2.1

A flake sits in a dark-orange room in the city's center. The city is named Miette, and the flake is named Coral. Per sits on the edge of per room, and the edge of per country. Nearby, a half-dozen dozen miles away, sits the border between CA and CB, a border that has not seen official activity in well over forty years. On that border sits a wall. On the other side, the unknown.

The country CA is named Calamity. The country CB is named Cobble. The etymology here has gone both ways; Calamity became a word after becoming a country, while Cobble was already a word fifty years ago when the country was named.

So it is not that Calamity is expected to fall into ruins. This could, of course, happen within the next couple years; Coral sits on the country's edge in more ways than one. But the word "Calamity" comes from elsewhere. It was shorthand for anything that might affect the entire country. Over time, this grew a negative connotation, for people are afraid of change. The name, though, is a point of pride: just as a world-shattering event might relegate Calamity to history, Calamity was its own sort of calamity for the countries surrounding it, a world-shattering event, an end of a country.

And Calamity ended a lot of countries. There is a reason that, today, only two countries in the world remain.

When people look at Coral, they see Calamity. Per eyes, which per was named after, are a distinctive color. Calamity, some hundred years ago, conquered parts of what is now Cobble, back when it was a monarchy. These Calamity people see in Coral's existence a reeducation and an assimilation into something better. They are wrong: Coral sees it in peoples' eyes sometimes, residents of those cities reduced to statistics and shareholder value. The assimilation was not into something better, if it was an assimilation at all.

Coral's story is not about that. Not about GDP; not about candy packs made just a couple dollars cheaper on the backs of bloodied tears and tiers. It is just perhaps important to point out a microcosm: A crocheted hat costs $15 at the store, and crocheting has not yet been automated.

And these people, these assimilationists, they are wrong for another reason; Coral is not a descendent of anyone conquered. Coral's parents left Cobble of their own accord.

Coral hates them for it. Cobble never ended. Never fell into ruin, never died, never lost its luster. Cobble is a country of people willing to work together. Whatever the mesocosm wants, it can't override the human spirit, the camaraderie of building to something greater than oneself. But Coral's parents act like it ended in tragedy. They refuse to discuss it at all.

(They refuse to discuss most things, actually. When Coral went downtown yesterday without their permission, they wanted to “have a talk” about it. But it wasn’t a talk, just a lecture, no discussion involved.)

Coral doesn’t know why the country has gone silent, but per plans on seeing for perself. And Coral has per whole life to do it in. Coral is seventeen, and Coral is very patient. Per operates on a reasonable, slow-paced timeframe.

Coral is mildly upset that Willow yesterday contacted per directly. It was about Fawn, and the information was important, but Coral would much prefer a Conduit-Mail. Thankfully, Willow’s next communication was in this very manner.

> From: Willow (willinglyawake@fur) yesterday at 10:34 PM.
>
> W. Coral,
>
> I hope this message finds you in such health that you could run a marathon with an elephant on your back whilst composing a sweet serenade for those whom you love most dearly. I must inquire, for I have most heavily pondered: what cause commandeers you to disable the Mute Telepathy option for our most prestigious convertees?
>
> Your most wistful and watered well-wisher, Willow.

Coral much prefers this treatment. For per, if one is not willing to put such effort into even a small questioning, then the question is not worth asking, and not worth answering. Why would anyone pay attention to questions asked bluntly? A question entreated with no more than the base count of syllables might as well be spam for how easily it can be sent forth.

Such questions that are indeed worthy of such fanciful elaboration are important enough to wait for. And wait Willow does, for Coral has not yet answered, as Coral is very patient.

Although, it is not patience that traps Coral in per room today. It is boredom, and comfort: Coral has been grounded, and Coral is currently about to walk through a very large city. If Coral in the mesocosm is to do a lot of walking, and Coral in meatspace is grounded, per might as well lie down in per bedroom, and wait, for it is only when Coral is alone or otherwise unattended to that per can safely zone out and start playing conduit-games. And Coral is not going to walk all the way to where mesocosm-Fawn went without having some entertainment. So conduit-game per shall!

W: DID YOU FIND FAWN?

Dammit.

C: gah!

C: Please, I implore you, if you have something to say then C-Mail me. I will respond when I am able.

W: YOUR STATUS says “playing *Nights a la Seventeen Stars*” and you have NOT answered the last one I gave you!

Coral sighs.

The quasi-anarchist group Flowers Under Rubble promised to undo the wrongs that Coral’s parents had enacted upon per. Freedom, friendship, truth… They promised many things. Most, if not all, of those promises were granted. Coral was granted magic powers from the mesocosm, community and entertainment from their conduit, and purpose from their politics. What went unmentioned, however, is how much like a child everyone would treat per. Willow especially!

C: You yourself told me that it is okay to ignore C-Mails should one prefer an activity which requires less mental load.

W: It is ONE QUESTION!

C: All the more important, then, that I answer it rightly?

W: >:(

C: Do you not agree?

W: Five.

C: That is not an answer.

W: Four.

C: I know not what you are attempting but I consider it quite childish.

C: What is this countdown even for?

W: I will send the worst music imaginable right into your SKULL.

W: Three.

C: I can block you.

W: And I can block you too.

W: Two.

W: …

W: One and a half…

W: One and a quarter…….

C: Fine.

C: I did not want them to be overwhelmed with options. The “telepathy box,” as they call it, is to remain magical.

C: Would you rather I keep all the features? Would our convertees not be confused by the conduit having such options as ‘Download Movies’ and ‘Throw Planets At Each Other Simulator’?

And besides, Coral spent so much time making sure that per could keep per excess features while the six newcomers on the conduit would lose them. Per had to get an entire nested instance running. What a waste it would be to turn that off. Coral does not mind spending time, but per would rather not spend effort erroneously.

W: I don’t know! I think I will ignore your questions until you EMBROIDER them with FLOWERY LANGUAGE.

W: Would a mute button have been so confusing?

C: You just said you wouldn’t answer my question.

W: A question is NOT an answer! A question is a question. I answered nothing.

C: You sound like Fawn.

W: FAWN!! WHERE IS AE.

C: Ae probably just went to aer house in the mesocosm.

C: When last I sensed aer, ae was heading in that direction.

C: Ae has yet to ask me what my power is; ae does not know that I knew aer direction.

W: You are being INCREDIBLY nonchalant about this.

C: I am a patient guy.

C: It is a long walk to get there, which is why I am going to be playing games.

W: You would be playing games anyways.

C: It is “anyway.” And that is true, for I have also been grounded.

W: Oh :(

W: FOR THE RECORD I disagree with you on grammar grounds however do you want to talk about how you have been grounded? Like are you feeling alright?

C: What is so good about adding an s to the end of that word?

W: Is that a “No I do not want to talk about this”?

C: Yes.

C: It is incredibly uninteresting. I was not allowed to go downtown yesterday. Go downtown I did.

W: But what about YOU? How are you FEELING?

C: How am I feeling? I am feeling bad about this run. Turns out it is hard to play games while talking telepathically.

W: :/

W: Must I present my remaining questions in an elaborate and properly dutiful cmail form?

C: Just get it over with.

W: WHY aren’t you asking for help?

W: Fawn could be in danger and you’re slowly walking over to where you THINK ae is?

C: Correction: Currently, I am eating. But soon I will be walking over.

C: And yes.

C: We cannot compromise anything. As far as my group is to know, everything was an accident, and I am not in a group with anyone.

W: It WAS an accident!

W: We did not want Fawn to get sent into the mesocosm so early! And ae was not meant to disappear!

C: But now the others have incentive to enter themselves.

C: I dare say things have worked out in our favor.

W: You're horrible.

C: Blame the prophecy, not me.

W: God, I hate it.

W: So what, we trap these teeangers together, yourself included, and then… what, the world is saved?

C: We'll figure something out.

C: But, first, we need to be a close-knit group. And that requires going through some things.

W: I don't like any of this.

C: Nobody expects you to.

W: I guess.

W: Please tell me if there's a way I can help keep them safe.

C: I will.

…Eating Coral is, in the mescosm's version of the wonderfully-creatively-named Miette Cafe.

Coral has yet to come up with a separate name for per mesocosmic self. Or, rather, has yet to feel like a different person to per. Part of the reason per wants entertainment on the walk is because they share emotions and thoughts so strongly.

The game is something Coral "downloaded" from an inter-conduit system devised decades ago. Something like a net connecting every tuned-in conduit to every other, on a common protocol, able to communicate information effortlessly. The Calamity government had spent so much effort on making sure no people nor information passed through the giant wall they built between Calamity and Cobble, just for it to be nullified by the existence of this simple information exchange. It makes Coral smile with glee and a bit of spite.

