why do you have to trample it just because it's a cliché or whatever?"

"Because I'm a terrible person, haven't you been listening?"

Cal threw up his arms. "This conversation is an exercise in pointlessness. It's simple. She lacks the ability to control herself, to temper her passions and humors. She lacks discipline. If you indulge her weakness, she will continue until she hits the bottom, wherever that bottom may be."

"We can save each other," said Z. "We're in freefall together, we can float together. We can save each other."

"Save yourself," said Cal. "I give up trying to save her."

"You both deserve better than me," said Kiki. "Take this instance for what it truly is: a severance of our relationship."

"No," said Z.

"Fine," said Cal. "I planned to go to Los Angeles anyway. I only came, in fact, to say goodbye and apologize for not being able to drive you home."

"That's fine," said Kiki. "I'll drift on the sands."

Cal closed his eyes. "It's possible I am allowing my emotions to obstruct my judgment at this moment. If I return from Los Angeles, perhaps there will be chance for renewal. But it will require effort on your part as well as mine."

"Just go already," said Kiki.

Z. hated to hear them speak this way, she wanted these connections to flourish, for them to live together, laugh together, why did Kiki want it to crumble? Especially if it unmoored her from everything and cast her away, adrift and despondent? And Max too... the hard drive had landed near her foot. Cal's throw had not damaged it, the thing would require more force. At least Max, in leaving her, found a new community. But that thought made her no happier, in fact it made her angry, and she knew now she grew angry because of her selfishness. Because of her desire for him. Because she considered what she wanted before what he wanted. And yet, if she allowed everyone what they wanted and never considered herself, the world would trample her, and everyone she ever loved would leave her.

She picked up the hard drive. It was compact enough to fit into the pocket of her jeans. Should she destroy it? Should she hang herself from the chandelier?

Cal opened the door. He stood in the doorway for a moment and said one final farewell. Then he walked into the hallway and disappeared.

Somehow, although Z. felt she understood them now, understood their wants and desires—somehow nothing had resolved, somehow she still didn't know what to do.

"I'm sorry, Kiki," said Z. "I want everything to be good again. I want us all to be happy together. We can watch movies together and you can tell me who stars in them. We can play games together or eat lunch together. It doesn't have to be a big thing, we can forget about our issues and not think about them."

"Bury our lives in entertainment."

"Beats alcohol."

Kiki smiled, either from humor or disdain. "How nihilistic."

"I was never anyone who would change the world anyway."

They remained in silence alongside the ruins of the hotel room, someone had to pay for the destruction—Maximillion probably. He was an adult, he had money. The bulge of the hard drive pressed against her hip.

"My plan was to destroy *Homestuck*," said Z.

"What?"

"The thing Max is about—Hussie's story."

"Oh. Yeah. That'd be funny, I guess. To see how they react. Burn the place to cinders."

"I didn't do it to be funny."

"You're funny either way."

"Fuck you." Z. tiptoed around the crashed chandelier. "I guess I should return the hard drive now."

"Return it," said Kiki. "You won't follow through?"

"I dunno," said Z. "Part of me feels like I've gone too far to stop. I don't know what I'm doing anymore, I'm so confused about myself and everyone else. It feels like nothing I do does anything, I just want to do SOMETHING."

"You're not going to change the world either way. By your own admission."

"But *my* world."

"I know what you mean."

Kiki knew what she meant. Kiki and Z., on the same wavelength. An excitement flooded her, suppressed by the overarching solemnity that inundated her brain, an excitement like when Maximillion harangued her, blathered that they were kindred spirits. Her options: Let her world fall apart around her or destroy it herself, but maybe now... Kiki. Cecily. Even Maximillion. The new *Faerie Endless* coming soon. Shirou Katsumata. Fragments, scraps she could cling to, cobble together, build upon, shore against the tide.

Except Max. Max who she grew up with, Max who she read with, Max who she played with, Max who she talked to and who taught her things about literature and who scoffed at her baseness but nonetheless had until now stuck beside her. That central component removed, could the other pillars stand? They better. She knew he would not return to her, and he had decided it—not her. Had she finally acquiesced? Or was her new turn a final, desperate play, as though in returning the hard drive he would be again ingratiated to her?

"I'll return it." She patted her side. "Wanna come with?"

Kiki sighed and shrugged. "Not really."

"If you stay here by yourself you'll be depressed. At least kill the time."

They exited and not long after encountered a gaggle of four Homestucks on patrol around the hallway. They were led by Red!Maximillion.

"Yo—get her." He drew a new balsa sword and waved it in her direction.

"Wait," said Z. "Wait wait wait." They kept running at her. "Wait dammit I'm gonna return it, calm down I'm gonna RETURN IT!"

They skidded to a halt before her, overall they comprised an even gender ratio. The other guy was an alternate palette version of Red!Maximillion, making him Green!Red!Maximillion, or just Green!Maximillion. The girls were more disparate, one wore a simple t-shirt with a

design on it, the other had a steampunk aesthetic with a top hat and lots of doily frills. She had seen them before somewhere.

"Well, that's an unexpected development," said top hat.

Red!Maximillion pretzeled his arms. Z. tried to forget that she had seen him in Max's room that night, but of course trying to forget something only makes you remember it. He scrutinized her through his sunglasses. "Yeah I don't believe this. Some trap."

"Take us to Hussie," said Z.