Coral does acknowledge that it worked: the people of Calamity very rarely know what a conduit is and even more rarely know how to connect it to the inter-conduit net of information. Nevermind that—only a few conduits have ever been smuggled over, Coral thinks. Even here in the city of Meire, oh so close to that wall between Calamity and Cobble, Coral has only ever seen three. Two of those were Flowers Under Rubble's, and the third was broken right in front of per by per parents.

But, still. Coral feels a decent amount of pride at having so much information right at per fingertips. Per could even look up what happened to Cobble! That oh-so-elusive information that receives so much speculation from the outside world (i.e. Calamity, which is the entirety of the outside world). But Coral has not done so. Coral wants to see it for perself. See how wrong everyone was.

It's the same reason Coral refuses to read the final blog post from the developers of *Nights a la Seventeen Stars*, a game Coral has 4,372 hours in. Eight years ago, they must have given some reason for the game to stop updating; but Coral would rather meet them in-person to ask them perself. So Coral waits. Coral is very patient.

Coral also finishes eating per crumpet.

The cafe is enormous. Locations in the mesocosm are built of peoples' expectations and thoughts surrounding them, but not all compressed into one space. Instead, they stack together vertically and horizontally, leading to hallways that go on for miles, highways that never end, and, here, a cafe that stretches for miles in every direction except the entrance, right next to a movie store which does the same thing.

(They are bigger on the inside than the outside. They kind of have to be).

As one walks in the building, it slowly becomes more esoteric and individualized. Sections of it begin to be shaped by individual experiences, rememberings and misrememberings, feelings and occurrences. Some sections have music that only played in the real cafe decades ago, some have the wrong colors and food selection, some just have nothing at all. Every once and a while, it even becomes dangerous, cafe sections marred with spikes or gore or malignant entities, the remnants of some horrid occurrence.

It's sad to Coral, how a cafe could become so dangerous and trapping to someone. Not through addiction—though some sections of the cafe seem to signify that—but through the actions of others, of partners, of authorities, people taking a student or assistant out to coffee but wanting something… much closer to them.

Much closer to their crotch, Coral corrects perself. Best not to beat around the bush when—

G: Hey is everyone awake

Coral sighs. Maybe per *should* have kept the mute option.

G: Sorry I didn't knock but I'm sending this to everyone consecutively

G: I'm Really Really not feeling well today and not only do I have to take care of Fawn but Also I have Work from 12 to 5 today

G: So

G: Could people please come over to help out and babysit?

This is lucky, Coral has to remind perself. *They're getting used to relying on each other*. And, luckily, Coral does have an excuse.

C: Sorry, I am grounded.

It took a minute of waiting before Glace responded:

G: It's alright I already got Batter saying yes

G: And maybe Autumn? I dunno

G: What are you grounded for?

C: Not relevant.

G: Okay

G: Let me know if you want to talk about it

Coral pinches perself. Not the sort of unsatisfying forefinger-and-thumb pinch, but a pinch with all fingers and fingernails dug in. A leader that gets grounded is one that is vulnerable, and Coral needs these children to trust per. Glace thinks less of Coral now, and it's per fault for mentioning it.

C: Don't worry yourself with it.

G: Alright

Coral closes the mind-door, despite it not having opened. It's the most polite, professional way to end the conversation, per thinks, despite the lack of door-continuity.

Coral lost per train of thought. Per decides to get on with walking to Fawn's house, standing up in the mesocosm while unpausing the game in meatspace.

Here, in the closest-to-entrance part of the cafe, where everything is as normal as could possibly be expected, a true consensus, peer-reviewed version of a cafe, the crumpet that Coral just ate slowly reappears behind its glass barrier. It seems that, to the average person, crumpets are like crocheted hats: they just appear there, or at the very least, their process of creation is nothing to pay any attention to.

It makes Coral kind of sad.

Coral steps outside. The cafe's meatspace equivalent was on the ground, as most buildings are, but here in the mesocosm it sits four stories high. Above it, extending maybe twenty stories, are various buildings and business types; Just as a cafe might have misinterpretations of itself within it, so too do the city blocks, amalgams of anything from previous businesses to occupy the location to entirely-misconstrued ideas of what might go there. The cafe itself shifts around daily, swapping with its neighbors vertically or horizontally, sometimes existing in two or more spots at once. Only the most well-traveled and well-remembered spaces remain in the same spot, consistently existing where they should—if not also elsewhere.

And, well, the Miette cafe wasn't particularly well-traveled. What Coral has been visiting is a memory. The real Miette cafe, the one in meatspace, went out of business years ago.

…It's a good thing the mesocosm also likes to erroneously add stairs. Coral quite likes the cafe.

Much like how the mesocosm metaphorizes poor experiences, it glorifies good ones. Beyond the street full of ample slow-moving cars, all driverless, all much quieter than the real-world ones, Coral sees in an alleyway a golden glimmer. Walking closer, ducking under pipes and sidestepping rubbish, per finds a marble statue on a golden base. The statue is of a young shimmer—

…"Coral," per can hear before per door even fully opens. Per blossom walks in, per pauses per game, and tries to prep an explanation for why per was just, apparently, staring directly into a blank now-slightly-lighter-orange wall.

"Yes?"

"You'll be cooking dinner for yourself tonight. Your gale and I are going out for dinner. You're still grounded."

"Okay," Coral responds politely.

The time is 9:30 am. It seems e doesn't expect em and per to talk at all between now and dinnertime.

—The statue is of a young shimmer hugging a similarly-aged flake, legs wrapped around per, per leaning back and holding aer up. A plaque below the statue reads: “Here is where we decided to get away from it all, together.”

Eight more months, Coral thinks, *until I can leave them*.

Eight more months until Coral can finally have nobody looking over per shoulder every time per steps out into the living room. Eight more months until Coral can cast off all of per social network. Eight more shitty, long-ass months until, having saved the world months ago, Coral can finally stop being hounded by everyone in per goddamn life.

…But it’s okay. Coral is a very,

very,

patient flake.

2.2

Glace would think that the Everything Hurts condition might prevent em from moving around while asleep, but no, apparently not. E wakes up to a bed with tossed and haphazardly folded bedsheets—and a beautiful, curly mane mangled and frizzed and, most annoyingly, lying right under eir nose, threatening a sneeze.

And a sneeze would *hurt*, right now, due to the aforementioned Everything Hurts condition, which is particularly bad today. Eir core especially rises and falls with a searing pain. The pain is always intense, always acute, always dull and throbbing and above all *alienating* but e is willing to call it *searing* today, which might just mean something.

Because pain doesn’t really have a maximum. It just goes up and up and up. Glace has experienced pain of which e thought, “One more minute of this and I’ll destroy everything this world has ever cared for.” And then e has endured it for another minute. Hour. Week.

When people are too happy, people expect bad things to happen to them. If someone gets high in public, they’re a junkie to be imprisoned; if someone makes out in public, they’re a slut to be shamed; if someone is spoiled, they’ll be friendless and hated by everyone. It’s just How Things Are: You can’t be happy without Working For It.

But the opposite, the idea that “You can’t be sad without Deserving It,” doesn’t really… happen.

Be seen suffering too much, and people don't think you're worthy of anything. They don't act with compassion to the ill with the same speed they act with anger to the hedonist: No. They just think you're depraved. They stare at you, and look away when you look back; they tap on their child's shoulders to let them know, "hey, don't speak so loud while that type of person is around. They might hear you. They might be *faking it*."

It makes Glace sad. It makes Glace mad. It makes Glace want to stay in bed, feeling like e is about to sneeze, with a set of abs that feel ripped (in the wrong way), for four hours.

It makes Glace feel like a cat, which e doesn't understand. Cats laze about, they get fed, they "meow" and "mrriuau??" incessantly; a cat has never deserved anything one way or another. They simply are. If anything Glace should *want* to be a cat, for it sounds rather nice. Glace isn't good at similes; maybe the other half of it will show up later, who knows.

Glace sighs. E should check up on Fawn. And Autumn will be arriving any time now. E might as well get up. But e doesn't want to! Maybe e will lie here a little longer.

— — — — — — —

Just a few more minutes, eight-year-old Glace thinks, holding the round brush in one hand and the hair dryer in the other. E can just imagine the look on eir teacher's face: "You must have gone to a salon—what do you mean you did it yourself?" but Glace has a secret weapon, stolen (borrowed) from the Miette library: a hairstyle book! You can just *take* those. Glace almost feels bad for the stylists this knowledge would put out of business if e doesn't handle it carefully.

There *is* one problem: Glace is going to be late to class. But surely that won't be an issue.