The Homestucks demurred. Top hat and the alt-alt-Maximillion seemed in favor, Red and t-shirt blandness seemed against. However, top hat was especially impassioned in her plea, she clasped her hands and trilled her voice at seemingly inappropriate moments, and her aura of melodrama overpowered the less creative Fuck-Z.-Coulter contingent. The top hat girl did a twirl of appreciation which was weird because neither Z. nor Kiki betrayed any emotion at this otherwise rudimentary and unspectacular step toward the more relevant task of meeting Andrew Hussie. She was determined to become important, like a quirky side character who steals a scene and the audience likes her so the creator starts putting her in more and more things, then suddenly she's the lead star and the show is on its tenth season and gets cancelled. She doffed her top hat to Z. and skipped to the elevator, flourishing her dainty, gloved hand to press the button while everyone else was normal and walked.

"Mr. Hussie went to the roof," said top hat girl, employing some kind of half-hum, half-singsong vocal cadence that caused Kiki to stick a finger into her throat when nobody but Z. was watching. She at least supplanted Red!Maximillion as chief generic goon.

Wait. "The roof?" said Z.

Top hat chirruped affirmatively. "He seemed convinced you were on your way to the roof."

"Makes sense uh narratologically," added Red!Maximillion. "Epic final confrontations on rooftops."

"Who's seen *Vanilla Sky*, starring—" But Kiki couldn't finish because she cracked up laughing midsentence. Nobody, including Z., got "the joke."

When the elevators opened, at the last moment, Z. braced for someone ugly inside, Frederick or Max's mother, or the police, or anyone. But it was empty and they went inside and waited for it to rise.

"I don't think it goes directly to the roof," said top hat, as though she knew jack diddly about anything, "Probably we'll have to find a staircase with roof access."

"Verily," said Kiki.

"Forsooth," added the girl in the t-shirt. Soon all of them were interjecting various antiquated vocabulary at top hat girl's expense.

"I am *trying* to be helpful," said top hat to general laughter.

The doors opened. Z. didn't know what she expected, a penthouse perhaps, but instead they entered a large open space with evenly-distributed round tables, set with ornate tablecloth and silverware. At one end of the room, flanked by a wide panorama window of the smoky city sky, stood a lone podium and its bowed microphone. A purple banner hung from the podium with the escutcheon of the Mbuji Hotel & Casino. In a silence penetrated by only the rumble of an unseen air conditioning unit, which caused the tablecloth to flit and rustle, it became a banquet for ghosts.

"Over there." Top hat pointed across the room at a door labeled ROOF ACCESS. "I *told* you, didn't I?" She started her skip-hum-singsong combo and drifted between the tables. The others followed more sedately.

A voice cried out, it said, "Z.!" On her side next to the podium lay Cecily, her hair a disheveled mess, her face pasty white, her fingers splayed across the rug, her gray dress blood-splotched.

"Cecily," said Z., "How'd you get here?"

"Z." Cecily's voice cracked. "He—"

The podium toppled forward. Out of the hollow space in its back rose Mitchum Graves, the most improbable phoenix, he shouldn't have even fit inside the podium let alone pull off the acrobatics to emerge fully-formed and upright. Clashed in his regal hand was the flagpole, bereft of any flag save charred scraps.

"You're that douche canoe," said Red!Maximillion. "Yo we got stuff to do."

"You got stuff to do...?" said Mitchum Graves. His voice imitated the laconic, spacey drawl of Andrew Hussie's speech patterns, emphasized to the point of caricature. "You have to bring Hussie back his story...? Z. has to find out once and for all how much everyone hates her...?"

"Who are you?" asked the girl in the top hat.

"I am Andrew Hussie," said Mitchum Graves. "The other man is an imposter. I created *Homestuck*. My mind, my spirit, my soul—if such things exist! The other man is a husk."

Red!Maximillion seized Z.'s arm. "We're gone."

Mitchum Graves hopped from the podium, skipped forward, and launched the flagpole as a javelin. Z. and Red leapt in separate directions and the spear sailed between them and embedded in one of the tables.

"You nuts?" shouted Red. His sunglasses fell off, he had normal eyes, the patina broke and he no longer looked even remotely similar to Maximillion. "That thing could kill someone!"

"Now Zelda." Mitchum paced toward her, the Homestucks and Kiki stepped away from him, his limber body shuffled in unusual ways. "You can't do this. Bring back the hard drive and

make everything nice again? You can't do that at all."

"Why," said Z. "Do you even care?"

"I told you, I'm Andrew Hussie, I have a vested interest in this." Mitchum pushed up his glasses, and the lenses caught in the light and covered his eyes in their gleam. Z. remembered his glasses not having lenses. "For starters, I gotta see the shit that goes down when that blot of a story gets removed for good, I have to see the looks on everyone's faces. When you're like me and have seen everything, it's these kinds of precious moments of truly special heartbreak that serve as the sole thing to titillate a jaded palate. Secondly..."

He moved close to Z., she stood her ground, if he touched her she would kick the shit out of his wiry ass.

"Secondly I need that thing gone." His voice shifted, the exaggerations in its timbre dissipated, it became a perfect mimic of Hussie's voice. "It makes me so tired. It drains me. When you pour your soul into a work, into a vessel beyond yourself... then you start to fade. How'd I describe it earlier? Cannibalism. Yes, that's the word. You and you and you and you —" (he pointed to the four Homestucks arrayed before him) "—eat me. I erode. But I can't stop. The feeling of... being *needed*... spurs me on. You understand, right, Zelda? When you feel like you'll do anything as long as you can forcefully inject yourself into the lives of other people. Even something destructive to your own health... But we can't live like that. We have to cut ties. I thought I was in too deep to return, but you've found an opportunity to free me."

He walked past her. He pulled the spear from the table.

"Is this an ironic joke?" said Z. She looked to Kiki for aid, she might know what was happening, why Graves acted this way, how he knew these things, but Kiki shirked far behind the others, dwindled into an ant.

"You can't walk up there and end it," said Graves. "End it without *me*." His voice changed again, it grew in force and size, Graves himself swelled as he circled the table closest to Z. "Give me the hard drive, Z."

She opened her mouth to form the word "no" but before the air sucked into her lungs he lashed out with the flagpole and cracked its side against her shin, the exact sensitive spot that took a blow from Maximillion's unwieldy golf club. She howled and fell against the table and seized a knife set there but he swung again, hitting the hard drive in her pocket with a heavy thwack.

"This shit is so far below me it's ridiculous," said Graves. "It's insane how much more I know about everything than anyone here, it's ridiculous. Sure, I gotta hand it to you, swiping my keycard by not revealing your plan—even to yourself—that's a good one. But—"

"Guy," said Red. "Guy if you don't shut up—" He trailed off, as though he expected Mitchum to interrupt him with an "if I don't then what?", but Mitchum communicated the same idea without the words.

"I'll get Mr. Hussie," said top hat. She moved for the stairs.

Graves twirled across the room and launched the flagpole. It sailed through air, into top hat girl's back, and burst out her chest.

Blood shot in a severe arc and splattered the floor and tables. The top hat girl made no sound, but sagged to the side and dropped.

Someone—Cecily—screamed. Everyone started to scream or shout or something. "I FUCKING TOLD YOU," screamed Graves. "I FUCKING TOLD YOU WE'RE NOT DOING THAT SHIT."

People started to run. Z. failed to comprehend. One of the Homestucks, the other girl, went to top hat's side, but only held her hands over the girl's body without touching her. Someone else ran for the elevator. Graves bounded to the fallen girl and wrenched the flagpole out of her, the girl's body gave a shiver, he swung the spear around him in a cyclone and a line of blood flicked off and splattered against Z.'s cheek.

"You can't do that," said Z. "That's, what did you, did you kill her? You can't do that." It didn't make sense.

"It doesn't matter," said Graves. "It's ending now. After this, there's nothing left. Nothing I do matters." He danced back and forth and laughed, he clapped his hands. The other Homestuck girl dragged top hat girl's body away. Only Red!Maximillion remained of the Homestucks, he stepped forward and told Graves he was insane, in the voice like when the main character says the same thing to the obviously insane jester.

"Oh my god, yes, beautiful, yes." Graves clapped his hands. "To manufacture in real life situations that should only be fictive. And I was so bored too, so so bored."

Red drew his balsa sword, he trembled all over with ire, Z. still had no idea what was happening, Cecily kept screaming, and where the hell was Kiki? This couldn't be real, this had to be fake. Graves struck a kung fu pose. He extended one hand toward Red and after a moment of trepidation moved the fingers to beckon Red forward.

"Everyone get to safety," said Red. The elevator doors opened and the two other Homestucks shuffled in, dragging top hat. "I'll buy time."

He charged Graves. Graves swept the lance sideways and Red dipped under it. He slammed the sword toward Graves's hip but Graves sidestepped like his body was composed of air. Graves's arms moved in pinwheel motions, he brought the lance behind him and back over his head while it span around in his hands, he smashed the butt on Red's head. Red dropped in a lump, his skull trickled blood.

The other Homestucks hesitated at the open elevator, but Graves gave them a thumbs-down sign and they hastily shut the doors.

The elevator doors shut. The silence resumed until Graves broke it. "Good, only us now, what a lame climax if I squared off against no name filler bitches."

He waited in the center of the room. On the other side of him, Cecily pulled herself to her feet with a table as support. Z. had no clue what to say. He formed another exaggerated martial arts pose, he slowly rose one leg and bent it at the knee while his arms waved around him.

"It's a joke," said Kiki, distant. "He senses it's ending."

Graves hurled the spear again, Z. flinched, but it sailed skyward and stuck in the ceiling, the point wedged against a fire sprinkler. Immediately, the sprinklers across the room went off, water poured upon them, it seeped into Z.'s hair and ran down her skin, stuck her shirt to her chest, sloshed down her socks and into her shoes.

"Won't anyone clap for me?" said Mitchum Graves, except his voice was the voice of Kiki Radney, a sixteen-year-old girl. "Won't anyone save me from the brink of despair? It must be. So. Damn. NICE. Being a cute teenage girl who literally everyone in the world wants to save from the brink of despair." He reached around his waist and pulled his drenched shirt over his head, he tossed the article aside. Tattoos adorned his torso, the vivid images seethed with the heart beating against his emaciated chest, he twirled around, on his back was a tremendous image of a pristine lake from which rose a green horse in a whip of water, and the shadow the horse cast was that of a woman, in each hand she held an axe, one axe golden, one silver.

"Kelpie," whispered Z.

Graves pulled his glasses from his face and crushed them in his palm, the shards sliced into him and blood ran with the sprinkler water. "I've got to save Max," now his voice was her voice, "Save yourself. I've got to save Max. Save yourself. I've got to save Max... But don't you realize?" His voice changed again, it sounded nothing like Mitchum Graves, it was—she recognized it—"But Z., don't you realize? I *like* dressing like a girl. It makes me feel sexy. I like to be objectified. I like to be desired. What do you need to save me from? I already saved myself. From my mother, from my obligations, from my loneliness, from *you*."