On the bright side, it's finally been long enough for the bathroom mirror to clear up, after Glace forgot to turn the fan on pre-shower. If only e had also remembered to hang up eir clothes on the curtain rod, to remove their wrinkles, but no, that would have required the Fan Not Being On to have been *planned*, which it wasn't.

On the not-bright side (On the dark side? That sounds a little ominous), the smiley-face Glace drew in the mirror's moisture has disappeared. On the not-not-bright side, Glace can now see eir face and hair perfectly. Freckles and all. Glace can even see a tiny little mustache on emself! E isn't supposed to start growing those until e is, like, sixteen, so it is kinda weird to have one of those as an eight-year-old. E almost uses eir off-hand to check the hairs' mustache-esque-ness, before remembering that e does not have an off-hand at the moment. E will just have to imagine how mustache-esque-y it feels. But then, either way, the book that told Glace that sixteen is mustache age *also* told em that, at age twelve, buds start bleeding out of their privates. And Glace thinks that sounds just absurd.

The door opens without a creak. "What are you doing?" The voice isn't accusatory, just a little bit sad. Glace's sun steps in, but only with one foot.

“Trying something new!”

“You need to be getting ready for—what are you DOING.” This was a rather odd question, because Glace had just answered it.

“I—”

“Stop that this instant. Your hair is not to be played with like that. Are you trying to undo all the work you’ve done to straighten it?? That’s not a style for buds. You’re going to go to school looking like a pervert.”

“It is! It’s in this book I found—”

“Do we need to take away your library card? Not all of those books are fit for children. Some of them are *Satanic*, like whatever—” ae gestures to Glace’s head “—THIS vile THING is that you thought you wanted to read.”

“It’s not that! It’s a real book it’s made by hair people please don’t take my—m—my—” Glace begins crying.

“I’ll have a complaint with the county about this. Give me the book.”

The book is there on the bathroom counter, within aer reach. But ae waits until Glace walks over, grabs it, then gives it to aer.

Ae leaves.

Glace switches off the hair dryer, round brush still stuck in eir hair. What is E even supposed to do? Straighten it again? What was the POINT of ANYTHING? Glace imagines slamming the hair dryer on the floor and watching it break apart. Maybe *then* eir sun would agree that e was right about things. Or at least ae would care that e had any emotions about it.

Or maybe I should just run away, Glace thinks, then feels bad for thinking it. Maybe ae was right; maybe the hairstyle book *was* Satanic. Why else would Glace have thought that, even for a second?

Glace continues to cry. Somehow, the idea that eir sun was right doesn’t make Glace feel any better about anything.

— — — — — — —

G: Ow. Could you hold my head with your other hand?

A: That would just make it hurt more.

G: It's my core that's hurting, not my head.

G: Specifically it's both that hurt but while my head hurts my core Hurts

Autumn acquiesces. Hir hand, after some delay, moves to grasp the top of Glace's head, fingers interwoven between the clumps of strands. The comb ze is carrying moves at a slow and steady pace, tearing out knot after knot of Glace's curly bedhead. It's not early in the morning, but Glace only just got out of bed. The floors of the apartment say goodbye to the last bits of sunshine to touch them today. Birds sing outside, but the windows are shut, so they can't be heard. Cars' engines and tires can be heard on the ground level, a few stories down. An air conditioner hums above, but Glace's comb in Autumn's hand traveling through eir hair is louder to the two of them. Their voices would be louder still, but Glace prefers telepathy.

G: Thank you

A: This had better not be some long con to get me to like you.

G: You don't like me? :(

A: We just met.

A: And you know what I mean.

G: I do, you're right

G: Don't worry, the long con will only begin After we get the telepathy box back

G: Only then will we become A Thing

A: We won't be dating. I don't really know you.

G: Okaaay

G: Are there any blooms you do like?

Autumn pauses hir brushing for a moment. Then resumes.

A: No. Not right now.

A: I don't want to date in high school.

G: But there's nobody you want to?

A: As I said, I don't want to date in high school.

G: Dang

G: So I have to wait all the way until you've graduated :(

A: Can we change the subject?

G: Sorry

G: I like embarrassing people

A: I'm… just not interested.

A: If you want to talk about it, you can. I just won't involve myself very much.

A: I'm not embarrassed.

Glace smiles.

G: Sure you're not

— — — — — — —

Fourteen-year-old Glace feels pained.

To be clear—Glace is in pain. Even just after a normal, moonlit walk, rain dripping down from the clouds and then in a stream from the tip of Glace's wet ponytail, with every other part of Glace wet too; Glace is in pain, Because e cannot remember ever having a day without pain. Ever having a moment without that overtone, implication, either explicit or implicit or just…understood. E had always been told, "Life is hard. Life is painful. In suffering, you will find your salvation." Did they not mean this? Did they not mean anything?

P: little g?

G: yeah im here

P: you seem kinda outta it

Glace's heart is pounding hard enough that e is surprised Pint can't hear it. Which sounds cliché, but ze *is* right there, and paying close attention to em, and hir hand was just now on Glace's cheek and *stop thinking about that stop thinking about that ze probably didn't mean it in that way* and it is NOT FUN to have an existential crisis about yourself IN FRONT OF *HIR*.

G: were you being serious?

G: most people just

G: don't have any pain

G: most of the time?

P: um

P: ya?

And Glace is ANGRY. All the little times E has been told to do things e didn't want to, all of the times e thought e was just lazy or stupid for being unable to pay attention in class like all the others, Glace cares so much about the world and its people and all the little things right and wrong about it and *holy shit ze's still looking in my eyes* and that got Glace nowhere not because e was faking being invested but because e just COULDN'T be as present as everyone else and

Don't ask don't ask stop thinking stop thinking

G: i uhm

G: not even like

G: a little bit?

—And people are able to go up stairs without being hurt? People can run the mile without hurting all over and giving up halfway through? Oh, fuck, all those times Glace went home after a hike and couldn't figure out why e was crying—

P: well i stubbed my toe yesterday if ya think that counts

G: i think

Stop thinking stop thinking

Pint reaches beside Glace's neck to twirl hir finger around a loose strand of eir hair. It's still wet from them walking together out in the rain. A walk that was painful. Glace didn't know it but five minutes ago, but it was painful.

STOP THINKING STOP THINKING STOP THINKING

G: I think I need a shoulder to cry on

(and someone to scream at. But not the person in front of em. No no no no that might drive hir away)

STOP EXPECTING ANYTHING ZE ISN'T INTO YOU YOU ABSOLUTE FUCKING DUMBASS

Ze scoots in a little bit closer, and opens hir arms.

It's maybe ten, fifteen minutes before those arms are at hir side again.

— — — — — — —

Glace's hair sits in almost-a-braid on—Well, it's not on anything, really. It's a few horizontal inches away from eir neck, and it's not actually *touching* anything, not even Glace's shirt or the top of the chair. The braid is kind of like if someone put a tarantula on the back of someone's head and then attached a few ribbons to it. And then attached some smaller ribbons to those ribbons. It's kind of like if someone who had never braided anything before in their life was given some Rather Difficult To Braid In The First Place hair to braid. Which, to be fair, is exactly what happened.

A: Oh.

A: You might want to get rid of this. It looks terrible.

G: Well, you can try again

G: We have time :)

A: …You planned this.

A: Please don't tell me you actually do like me

G: I like everyone!

A: You know what I mean

G: I don't. Please enlighten me

G: What specifically are you asking about?

G: I'm a tactile learner by the way

A: Oh fuck off.

G: Hehe

G: So you ARE embarrassed to be asked that

A: Fine! Fine.

A: It's embarrassing to talk about romance.

A: You win.

A: Just… please stop.

G: Ehehehe

G: No, I didn't plan anything

G: I just kinda forgot that some people don't know how to make braids

A: I've never needed to?

G: That's so weird!

G: I was asked to all the time as a kid

A: Braids aren't exactly a fall gendered hairstyle

G: I think you'd look good in one

A: I'd also look like a pervert

G: Don't say that :(

A: It's true.

G: I'm being serious. Don't say that.

G: People can wear whatever hairstyles they want to.

A: And some of those styles make them look like sexual deviants.

A: I'm not saying I agree with it, just that it's true.

G: Whatever. Nevermind. Go your whole life without having a braid if you want.

G: Didn't mean to offend you.

A: No offense taken. I just thought it was funny.

Sure, Glace thought. Most kids are like this; heck, most adults are like this. Glace isn't sure why e thought Autumn would be any different. E is lucky, frankly, that ze was willing to braid hair in the first place.