She seized the table knife and charged him, howling, "WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?" The knife whizzed in front of her, hit nothing, his body shifted positions effortlessly, he swung the spear and she rolled under it, she drove the knife toward his foot, he pulled the foot away.

"I'm the lady in the lake," said Graves. "When you fall into my waters I turn you into gold. How else do you explain Maximillion?" He bounced upon a table, only his toes touched it, he moved lighter than air. Z. rushed after him, swinging and going ballistic with the knife and slicing and jabbing and stabbing and nothing touched him nothing hit him did he even exist or was he a ghost like all the well-dressed men and women who did not exist in the chairs at these round tables? The water flowed into her eyes, into her panting mouth.

"Z., don't!" Cecily leaned against one of the tables, the water had ruined her hair and clothes, she was a sopping wreck. "It's dangerous, we need to call the police!"

"Oh yeah," said Graves. "I almost forgot I dragged her up here. I had a reason for that, I swear." He tapped his forehead, the blood from his cut palm got onto his cheekbone.

"Probably to rob her virginity, am I right? Classic Mitchum Graves, busting out the old-fashioned rape jokes. Everyone laugh." No one laughed. "Oh no, if I lose my wit, what do I even have?"

Without pause, he skipped across the tables in a way that reminded Z. of the top hat girl, she could not tell if he intentionally imitated her or not, he scooped Cecily in his free arm and swung her around like he intended to tango.

"I remember now. Give me the hard drive, Z., or..." He poked the point of the spear under Cecily's chin. Cecily cried out.

Why did Graves want the hard drive again? To destroy it or save it? She almost called his bluff, she almost said yeah right, the words formed on her lips, but she realized at the last moment the situation and sucked them back, Cecily said her name. Z. sighed. If Graves played this game, she had no hope but to concede.

She removed the hard drive from her pocket. The plastic casing was waterproof after all, the dew from the sprinklers ran off it in clear streams. She held it up. "Let Cecily go and I'll hand it over."

"Oh please, have you never seen..." Graves hesitated, he blinked and grew pensive, he shook his head. "Well shit, I can't think up a movie right now, but I got the power I call the shots. Toss it to me."

"Why do you want it," said Kiki. She was infinitely far away. "What does it matter to you, Mitchum."

Graves clenched his teeth. His eyes blinked, they squinted. Z. realized he had difficulty seeing without his glasses. The blood on his hand smeared on Cecily's dress. "Give it!"

Z. tossed the hard drive forward, it clattered onto the ground at the base of the table Graves stood upon. He squinted at the hard drive, he didn't move. Both of his hands were full.

After a hesitation, he flung his arm with Cecily and she span out like a spool of thread and hit the ground. He leapt toward the hard drive, raising his spear overhead to bring down upon it.

Kiki flew out of the woodwork and kicked the hard drive away, it skidded under a table. Graves redirected his spear and drove it to the ground an inch from Kiki's foot. Z. rushed forward, she tossed the carving knife and grabbed the hard drive and rolled away, except she hit her head on a tabletop and came up disoriented. The table flipped up and hit her again in the face, this time at the beck of Graves, who upturned the whole thing with one hooked motion of his throbbing arm.

"Aw come on Z., where's your sense of adventure?" He advanced on her, twirling the spear idly, while she sniffled blood back up her nose and backed away. "Think how karmic it'd be to ruin Hussie's life work. It's so outrageous. He poured his soul into a grandiose piece, reaching mediocrity at best. Isn't it, in a way, just?" He laughed. "Don't I, the prophet Emmanuel, seem the very arbiter of justice?"

"Do you hate Hussie?" asked Z.

"I *loathe* Hussie." Graves flexed a bicep, the muscle was barely connected to the bone, his ponies danced and swelled and shouted bitter words. "Once, in college, he shortchanged me

five bucks at a bar."

"Are you jealous of him? His success?" Half stalling for time, half under the manic notion that if she asked the right question, if she struck directly at the heart of this man Mitchum Graves, pierced his verbal defenses, then he would crumble, the most fragile flower bowered in iron fronds.

"God damn, of course I am," said Graves. "You know how many nubile cosplay chicks Hussie can smooch if he only asked? Wowza."

"What is it!" said Z. "What's your purpose?!"

Kiki appeared at Graves's back. She supported Cecily with one arm. "Nothing," she said. "There's nothing here at all, Z. There's no reason, stop looking for it, you can't *understand* everyone."

Without looking behind him, Graves rammed his spear butt into Kiki's stomach. She staggered against a table but didn't fall.

"You just have to beat the shit out of him," said Kiki.

The sprinklers stopped. The room was nearly inundated, every step Z. took caused the carpet to gush.

Graves stabbed his spear in the ground and used it to vault toward her. The attack was sluggish and telegraphed and she sidestepped it. Beat the shit out of him. Alright. Z. understood that language. She swung a fist for his side as he fell, her knuckle sunk into the brittle stomach. The valor of a palpable hit ended prematurely as his fist sailed into her jaw, it exploded in her face, she found herself on her back. He swung the spear and hit her with the shaft near her neck, she croaked in dismay. A second hit whipped out, a third, she tried to crawl away and he jumped on her back, she reached out and grabbed the edge of a tablecloth.

"Z., oh no, Z.," said Cecily, somewhere.

"Kick his ass," said Kiki.

"Come on Z., why don't you kick my ass? Come on Z., beat me up. Come on Z."

She tugged on the tablecloth. It slid, plates and silverware fell on her. She spat a little blood, or maybe it came from her nose, nonetheless blood splattered the carpet. She kept the hard drive under her arm, although mostly through force of habit, she had no idea why she did anything anymore, she made decisions based on emotional whims and went with them until they became inconvenient—was Graves testing her resolve? Any moment now, he'd let up, he'd say, okay, I guess you're worthy of returning the hard drive, of repairing the fracture between you and Max, you've EARNED something now. Sorry I murdered that one girl.

But he hit her again, and again.

"I'll help!" said Cecily. She twirled out of nowhere like a shot putter and hurled a thick leathery circle toward Graves, it was a tablecloth, it thwacked against his head and coiled

around him, he was entangled completely within it. Z. wiped her lip and sprinted at him, she swung her arms around the thrashing cloth, the arms closed but they closed around nothing, she held the cloth in her arms but Graves was not there. She turned and he was behind her, the spear sailed toward her gut but got caught in the tablecloth Z. was carrying.

"No," said Cecily, "NO!"

Graves bellowed laughter. Someone fell to Z.'s side, it was Cecily, she put her arms around Z. and held her.

"I won't let him hurt you," she whispered in Z.'s ear. "Kiki—that's your name right? Please help."

The blows ceased. "Yes, Kiki, come on, power of friendship my ass, maybe if you three combine your powers you can—"

He cut off suddenly. Z. looked up. Kiki had stabbed him in the side with a knife. No—not a knife. It was Cal's box cutter, the one he had in his jeep, the one he left with them when they broke down in the desert.

"You motherfucker," said Kiki. "I'm sick of you."

She wrenched the box cutter out and plunged it in again. Again and again, against Graves's bare chest, into his tableau of tattoos. Into his stomach, into his arms.

From Graves's wound gushed a clear, watery fluid. It rolled down his side like a gel, mixing with the water that glistened upon his skin. Graves kept his foolish grin and rolled his head back around the full extent of its possible motion. For a moment Z. expected him to open his cadaverous mouth and cackle like an undead animation, but he only looked at the ceiling.

Kiki retracted the blade and dropped it on the ground. She staggered back, then fell to her knees. All across her body had opened shallow, bloody cuts. Blood seeped down her shirt, in all the places where she had stabbed Graves.

"I am the Christ that Longinus impaled," Graves said. "I am the ruler of heaven."

"KIKI," said Z.

"Kiki!" said Cecily, "Are you alright? Stay still, I'll call a doctor, something may have ruptured."

She turned to move but Graves reached out and grabbed her. "No..." he said, "Nah. We're beyond doctors now." He twisted her arm over her back and she cried out in pain.

Kiki fell onto her face.

Z. staggered upright. "I," she said. "I will kill you."

Graves cackled. "I am the one man from whom a pound of flesh could be extracted without drawing a drop."

The elevator dinged. The doors opened. Khalid "Lil Cal" Bhandari stepped out. He stood amid the tables and looked at all the bodies. He noticed Kiki on the ground. "What is happening here?"

"Stay away," screamed Cecily, "He's a madman, he'll hurt you!"

Cal's eyes widened. He looked from Kiki to Graves. "You're that Canadian."

"You shouldn't be here," said Graves.

"I came back for Kiki." Rage crept across Cal's face. "I came back and... And what is this, what have you done?"

"Your part ended. Go away," said Graves.

Cal hurtled forward. He bounded between the tables and past the staggered Z. He shot out a fist and smashed Graves in the wrist that held Cecily. Graves's hand jerked back at a funny angle and Cecily fell away from him.

Kiki tried to rise. Z. dropped to her side and turned her over. She had many cuts, so many, what should she do?

Cal swept a foot out and knocked Graves's legs out from under him. He raised a boot to stomp on Graves's face but Graves rolled away and backflipped to his feet. He swung the flagpole around but Cal, as though nothing mattered, as though everything was nothing, reached out and caught it by the neck. He jerked it and Graves staggered toward him directly into an uppercut to the jaw.

The jaw came off. It bounced across a tabletop and flipped into the fallen podium, leaving behind a trail of blood drops. An unhinged gory mess dangled down Graves's throat.

"Are you even a person." Cal rubbed his knuckle. "Do you even exist?"

From Graves's ruined face uttered a voice: Cal's voice. "I need to go to Los Angeles. I have an opportunity. Why have I stayed behind for someone who spurns my aid? It's useless, pointless."

"Nice mimicry," said Cal, "But I think you have my inner voice all wrong. I don't sound like that." He advanced toward Graves.

"Cal, save me!" said Kiki.

Cal and Z. both turned toward Kiki and it took Z. only a moment to realize that Kiki had not said a single word. She started to shout for Cal to look out but the pointed end of the flagpole had already entered his side, just above the hip. Graves plowed onward and slammed Cal into a table, and as Cal fell he yanked the spear point out and drew back his arm for another stab aimed at Cal's head.

"Save yourself," Graves murmured.

Z. barreled at him, she didn't know what she was doing but she held the box cutter in her hand somehow, she had seen what had happened to Kiki but if there was one place on Graves's body one weakpoint she knew what it was what it had to be—

She drove the box cutter into the kelpie on Graves's back.