— — — — — — —

Fifteen-year-old Glace's straight hair grazes the white bedsheet as e sits upright, waiting for the doctor's results. Nearby, eir cane—short and green with a flat, functional grip but a distinctive lack of color coordination with Glace's outfits—has fallen to the floor, and continues to lie there next to the bed and the black file cabinet.

"Well, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that we didn't find anything. The good news… is that we didn't find anything. This was your third visit?" Glace nods. Today's not really an Enthusiasm Day. "Well, there are these things called somatizations. Do you know what those are? When people have emotions, sometimes those cause physical manifestations, like short breath, quicker heartbeat, headaches, even vomiting—I'm sure you're aware of those. But there's another one, that can come from anxiety. And, as a teenager, you get a lot of anxiety! Having to deal with tests, and classes—and I'm sure with hair as long and beautiful as yours, you have a lot of breezes chasing after you. And you might be chasing after some yourself. And I'm sure that can be super stressful, and it's why you've got your pains. So it's nothing to worry too much about."

When Glace gets home, e cuts off all of eir hair.

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I can't take any more of this, Glace thinks, before continuing to take more of it.

E almost feels like e is betraying Autumn, who spent so long making hir sixth braid attempt the best one. Because it isn't making Glace happy. It's not even really coming close.

Glace's knee itches, and e can't tell if it's on the inside or the outside, or if maybe it's just pain deciding to disguise itself. Sometimes e spends the whole day thinking a body part isn't in pain, and then e tries to sleep, and can't stop thinking about it all throughout the night. And only then does Glace realize, "oh, it's in pain. Because I spent two hours walking today. Right."

Luckily, the rest of Glace's body parts have made their painfulness quite explicit. Glace does not need to think very hard to understand that eir neck does not want to move and that eir leg did not appreciate the hot, dry wait for the bus.

The bus, ever A Bit Shaky, drives over what must have been a pothole, and the whole bus jolts briefly. Glace's core and neck scream at em. The bus ride is usually relaxing or at least tolerable but today it seems only to be making things worse.

But that's not why Glace can't take any more of it. Not the base experience, not the distractions, not even the constant wading through eir own thoughts, thinking twice as hard to make the same connections as the pain pulls back on eir cognition. Not how e will try to remember something, what someone said five minutes ago, five years ago, walk into the Remembering Things part of eir brain to find that Pain is sitting there, taking up the whole hallway.

…No. It's just that, one more day of this, and especially one more week of this, and Glace will grow to hate everything. E knows from experience that, after too many Bad Days in a row, e just turns into the most spiteful, irritable person imaginable.

E doesn't *like* being negative. E wants to be exuberant and fun and the sort to tell spooky stories late at night at a sleepover or pull someone outside half-dressed to dance in the rain. The type of person to jump with joy and squeal and glomp someone e hasn't seen in a while. But dancing requires moving and stories require vocal cords and—and—There's something else wrong with one of those things, Glace just can't put eir finger on it—

I've never jumped.

The realization hits just as the bus jolts again, and Glace loses eir train of thought.

What was e thinking about? Right. Being sad. Well, might as well *try* to do better than that.

Glace has warmed up to the things the telepathy box has given em. Despite what happened with Fawn, getting superpowers sounds exciting. Coral made them sound scary, but the powers couldn't make Glace do anything e doesn't want to, and e would like to have the power to help people more often. Like—Coral explained per power to Glace, and it sounded just kind of nice. Glace enjoys people-watching, and being able to sense them through walls could just be generally helpful.

And Glace likes being able to speak without speaking! And invite people over without speaking! And telepathy is why Fawn could have a babysitter right now. Glace was only comfortable with contacting Autumn in the first place because doing so was so quick and easy, an affordance only the telepathy box has given. And telepathy is what let Glace have Autumn stand nearby, awkwardly, while Glace cooked some breakfast for emself and some lunch for Fawn. That was fun for Glace, if only because Autumn seemed so out-of-place talking to someone who was cooking a meal.

Should have just guided Autumn through the recipe, Glace thinks, before regretting doing so. E can't just rely on others for everything; Glace needs to be able to sustain emself. Glace needs to cook, needs to shower, needs to have a job to pay rent. Even if it is painful. Really, really painful.

But then, Autumn's braiding sits soundly on Glace's neck. That's something Glace couldn't have done by emself. It bobs a little whenever the bus jolts, but Glace doesn't mind. Some sensations are painful: the ones that aren't are always nice. It's not the best braid, not even close, but it had love put into it, even if Autumn would vehemently deny having done such a thing.

Glace does like the others. They're varied, but not mean-spirited; even Diode, who seems self-centered, has some hidden layer of honor and friendship. E has treated Glace like an equal, even radically so, which would make Glace feel very accepted if "like an equal," to Diode, did not mean—

The bus jolts again, and Glace loses eir train of thought. Today is an Everything Hurts day. The whole of it, all the pain—Today it's bad enough to make Glace switch into third-person-present narration. And that usually takes quite a lot!

The other bus-goers, they're used to Glace by now. E has eir spot for eir wheelchair (thankfully reserved for those who need it), and everyone else has spots for their…butts, and they've all gotten used to the thirty-second waiting period where the bus driver lowers the ramp from the bus's entrance and Glace has to roll all the way up it. Every time, the bus driver looks in Glace's eyes, and smiles—And e can't help but wonder if ze is thinking of those first couple times Glace rode the bus, with just a cane. "You're faking it," ze's probably thinking—

Another jolt, and—and—There it is! The train of thought. It hadn't quite left. But—oh, that's a rather mean thing to think about the bus driver. Glace is sure ze understands. It can't be *that* rare to just, like, *kind of* need a wheelchair, right?

One time, a nearby pedestrian decided to push Glace up into the bus, and it made em almost want to cry. Not out of happiness, but of anger—Do people walk up to just anyone and wrestle control of their movements from them? Is it kind to grab and carry a stranger up a set of stairs? What makes Glace so *pitiable*, so childlike that one has to help push em into a bus entrance? Glace wants to install spikes on eir wheelchair handles, if only to say—

The bus screeches to a halt—

—Nevermind.

Is it weird to miss the time before you figured out you're disabled, if only because at least back then people treated you normally?

And then I'd have died in a car crash, Glace thinks. There's a reason e takes the bus.

The bus driver preemptively lowers the ramp as Glace moves and rotates over to the bus's exit. E always takes this stop.

— — — — — — —

Sixteen-year-old Glace has been lying in bed for a couple hours now. It's the first place e went after getting home from school, school which has been harder and harder to enjoy. E chose hard classes for emself, as a way to motivate emself to actually try—e had thought, "If it's harder, then I'll learn more, and it will feel more engaging." And that was true! E loves eir classes, loves eir teachers, loves learning and solving problems and…

On eir desk, the stack of homework e has yet to complete has reached seventeen pages. Nevermind the two essays e needs to finish. Glace would think that essays would be easy enough to complete, given how much time e spends doing literally nothing, but constructing sentences requires having a pen and paper and for some reason e just can't motivate emself to start anything.

Glace's sun knocks on the door to eir room. E doesn't know how e can tell, but ae has aer own way of knocking on doors, just like how ae steps up and down staircases in aer own way, and how ae sits down in chairs in aer own way. It's one of those little details that Glace really likes about life.

"You can come in," Glace says.

Ae does. "You have to mow the lawn sometime today."

"I do?"

Ae sighs. "Yes, you do. It doesn't need to be now. It just—" Ae looks at Glace with a melancholic expression. "--It needs to be today."

"Okay," Glace says politely and without affectation. E continues to stare at the ceiling.

Ae continues to stand there, in Glace's doorway, a few feet away. It's a dark room—the lights are off, and sunlight peeks in from the edges of the blinded windows. It also enters from the hallway, where eir sun came in from. Glace's room's light green walls host a variety of posters, poetry, pottery and books. E's lived in this room eir whole life. Some of the books have, too. It's always felt at least a little bit safe—even when everything else has been bad between Glace and eir parents, they've never entered eir room without permission.

"You know we're not trying to hurt you," ae says. It was a ten-second pause.

"Yeah."

“We just don’t want you to become reliant on anyone. You need to figure out how to manage life.”

We, Glace thinks. It’s an easy word to fixate on.

“Yeah,” Glace says again. E tries to think of more to say, but doesn’t succeed.

“You still need to—” ae pauses, then says tersely, “You need to fix your hair.”

It’s still short, from when Glace cut it four months ago. Right now, it’s a mess.

“Mhm.”

Ae leaves, leaving the door open behind aer.

Glace doesn’t even really hurt today. Walking has been fine, eir back doesn’t hurt, no nausea, not much muscle soreness. E isn’t sure why e feels so demotivated.

Through the open door, Glace’s cat walks in and jumps on to Glace’s bed. She sniffs around, her nose (as always) very slightly wet. Right now, it has a pine needle stuck to it. Ever helpful, she begins licking Glace’s ear, which e finds uncomfortable. Glace knows what she wants, and after a few attempts to get her to stop playing with various parts of Glace’s face, Glace sits up in eir bed and gives her a lap.

Cats are so simple, Glace thinks, petting her back. Humans have to deal with four genders: cats only have to deal with two! And, beyond that, Glace is pretty sure the cat in front of em has never needed to know what gender is. Or school. Or hair.

Shorts seems more and more alert with each stroke of Glace’s hand, until finally, she bites! Glace pauses until she decides to let go. Wrapping herself around Glace’s hand, she digs into eir forearm with teeth and claws. Her back paw gouges out a thin curve, one of her teeth makes a sizable red hole, and she looks *very* ferocious, what with her belly completely exposed, and her butt about to roll off of Glace’s legs and onto the floor.

Her butt rolls off of Glace’s legs, and onto the floor. In her panic, she scratches Glace’s arm again—though, this time, not to attack, but to stop herself from falling.

She hits the ground, and looks confused, before walking away.

“Very impressive,” Glace says, and smiles. E inspects eir arm: much of it is red, but none of it is bleeding. Slowly, over the next few minutes, the injuries form bumps of tough skin where the scratches and bites were. It stings a little bit. All of eir family members seem very scared of being bitten, or scratched, but it really does not hurt all that much. If anything, this sort of mild, controlled pain is something Glace enjoys.

As the click-click-click of Shorts' claws taps across the floor, a deeper, resounding voice echoes from the other side of the hallway, "You're being too easy on em."

Glace's sun replies, "We don't know what school was like for em today."

"Did you ask?"

"I—"

"You're being too lenient. You think people can make it in the world like this? You're told to do a thing, you do it. You don't wait."

"It's not something that has to be done immediately."

"Who the fuck cares? This isn't about that. This is about everything. Do you know how badly e has been doing in school?"

"E is passing all of—"

"Last week, e missed five different classes! Do you think that's acceptable?"

"E has already—"

"Stop talking back to me!"

Per is angry at this point. Angry, and a little drunk; Glace estimates that per has downed maybe two or three bottles of beer at this point. It's part of why e much prefers eir bedroom to the living room.

Per continues, "Do you know what teenagers will do to get out of things? Maybe there's a REASON the doctors keep—"

"STOP."

Per doesn't, "a reason the doctors keep finding nothing. And we have to pay all these copayments for nothing. Have you considered that? Maybe e just wants to sit around doing nothing—"

Glace's sun leaves the room. Glace can hear the sound of a door shutting loudly. As far as e can tell, it's the front door; eir sun is no longer in the house at all. Ae likes taking walks when ae is upset.

Click-click-click. Shorts walks back into Glace's room. She jumps up onto the bed. Glace grabs her, and hugs her tightly—as tightly as e can imagine being comfortable for her.

Shorts doesn't particularly like hugs. But Glace does. And Glace kind of really needs one right now.

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Glace is lucky because, while eir apartment was specifically chosen for its proximity to a bus route, e had no guarantee of an employment opportunity also nearby to a stop. To eir surprise, after trying a few locations, the first place to interview and accept Glace was the one e expected least to be qualified for: The Miette West-End Animal Shelter.

Glace was accepted on one condition: e pretends to be paraplegic. "Makes us look more accepting," eir manager and hirer said to em. Glace doesn't mind; E doesn't want any colleagues getting weird ideas about why e is sometimes in a wheelchair and sometimes not, especially not in such a high-pressure environment as this. E doesn't really care that it's faked, for half the time it won't be, and it means e won't be doing hard manual labor like the community-service workers do, or frankly, anything that requires actually moving around.

It's weird that, of all the places to feel most accepting regarding Glace being able to do jack-shit-nothing sometimes, it's the understaffed, underfunded shelter that explicitly rejected the idea of Glace accurately portraying eir as-of-yet-unidentified medical condition.

Glace gets to attend the front desk, which e actually really likes! It's a bunch of paperwork and talking to customers. Talking—that's going to be painful today, but everything else should be fine.

Glace is proud to work where e does. While Miette's other animal shelter earns itself more prestige and funding, especially in the modern wave of animal politics, it only manages that by rejecting the animals that it doesn't think it will be able to adopt out. Of course a shelter can be perfect when it doesn't take in animals with worms, or behavioral issues, or injuries, or just too many years under its belt. One time Glace went there to see a cardboard box left at their doorstep, one labeled "please treat her nicely." The box was open, and just left there—that animal had escaped, and then it died somewhere on the streets, and Glace is half-convinced Miette's other animal shelter left that animal to die on purpose. Didn't even send it to West-End, just let it escape and run into some fox's jaws.

…wow, Glace is really jaded today. E doesn't really mean that—E is *pretty sure* e doesn't really mean that.

The door opens, for the seventh time, around one and a half hours into Glace's shift. In steps a middle-aged snowdrift with a sun-hat, jeans and a goatee. In per hands is a cage with a rather scared-looking grey-and-black cat, maybe ten years old, well-fed and without visible injuries.

Glace smiles and looks up at per attentively—eir neck complains about it, and Glace respectfully reminds eir neck to shut the fuck up I have a job to do here.

“Hi,” the drift begins,”I’d like to give up my cat. His name is Claws—I hope that’s alright—”

It isn’t, Glace thinks. *Change to Paws? Too generic. Law? Saw?* Glace momentarily forgot that “Saw” is more than just the past tense of “See.” *Cl-hmm. Chloe? It’s a boy, nevermind—*

“—and he’s got some gut problems, which I just can’t take care of. I didn’t wanna abandon him, yknow?” Glace nods, and he continues, “and this place was closest. I can send you the info of the breeder I got him from, if you want?”

“That would be lovely,” Glace says, trying eir best (and succeeding!) to not give the guy in front of em a death glare. *Better here than abandoned*, e has to remind emself, *and better given in-person than left in a box*. “I’ll have you sign this, and put him over there?” The drift acquiesces.

They talk for about ten more minutes, and Glace looks down after a while, surprised to see the amount e has written down. The details are not for em to remember, but still—to have forgotten that quickly? One would think that Glace doesn’t care about the cat at all.

“Take good care of him, okay?”

“We will!”

And then per left, likely never to be seen again.

“Claws,” Glace writes down as the cat’s name. E doesn’t bother writing anything to change it to. There’s no point. Glace can finally remember now what e was thinking about earlier, why e felt like a cat earlier: Cats don’t get adopted.

Not unless they’re perfect, and young, and friendly and cute and beautiful, cats don’t get adopted. Glace read one of the books they keep for the technicians, and if there’s one line e remembers, it’s that “cats are overwhelmingly at risk of euthanasia.”

And Glace isn’t perfect. Isn’t young. Glace finally has the second half of that simile from earlier; Glace, over time, has been feeling more and more abandoned.

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Sixteen-year-old Glace sits at a bench. The school e goes to is just a couple minutes’ walk away. Glace doesn’t plan on going there, as it’s a weekend, but the building feels calm and familiar. Glace has walked this path a thousand times, maybe even two thousand. But e can’t remember ever having sat down on this bench before.

The moon's light reflects on the foot-high grass all around em, coloring the blades mint and teal. They are framed in Glace's vision by eir fingers, forming diamonds and triangles, interlocking bars of skin, alternating transparent and solid and not there at all. Glace has always liked how having two eyes makes vision so weird when things are close to either of them. Noticing that right now, though, makes Glace feel bad. E has more important things to be thinking about. Not *productive*, but important.

Glace feels and hears a thud as, a couple feet away, someone else sits down on the bench.

"Hey," a young and androgynous voice speaks. Androgynous, that is, between spring and fall—it's medium pitch. Glace doesn't react, and they continue, "are you doing alright?"

Glace drops eir hands, but doesn't look over. E waits a few seconds before responding, "A lot's going on."

"Ah. Do you want to talk about it?"

E really does want to talk about it—But it's kind of a cardinal rule that one does not receive impromptu therapy sessions from people you just met.

"With a stranger?"

"Hey, we wouldn't be strangers after it's over. And—I don't think cool people should be having their head in their hands like that."

That was surprising. "You think I'm cool?"

"I liked your haircut. Not every bloom is willing to present themselves that way. I think it's cool."

Glace snorts. "Wasn't exactly intentional."

"It wasn't?"