He dropped onto his knees. Z. staggered back and left the box cutter stuck in him, the handle wobbled as Graves tilted inward and pressed his forehead against the soggy carpet, like the position of a Muslim prayer, pointed toward Cal. Cal clutched his bleeding side and with Cecily's help pushed to his feet.

"Who... Who was..." Then Cal shook his head. "Kiki, gotta save Kiki." He took a step toward her.

Mitchum Graves's body melted. It dissolved into an orange mush that held the form of Mitchum Graves for a brief moment before it collapsed entirely.

Then the floor under where Graves had fallen began to cave inward. It sank, tugging the surrounding carpet along with it, like a giant sinkhole. Nearby tables rattled and started to move.

"What is this, what's happening?" said Cecily. Nobody knew what was happening. Nobody ever knew.

The sinkhole grew, large swaths of the floor fell into an empty black void. Chairs and tables leaned, then toppled in. Cecily and Z. stepped away.

"We have to get out of here," said Cal, who staggered along a deepening incline toward Kiki. He scooped her up in his arms and started to climb toward the top of the depression, although he was already halfway down it. On the side, opposite Z. and Cecily, Red!Maximillion rolled into the void.

Z. and Cecily kept backing up, until they were pressed against the wall. Z. glanced to the side, they were near the roof access door. The depression continued to grow, it spanned the width of the room, there was no possible way back to the elevator.

"Kiki," she said. "Cal!"

Cal and Kiki had vanished. Cecily clutched Z. tight and trembled. Below opened a vast, bottomless pit.

Out of the darkness, Cal bounded. He had Kiki draped over his shoulders, and he half-ran, half-climbed up the steepening slopes, grabbing seemingly nothing as handholds. The blood ran down his side as he hoisted himself over the edge of the pit and back onto relatively level ground, although he had risen in a corner of the room with no exit.

The pit continued to expand. Z. and Cecily stood with their backs against the roof access door. Cal and Kiki seemed an infinitely far distance away.

"Get out," Cal shouted. "I'll save Kiki, get out!"

He climbed onto one of the few remaining tables. With Kiki still on his back, he grabbed hold of one of the several chandeliers that lined the room and pulled them both onto it.

"Get out!" Cal shouted again. "I have her. She's safe with me. I won't let her die."

The elevator dinged the moment Z. opened the roof access door. She glanced over her shoulder as the elevator doors opened. From between them glimmered a black shadow, only a momentary glint, but it was all she needed to turn away and continue up the stairs.

The blue sky yawned above her as she tromped up the final steps onto the rooftop platform. It bent atop the city in the shape of a boomerang, lined by a waist-high fence. In every direction the towers rose from the murk, spires and obelisks. A wind rustled across the golden pavilion, her hair flapped around her ears and face. Cecily trudged behind her and leaned against her back. Her arms laced with Z.'s. Ahead of them, standing on the roof with his glasses awash in white light, stood Andrew Hussie. Beside him, Max propped himself upon the scythe, his hairless ankles crossed with the tip of one boot pressed against the ground.

Although they seemed serious, it looked like they had only recently adopted these positions, perhaps after they heard her open the roof access door.

"Alright, Zelda." Hussie's voice actually sounded nothing like Graves's previous imitation. "It's been fun. Please return my story."

Max said nothing.

Z. staggered forward, she almost had to carry Cecily's weight on her back. In her hand she clutched the hard drive, it had been in her hand the whole time.

"Don't worry," said Z. Everything seemed unreal, like had neither of them heard the insanity on the floor below? Did the stuff on the floor below even happen? No, it couldn't have. It couldn't be real, she must have imagined it. Z. realized this was it, this was her opportunity, this was why she stole the hard drive in the first place. This was real, everything below was fake. That had been Graves, this was Hussie.

And Max. "I'll give it back. But I want Max to answer some questions first."

Max said nothing. Hussie unfolded his arms and pushed up his glasses. His unicorn t-shirt ruffled in the wind. "Alright."

Z. swallowed. Hussie and Max stared at her and she realized she had no specific question to ask beyond the obvious one: Why?

Why what, though?

"Max," she said. "Why... why do you... hate me?"

They were such strange words to say. They chimed in her throat like little bells. The final syllable squeaked. The pent-up exhaustion enveloped her. Her legs wobbled, she might have fallen had Cecily not supported her.

Hussie nodded. "At first, he probably didn't hate—"

"I WANT HIM TO SAY IT."

Hussie fell silent. His eyes continually blazed with absolving white light. He stepped aside and the stage belonged solely to Max. Flanked by the broad blue sky, he almost melted away in his icy ensemble, he was only a few strips of sallow flesh drifting. His eyes no longer met hers.

"I didn't hate you," he said. His voice was his normal voice. "I only stopped caring."

"Why," said Z. "Why."

Max thought. He thought for a long time and the plumes of smoke swept across the backdrop sky.

"You had always been there," said Max. "And everything that had always been there made me so unhappy."

"I made you unhappy?"

Again he thought. "Maybe. Maybe not. I don't remember. But I was unhappy then. I had to break from that life. You were part of it. In the beginning, you were collateral damage. But then—"

"So that's it." Her fists balled around the hard drive. "After everything, I was collateral damage. After we grew up together, watched movies together, played games together, told jokes together, shared stories together, hung out together, every single day for twelve years we hung out together, you and me and Kiki, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, that whole time I was..."