E finally decides to look over. The person on the other side of the bench, a respectable distance away from em, is dressed in a leather jacket with pins and patches, a t-shirt, and ripped jeans. Their face sports a nose-ring and their hair is completely shaven on one side, with the other side put into three equal braids. They're twenty-something, and they sit with their legs and arms both spread far apart, as if on a couch. Glace still can't figure out their gender.

To contrast, Glace's hair is mostly untouched, not very long. E hasn't even bothered to straighten it, and at this point, e doesn't know if e ever will again. It's slightly less than shoulder-length: the hair length most gendered towards summer, not spring. Blooms are

supposed to have long hair. Eir parents were really, really mad when e cut eir hair, and it's been somewhat of an embarrassment to em ever since that. It's surprising to be complimented on it.

"You're a punk?" Glace says, before realizing how mean that sounds. "I mean—"

The stranger laughs. "Yeah, I guess so. Are you?"

"I don't think so. And—cutting my hair was only kind of intentional. I was really mad."

"Ah. I get it."

"No, that's—" Glace sighs. "That was an oversimplification. I went to the doctor's, and was presented with the shittiest specialist ever, who complimented my hair. Felt like per cared more about my hair and my looks than per cared about my illness."

"That's real rough."

That's still not the full story, Glace knows, and e feels bad for giving a half-assed version of it. Is it fine to give more details? The stranger seems nice enough, and Glace is tired, and doesn't really want to care about filtering emself.

"And I was also mad because, I guess I was really hopeful. I've been sick for my whole life now and I thought this would finally be the time they find out why. I waited months for that appointment."

"So it's like you were lied to."

"I mean, they never lied to me—"

"Sure they did. When you're sick, everyone thinks you'll get well, everyone tells you you'll get well. Even if they don't mean to, they do. You don't get well, they think you fucked up, yeah? You think you did something wrong?"

"That's not lying that's just—it's just being hopeful."

"You don't feel like you've done something wrong?"

"It—" Glace pauses. "I do, yeah. Maybe I have. I don't know. Is it so wrong for others to hope that I'll get better if I do things right?"

"Their hope shouldn't be used to ignore your reality."

Glace had never thought of it that way. "I guess," Glace says, and pauses, staring into an orb-shaped streetlamp. "You don't think I'll ever actually get better?"

The stranger shrugged. “My sibling hasn’t.”

“Oh,” Glace says.

“What I’m saying is, don’t beat yourself up about it. Don’t go—” They laugh again, “—Don’t go tearing your hair out over it.”

Glace laughs. “What was your name? I’m Glace.”

“Raffia.”

Somehow, Glace now feels comfortable around Raffia. It’s nice, at 9:00pm on this Saturday, to have someone to talk to.

G: And—sorry that I have to ask—Are you a wind or a bloom?

R: last time I checked, yeah

G: No—I mean—

Glace buries eir head in eir hands again, but can’t stop emself from laughing just a little bit. Glace can’t tell for sure, but it feels like Raffia is smiling mischievously at that.

They sit together, saying nothing, for about fifteen seconds.

R: is that all you wanted to talk about?

G: Well

G: It’s part of it.

G: …

G: A couple weeks ago, my family found out our cat has an ingrown claw.

G: So we took her in to the animal hospital and found, like, five more problems she apparently had that had been causing her a lot of pain

G: On Wednesday, we took her to Central, to see if they’d take her in and give her the care she needs.

G: They rejected her.

G: Today, my parents decided to give her to West-End

G: Because I guess they just didn't want to pay the medical costs

G: We can afford them. I swear, we can afford the costs, but they just… didn't want to pay them.

R: and west end is

R: …

G: It's a kill shelter, yeah.

G: So she's… she's essentially been abandoned

G: And I can't even bring myself to cry for her

R: that's normal

R: everyone processes painful events in their own ways

G: No I mean

G: I'm just scared. Because, like, my parents have never been great about my illness

G: My sun is pensive and pitying and my glacier is… I don't even know

G: Per started drinking right around when I first started mentioning my lifelong pain to them and I don't know if it's anger or guilt

G: Or something else. I don't know. I just hope it isn't me and I can't help but think it is.

G: But per has never, like, openly believed me about it. Cause there's no real evidence. It's all just what I say and what I feel and sometimes per has me doubting if I even feel pain in the first place

G: …

G: And I'm scared because

G: I've always been kind of annoyed at them for not understanding.

G: But today, my pet, who has turned out to have a bunch of medical issues, was essentially condemned to death by them.

G: …

G: I have medical issues.

G: I'm just as much a liability as she was. And they loved her, right? So what's the difference?

G: What's stopping them from abandoning me too?

G: Maybe not today or tomorrow but when I graduate I'm just really scared they'll just drop me

G: And I don't know what to do.

G: I don't want to be alone.

R: you won't be alone

G: How do you know??

R: glace

R: you won't be fucking alone

R: because i've decided you're my friend now

R: and if you ask any of my other friends, you'll know,

R: i'm fucking impossible to get rid of

R: okay?

G: I'm sorry

G: I really want to but I can't

G: You're a stranger. I don't know you.

R: you think i wear this for nothing?

R: being a punk is about not giving a shit about if someone's supposed to hate you

R: it's about making friends with people you have nothing in common with

R: it's about trusting strangers because they want you to

G: God I wish I could do that

R: what's stopping you?

Glace pauses. E isn't crying—e hasn't in a few months, now—but eir face scrunches up and eir breathing has become irregular.

G: I'm scared

G: I'm so fucking scared

R: do you want a hug?

Glace scoots over, grabs one of Raffia's arms, puts it around emself, and squeezes it as hard as possible. In doing so, e ends up pressed against Raffia's jacket and chest. It feels like a terrible idea, the whole time, but Glace can't bring emself to let go.

After a minute, e does, and scoots back over a bit, but not quite as far.

G: So

Terrible idea, Glace reminds emself. Terrible idea. But it can't hurt to stay in touch, right?

G: Do you want my phone number

R: actually there's a place i want to show you

R: are you up for walking a while?

Glace laughs.

G: That's not suspicious at all

R: could i just give you the address then?

R: it's a refuge and a hang-out spot

R: it's also a bar, but they won't sell you drinks. you'll make a lot of friends. and I'll be there.

R: okay?

G: Okay. I'll consider.

R: i'll see you there

Three days later, in a fit of stupidity, anger, and some amount of curiosity, Glace opens the door to the building whose front does not at all imply it's a bar. Opening the door is hard—Glace has both of eir forearm crutches with em, since it's not really a Good Day. But Glace wouldn't want to be on eir bed right now, because that requires being at home. And Glace doesn't really want to be at home.

The bar goes quiet, Glace notices. It's a hidden sort of quiet, but when before, eavesdropping against the door, it was rowdy and full of laughter, it's swapped to regular, calm conversation as Glace sticks eir foot in the door and shuffles around the crutches. E finally makes it through the door.

"Hello!" says the bartender, a short, thirty-something bloom. "Hi," says Glace. "I thought I'd rather be around twenty tipsy dumbasses than one drunk one."

A few of the people in the room laugh genuinely, others smile, and Glace feels at home.

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As Glace quickly rolls into the euthanasia room, door already open, e sees the panicked dog's muzzle hanging loosely from its back, falling to the floor as the dog jumps once, twice, at Glace's manager, Kirse, who is equally panicked. Kirse emself stands within the mesh of the press gate, *never* meant to be stood on. Frantically, e yells: "Get the net! Fast!"

As Glace struggles to search for the net, the gate breaks off of the wall, and Kirse falls down to the floor. Glace finds the net: on top of a shelf, by the opposite wall, next to the fire hydrant and the clean-your-eyes-if-you-get-sodium-pentobarbital-in-them station. It's a ways away, but Kirse is in danger of being bitten, and—

Glace tries standing up, and simply can't. E doesn't know why; maybe yesterday e just exerted emself far too much, or maybe e has just not tried standing on a Bad Day in a very long time, but eir core and spine and legs scream all at once and Glace feels like e is about to pass out in that three-second span alone. It breaks eir train of thought, and e can't even remember for a couple seconds why e was standing up in the first place.

"RUN!" Kirse yells, trying to use the gate as a shield against the dog. Glace sees the needle, now, against the floor, previously filled with the ketamine-xylazine anesthetic mixture. So too does the end of a leash, now useless, lay on the floor. It's clear that, after Kirse gave the dog pre-euthenasia, he somehow backed out of the gate and took off his muzzle. What's not clear is why that was possible, when usually it's required that at least two people are present for injections, and nobody else is currently to be found.

It's a bad idea to yell when the other animals are so closeby, Glace thinks, which is not a helpful thought at present. E rolls eir wheelchair to the other side of the room as fast as e can, which isn't particularly fast, hoping that maybe e can try standing up again once e is a lot closer.

Before e can, Kirse runs across the room, grabs the net, and uses it to hold down the dog.

"Ten minutes," e says. Glace knows what e means: ten minutes until the dog goes unconscious. Ideally, it would be let outside, spend the last minutes of its life in freedom and solitude, as this dog especially has always been happiest when alone, for as long as Glace has known him. But no, he has to be held down, because Kirse fucked up the procedure.

"Help!" Kirse yells, as the dog fights to remain Not Under A Net. But Glace can't. E tries to get up, again, but e knows that even if it is physically possible, even if Glace knows e has never passed out from pain before, five seconds of enduring that would make Glace want to pick up the needle and stab emself with it.

So Glace does nothing for the next ten minutes. E asks, at one point, if Kirse wants a first-aid kit: eir arm is bleeding where it was bitten. But e can't *use* a first aid kit at present, and Glace can't help with that. All Glace is good for, right now, is paperwork, and e gets the feeling Kirse won't want this incident recorded.

"I thought you said you could walk!" E says, about two minutes in. The dog has stopped fighting by this point, but it still isn't safe to let go, so Kirse keeps the net held down.

"I can sometimes. Not today, though." Glace isn't able to match eir energy, or the energy the situation requires in general.

"Can't you *try*?"

"I did."

"No, you fucking didn't! I asked you to run and you just SAT THERE—"

"I tried—"

"Stop lying about what I saw with my own eyes!" Eyes that are, at this point, full of water. "You told me that you can walk and you use the wheelchair for comfort and that's okay but"

"That's not—"

"It is—and" Glace stops listening. E has heard this tens of times; mostly just from one source, but still, tens of times. Kirse goes on for about three minutes. After that, Glace asks about the first aid kit, and Kirse refuses to seriously respond, and—

“You’re fired,” e says.

Glace isn’t really sure what e expected. But, still, e feels like a cat all over again.

— — — — — — —

Eighteen-year-old Glace, recently graduated from high school, arrives at eir new home to find a letter.

> Dear Glace,
>
> We are going to miss you. Your smile always brightened up our days, your accomplishments always made us so proud, your hard work, perseverance, dedication and resilience through tough times has been an inspiration to both of us. We still remember that day you came home, proudly brandishing your “One Million Words Read!” award from the elementary school. Or that day you won the piano competition. Even that day you brought home your final project from pottery class and carefully pieced it back together after your glacier broke it (per is very sorry). We know you will continue to do great things, and it pains us that we won’t be able to watch you every step of the way. You are bold and fearless. You can and will change the world, so long as you keep on trying to.
>
> As a late eighteenth birthday present, we will be covering your rent for the first twelve months, so long as you are making an honest living.
>
> We love you,
>
> W. and Su. Ghornet.

Glace begins to cry. *They love me*, e thinks, and *I don’t want to change the world* and *they loved Shorts too* and *what is an honest living* and *why did I think they still hated me* and *why didn’t they mention my illness at all* and

and

— — — — — — —

Glace’s apartment door feels cold, now, not cold as in frigid but like how a brain freeze feels or how it feels to read a congratulation letter just to find out it is actually Financial Abuse against Glace seeking welfare or a diagnosis.

Glace can’t help but replay the day’s events (or, well, event) in eir head over and over; *why didn’t I just stand up* and *why didn’t e ask one of the volunteers for help* and *why was the dog scheduled for euthanasia* and *was that the same net that Shorts was wrapped in when she died* and

and

Glace, having worked at West End for four months, has earned five thousand dollars. Of these, three thousand, four hundred and thirty-two have been saved up. Glace has tried eir absolute best to spend only what e needed to.

Rent, in Glace's apartment, paid by eir parents, has been nine hundred and fifty dollars per month.

Four months ago, Glace said to Willow that e was going to leave the bar and its community. That e would try to live on eir own, make a living for emself, prove that the world is kind and that it's possible for someone to work and play and date and learn all at the same time while being just one person with an illness in downtown Miette.

And e has failed.

E steps into the apartment where e is doing everything alone, at 4:30pm on a Monday, and finds two people sitting on the couch: Batter and Fawn. Fawn is asleep. Batter is awake and looking at Glace with a cute mixture of awe and anxiousness.

Glace rolls up to Batter.

G: I need a hug.

B: okay

Ae leans over awkwardly to hug the still-sitting-down Glace. Aer hand, reaching around Glace, touches Autumn's braid in Glace's long, curly hair, and Glace wonders if it's okay that e will spend the rest of eir life needing people to be there for em. Because, even just today, two people were.

2.3

G: I need a hug.

B: okay

Batter leans over awkwardly, wondering why Glace seems so sad, or why e is home early (probably related), or why e is in a wheelchair (hopefully unrelated). Ae can't get the hug to feel

correct, but ae can feel Glace's breathing relax in aer arms. Batter touches Glace's braid—which must have come from Autumn, now that Batter thinks about it.

"Batter thinks about it" is a bad way to put it: there is no one thing Batter is thinking about at any given time. Aer thought process is more akin to a wave function than a linear series of thoughts. It's hard to represent on a page, and especially hard to write as narration, but we can try to get closer:

As Batter entered Glace's apartment, ae found Autumn watching the TV, channel turned to news, writing haphazardly on a notebook ze had in hir lap. On the way home from school, Batter had taken the time to stop and stand near one of the school's fences. "You didn't get the assignment?" Spinfeld had asked genuinely. People walked by, most of them students, the vast majority people Batter didn't recognize, or people Batter recognized but couldn't figure out why. A few seconds later, Autumn looked up at Batter, turned off the TV, and walked out of the room without saying anything. What was in per face was not anger, but resignation. It made Batter feel kind of lonely. Autumn had to leave, Batter knows. Per just thought Batter was telling the truth, like the other ten times Batter had failed to turn in something assigned via the government's telepathy system, or the hundred times Batter had failed to turn in something in general. The school always tries to promote a sense of community, and sometimes it feels like it gets close; Batter went to school, and planned on just lying whenever asked about something done telepathically, but Autumn was pretending to be sick, and so ze had to get home before either of hir parents found out ze was actually going to someone's apartment. Batter always feels close to others when ae opens a door that is locked on the outside, to let a student walk in from the courtyard. Batter had told aerself that ae would really try today, that ae would make up for the fact that ae wasn't on the government's system by doing all the other work as diligently as possible. But recently, Batter learned that that's disallowed: when a student is trapped on the outside, they're supposed to walk back in through the front office. Or, well, Autumn only mentioned hir glacier, but Batter can assume ze meant both of hir parents. Batter, in helping people, has been breaking the rules. Ae thought that maybe, with this proper motivation, ae could actually do as well as everyone else. It makes Batter feel untrusted. Batter wishes ze could stay longer. It makes aer feel like the school doesn't really trust anyone at all. Glace had spent the morning hours with Autumn; Batter wonders what that would be like. Every time Batter has tried to talk with hir since the event two days ago, ze has brushed aer off. Batter remains hopeful, but it's getting hard to do so. Maybe this was what ae finally needed. And, well, being stopped near one of the school's fences isn't helping that: the fence has barbed wires, presumably for safety. But the barbs aren't pointed outwards. They're pointed inward. Apparently, it wasn't.

Glace lets go of the hug, and Batter does too. Batter sits back down, in part to have more of an eye-level conversation.

B: are you okay

B: are you home early because something shitty happened at work

G: …

G: sigh

Glace sighs telepathically, which is weird—it's the very essence of a sigh, but Batter doesn't see Glace sighing in the real world. Maybe it was on purpose, then. It's kind of uncanny. Batter isn't used to telepathy yet, and it's weird to talk with someone without being able to see their lips moving. Batter worries that, without that reminder, ae will just forget that Glace and ae have been having a conversation at all.

G: I was fired.

B: is that why youre in a wheelchair

Batter realizes only after asking this question that it is perhaps the dumbest question ever asked by anyone.

B: i mean—

G: ahahahaha

G: Yeah they. They took away my legs.

G: When you get fired that's what they Do they feed your Legs to the Dogs because there's not enough money to Feed all of them

(Glace still has both of eir legs attached)

B: sorry i mean are you all okay right now

G: …

G: It's just a Bad Day

G: I have an illness where I feel pain a lot

G: Some days are worse than others.

G: …Is Fawn doing alright?

Batter looks over. Fawn is lying down, asleep, on the couch. Aer body takes up two of the couch's cushions, one of which is also occupied by Batter, so aer legs drape across Batter's lap.