"Someone who was there," said Max. "Don't act as though I was ever anything more to you than a living body with which you could abate your own loneliness."

"Of course you were more than that, Max!" Something Kiki had said intruded: You need more for friendship than playing the same video game. Kiki's mocking, jeering voice transposed upon Mitchum Graves's face in her mind. Fake, fake, fake! All Z. could say was: "Of course you were more."

"Sixteen years ago," said Hussie, "There were three friends. Me, Mitchum Graves, and Ian West..."

"I don't CARE!" said Z. But Hussie continued:

"We went to college together. We dreamed of creating art together. Things that would challenge the way people saw the world, reinvent their worldviews in the shape of our own. Our friendship seemed something united by adamantine bonds. And yet, although we shared interests in similar kinds of stories, there were irreconcilable philosophies that guided each of our mindsets. These philosophies were at first mere differences in opinion, host to healthy debate, but over time it became clear. The philosophies were the substance of our individual

humanity; the things that had united us the mere trappings. These divides ran deep and, although there was never an official sundering, when we graduated and went our separate ways we did not look back beyond the rare instances where kismet forced us together."

He paused, nobody spoke, he fumbled his hands together as though embarrassed to have spoken so longform. He added:

"I don't know if connections ever truly last a lifetime. Most die alone, separated, in convalescence, their minds blank, their memories devoured."

And what philosophy, she wondered, did Max harbor that so opposed her own?

The roof access door opened.

A shadow spread across the platform, beginning from behind her. It elongated and broadened, it swept her entirely. Cecily's hands dug into her shirt, and either Cecily began to tremble or Z. did. Max took a staggered step backward, he swung the scythe into both hands and held it ready at his waist as the shadow reached him. The sky shattered into an overwhelming darkness, the smoke glowed with a faint white luminescence. Everything became unfathomably devoid of warmth. The water ran off her body and pooled around her soles.

The shadow embodied her, her angles and ends started to erase, she became the droplets that dropped from her tangled shirt and windswept strands of hair. She and Cecily melded together.

"Are you Mr. Hussie," Z. said, or at least her mouth opened and the words sounded in the air concurrently. It was not her voice, however. Older, laced with quiet refinement. The voice of Max's mother. Mrs. Roddlevan.

Mr. Hussie effected no change in response to the shadow sweeping across the rooftop. "I am."

"A bevy of your followers informed me they were in pursuit of this girl, Zelda Coulter. And a trio of nice young adults in the elevator indicated I may find you here. Allow me to be frank, Mr. Hussie: Have you done something to my son?"

"Ask Zelda."

"Zelda has a long record of untrustworthiness. As an adult, however, I expect maturity from you. Please inform me as to the whereabouts of my son."

Mr. Hussie hesitated, but behind the glare of light in his glasses his eyes were indeterminate. He said nothing.

"Oh," said the voice. "Then."

The shadow penetrated the dissolution of Z.'s form. It reached into her skin, her veins, her blood, her organs, her bones, it tapped into her spinal column, it rose up the bundled nerves into her cerebellum, it invaded her thoughts and privacy, everything became confused as words that weren't Z.'s own entered her mind, these voices colluded and competed within her, they whispered for her to tell her what had become of poor Max, what had become of her

poor boy, what had become of her wonderful child, and even an almost silent plea to be strong that came from a fainter, more translucent source, but the whispers multiplied, they echoed, they caused her, a formless shadow, to convulse, to split into floating spheres of her matter, and each sphere reverberated with this music, this whisper: what has become of my boy, what has become of Max, I am a mother who is worried for her boy, he has such a bright future and I want only the best for him, I believe he is falling into dark corners with unsavory people, I believe he is being corrupted, where has my boy gone? I have already suffered one son's failure; where is this boy with such promise? Where is this boy who succeeds in his classes, who is so smart and inquisitive, who is so bright with curiosity for our world, who loves literature and math and science, who his teachers foresee will acquire greatness, who has campuses asking him to visit, who will marry a nice lady and build a family, who will live a life better than the life of his poor mother, who will support her in her old age, who will help her who has no husband to help her—her who will be crook-backed soon and with cataracts and glaucoma both, who wants only the best?

Z. bent. She pointed to the girl beside Mr. Hussie, with the frosty stare and scythe.

The whispers abated for a moment of tranquility, with them dug so deep inside her Z. felt nothing but a satisfactory numbness, her body feeding off the energies of another, she became a silent and humble leech, one who wishes no ill toward her host but who wants to remain lethargic and peaceful for a lifetime...

Then Z. cracked vertically in half, shattered from skull to pelvic bone, the fracture at a slight angle to leave her in two uneven pieces. Her lips flapped:

"No. No, it isn't true. I refuse. This is not my Max. Not him. I will not believe it."

The whispers twittered, they spoke the same words in unison, ten thousand voices all with the same voice that was not Z.'s voice but filled her head nonetheless. She tried to scream, to blot it out, but if she managed to peep it did not register above the oppressive symphony that crumbled her to dust.

"Who did this? Who did this to my son? Was it Zelda? No—it was YOU, Mr. Hussie. It was YOU!"

These voices, so loud and forceful inside her, and yet despite their pure force of will were not so diametrically opposed to her own thoughts, rather than resist she remembered that yes, indeed, Mr. Hussie had done this to Max, it was his story, something must be inside it, some degeneracy of spirit, some corrupting influence, something to transform him into the creature who stood before her [No Zee no] something to [Zee] something to [please Zee] IT'S NOT SPELLED LIKE THAT IT'S THE LETTER AND A PERIOD [ouroboros] THIS IS WHAT I CAME HERE TO DO ALL ALONG

She, a split person, drew back her arm with the hard drive. Max dashed at her, into the long shadow at whose banks he had stood, and swung the scythe. She launched the hard drive the same moment the scythe cleaved through her stomach, she was now four segments, the hard drive sailed skyward at a trajectory she did not expect.

It went up. It hung in the air, the rounded edges of the plastic casing revolving slowly. It went down.

Hussie darted across the roof, hopped the fence at its edge, stuck out his arm, and caught the hard drive. He began to fall over the abyss.

Max, who had abruptly shifted direction the moment the hard drive left Z.'s hand, sprinted across the roof and seized Hussie by the collar. He, too, began to fall.

Z. and the shadow of Mrs. Roddlevan inside her, united by a combined passion, dashed after him and leapt the fence and wrapped their arms around his waist the moment his balance tipped toward the infinite void of smoke on the other end of the golden obelisk. They, too, began to fall.

All fell together.

The voice said it was better to fall now, together, than to continue alone. The feeling of gravity tugged against Z.'s stomach. The sun bore down on her.

A hand seized her neck. Small fingers latched against her throat. The fingernails dug against the skin and cut them so that drops of blood dribbled down.

They stopped falling.

Z. looked over her shoulder. Cecily had her by the throat, her other arm linked around the fence they had all jumped to come this far. Her face strained with pain, her teeth bit into each other, her arm shook with violence, her little body vibrated.

The blood from Z.'s throat dropped into the abyss.

She unlatched one arm from Max's waist and reached back to grab the fence. She and Cecily and the shadow pulled together. Combined, their strength reeled in the bodies that had so willingly flung themselves forward.

Cecily, Z., Max, and Andrew Hussie fell back onto the roof. They lay together side-by-side, each panting with exertion, each staring into the empty blue sky. Z.'s mind throbbed with the shadow inside her. It had grown quieter now, it had only one voice now, but still that voice whispered, fainter and fainter each time: what has become of my boy, what has become of my Max, as though it hoped to find him inside Z.'s memory, as though somewhere among her synapses and neurons and lobes he may still exist. The real Max, beside her, blinked and stretched his pale body in an arch, and then lay still.

They all lay still. Cecily, Z., Max, and Hussie. The shadow diminished into a kernel as she saw an image of Max as he had been, a young boy with a smile, one who played *Faerie Endless* and told her the stories of James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon. He laughed, he said: "Come on now, you don't really think that—do you?" The kernel of the shadow went silent. It remained inside her.

The smoke drifted across the sky. Z. stared at it a long time, projected upon it this image of Maxwell Roddlevan, her best friend.

The blue sky turned orange.

When she blinked and the projection ended, she sat up and discovered the sun was setting. Hussie and Max were no longer near, but Cecily lay next to her, curled up asleep. She breathed slowly, her legs folded slightly at the knees, she had nestled against Z.'s shoulder and murmured nonsense words in dreamy somnolence.

Z. woke her up. It was time to go.

When they came down off the mountaintop, they found nobody: not Kiki, not Graves, not Red Maximillion or Miss Top Hat or any of the other Homestucks, not Cal, not Mrs. Roddlevan, not Frederick, not Hussie, not Max. The elevator was empty and silent and they stood beside one another, Z. and Cecily, and stared at each other through the mirrored panels.

The crowds in the lobby had dispersed, the convention had ended, workmen carted folded booths and equipment, the last stragglers in costume were departing. Beside the statue of Mr. Mbuji reclined Maximillion, his hand pressed to his side.

"Z. and Cecily you're both here it's good to see you both I was worried something happened did something happen did you accomplish your goals?"

"You're hurt," said Z. His side bled. The red ran down his golden clothes, it dried against his pant leg.

"You too." He pointed at her neck.

"I'll be fine."

"We'll all be fine isn't that right?"

Cecily said: "I think we will, Mr. Maximillion."

"Come on girls why don't I treat you to dinner there's a Chinese restaurant not far from here I think I can make the walk what do you say Z.?"

She thought for a long time, her eyes focused on the statue of Mr. Mbuji, his solid and placid benevolence, his fond regard for the subjects beneath him.

"Alright, let's eat."

Cecily and Z. together supported Maximillion and helped him across the lobby. As they neared the exit, Cecily stuck out her hand and pointed. "Look! It's Mr. Katsumata."

Indeed, Shirou Katsumata had exited the convention center, accompanied by the man who had translated for him. Mr. Katsumata smoked a cigarette, which bounced upon his lower lip as he spoke with his translator in stern, but reserved, tones. As they approached, Cecily called out to them:

"Mr. Katsumata! Thank you so much for coming." She reached across Maximillion and nudged Z.'s shoulder. "Come on, speak to him too! You were so distracted yesterday you didn't say anything even though he noticed you."

She thought of something to say, Mr. Katsumata and the translator had stopped momentarily, the pause was transient, soon they would break. She said:

"Your work has made me who I am today."

Mr. Katsumata stood still and silent while the translator turned her words into Japanese. He then took his cigarette and expelled a large puff of smoke into the air.

He replied in Japanese, he spoke for a long time, his hand trembled, the cigarette dropped to the ground, and he began to cry.

When he no longer spoke, his translator, who maintained impeccable composure, said:
"Thank you so much for playing my game."

THE END

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