B: yeah ae talked to me earlier about how your cupboards are like how fawns cupboards used to be before a remodel and when ae was young ae used to hide in them so nobody could find aer not even aer parents

B: then ae smiled at me i hope that meant something good

B: also ae likes your cooking ae says ae would like to try it on toast

G: The spaghetti?

B: yeah

G: Okay

G: Well uhm

G: If Fawn is doing alright, I'm going to go lie on my bed

G: Today my options are either sitting or lying down and if I spend too long sitting then that could cause problems for tomorrow

Glace rolls off. The empty spaces in the room are just big enough for em to turn around in.

B: can i come with you

B: ive been feeling anxious today for some reason and id love to have someone to talk to

G: I mean, sure

Batter carefully lifts Fawn's legs, maneuvers around them, and sets them back down.

Glace enters eir room. The lights are already on—three large ones attached to a ceiling fan, and a bedside lamp full of colorful curves. The bed has a step-stool beside it. Glace rolls over to the stool, and slowly steps up, expressionless.

E lies down on the bed unceremoniously.

G: uhm

G: Walking up that really hurt and it occurs to me that maybe I should have, like, grimaced, or something

G: I'm, really just fucked in the head

G: It feels like I'm lying to you if I don't react to the pain I'm having. But then, it also feels like I'm lying to you if I do grimace, since it would be forced

G: I don't know. Does it count as lying if it's a reaction a normal person would have?

G: …

G: Sorry that my room's a mess.

Batter can't place what Glace is talking about: the room hardly has anything in it. The bed's sheets and blankets are out of place, but still on the bed. A couple pairs of shirts, pants, and underwear are on the floor, alongside some papers, a book, and a bowl with crumbs inside, but that is all. Against the wall are two canes of different colors and designs, and two crutches, but Batter wouldn't consider those mess-worthy. It makes Batter a little self-conscious about aer own room, which looks far worse. But, hm, maybe that would make Glace feel better.

B: i know the feeling

B: of your room being a mess i mean

B: if it makes you feel better mines a hell of a lot worse its like if someone made an abstract art piece out of jeans and sweatpants and then someone else vandalized it for being good art so now it isnt anymore

G: Mine's still pretty bad

B: no it isnt

G: I'm really not in the mood for banter, sorry

B: oh

B: i was being serious i hoped that was obvious

Glace lies there for a little while, and Batter worries that maybe the telepathy thing had suddenly stopped working.

G: Well, in that case, you're just wrong

G: It's a mess. I don't really care that yours sucks more

G: I'm sorry for you about that. But I care about having a clean room and…

G: I don't know. I mean, look at me. When Autumn came here this morning, I lied to hir. I said that I'd already showered. Fawn knew I was wrong, but didn't correct me, and I felt just terrible for some reason. Like, um, I wanted them to make fun of me, and then I'd go shower, and then maybe I'd get one of them to say "hey, it's okay. Sometimes I also don't want to shower."

G: But ae didn't say anything, so I just… haven't showered since yesterday.

Batter can't remember whether or not ae showered this morning. Ae should have, ae knows. But ae also *should have* done aer classwork, and should have remembered to pick up coffee on the way to school, and ae knows that ae didn't do those things.

Still, this moment is about Glace, not Batter.

B: its not really a massive deal sometimes im in a rush so i dont shower either

G: Again, I'm sorry about that but

G: Please stop trying to, like, make me feel better

G: I don't want to feel good.

B: then why did you ask me to hug you

G: I…

G: I don't know. That's different.

G: There are a lot of different ways to comfort someone, I guess, and I only want some of them.

G: Like, if someone fucks up, you can be like "You'll do better next time"

G: or like "Even though you fucked up, you have other good qualities"

G: or like, uhm, "That wasn't a fuck-up"

G: Hugs feel like the second of those. That's the one that always is nice.

G: And I don't like the last one. It just makes me feel stupid.

G: Like, sure, yeah, it probably doesn't matter that I didn't shower today. It's not like I sweat very often, and it's not like I rolled around in the mud or whatever

G: But I have rules for myself. And I don't want to break those rules, because then I don't know which ones I'll accidentally break in the future.

G: So it feels bad when I tell someone I broke a rule and they're just like "well, you shouldn't have set that rule for yourself"

B: thats not what i mean

G: I know

G: You're just being nice

B: no thats not it

B: just because you broke one of your rules doesnt mean the rule was a bad idea maybe it just means you had a tough time today and youre feeling shitty

B: sure maybe your rules are bad sometimes but im not trying to say that it wasnt a fuck up to break your rule im just saying you seem like a nice person and stringent rule following is only going to beat you down

B: treating your showering rule as malleable today doesnt mean youll be a mass murderer tomorrow

B: i mean i dont know you very well maybe you are going to kidnap me the first chance you get but i think we are trying to have this apartment have less people restrained in it and not more

G: So you're going for "You still have other good qualities"

B: no

B: im just saying its a small fuck up and if youve had a bad day and all thats wrong is that you have a shitty room then youre doing alright for yourself

Batter, on the other hand, doesn't need to have a bad day to fuck up constantly. It's part of why ae is mad at Glace being self-deprecating; if Glace is mad at emself for just doing such tiny things wrong, then e should be even more mad at Batter. But e isn't, e only thinks the things are wrong when it's em doing it, and that's just hypocritical.

G: So

G: Still option #2

B: theres

B: more than three ways to be nice to someone

G: …

B: im trying to be nice to you and it feels like you just dont want me to

B: i dont want to be put into boxes and categorized like my main appeal to you is being a logic puzzle i want to make you feel better and its okay if you dont want your feelings to be my problem but you asked me to hug you and that felt important to me and im willing to bet it was important for you too

G: Sorry

B: stop that you dumbass

B: i dont care about you being sorry over and over again i want to be friends

B: were stuck with each other right so we need to become friends until we get the box back

G: Could you hold my hand?

Batter is taken aback. Literally—ae flinches. Ae has never been asked that before.

G: Oh. Sorry, nevermind. I kind of forgot you're a shimmer.

B: im a shine

G: You're an adult? I thought you were, like, sixteen

Batter gets that sort of comment a lot. Batter may be average height, but that's average height for a *shine*, which is 5'2", and Batter's face doesn't betray aer age to any real extent.

B: im an adult

B: sorry i was just surprised

B: ive never really held anyones hand before but if you want me to then i can try

B: i mean i havent for more than like thirty seconds im not sure if thats how long handholds always last but i assume its longer

B: and uhm never on someones bed before

Batter is getting flustered, and focuses on aer gloves—still as golden as they always have been. They feel out of place in Glace's apartment, which is almost entirely colored in blue, white, black, and gray.

G: They can last as long as you want them to

G: It's your call, though.

B: okay

Batter reaches onto the bed to grab Glace's hand, then hesitates.

B: am i doing this all right

G: That doesn't seem very comfortable for you

G: How about you lie down next to me :)

B: wont that hurt you if i move around on the bed and jostle it

G: Do it slowly

B: okay

Batter walks over to where the bed hits the wall, and slowly climbs on, watching Glace's face closely before remembering that e doesn't show pain on eir face like most people do. The bed doesn't creak, but it does press down under Batter's weight. When ae lies down, ae reaches out, and grasps Glace's hand within aers. Glace, in return, squeezes Batter's hand. It lasts ten, fifteen seconds, before Glace stops squeezing—but does not let go.

For Glace, Batter imagines this is a moment of peace. Glace can finally have someone to anchor emself to the world, to tell them that e really does have a lot of good things about em. And, if it were up to Batter, this moment being that and that alone would be enough. But it is not up to Batter: it is up to Batter's *brain*. And Batter's brain, having never been in a situation like this before, never touched so affectionately, interprets this moment as one of utmost intimacy.

Batter, for aer part, doesn't understand aer emotions. It feels like ae is under a lot of pressure, like this moment is very important, yet at the same time ae feels like ae is completely safe to do anything. Or maybe—completely safe to *have done* anything. Batter feels like ae wouldn't really be judged for admitting to mistakes—unless Glace thought that ae was just trying to make em seem better in comparison.

Glace doesn't say anything, and Batter wonders if that means ae did something wrong—but Glace continues to hold on.

G: …

G: I've never really understood why you all have to wear gloves

G: Are they, like, comfortable at least?

B: i dont know

B: was i supposed to be keeping track of if theyre comfortable i kinda forgot to do that

G: Do you take them off when you get home?

B: isnt it bad for my skin health if take them off

G: Why?

G: I've heard reasons for that, but it's different ones every time, and it just feels fake to me

G: Frankly, the way you dress, I thought you'd be more cognizant about this sort of thing.

B: i dont know what you mean by the way i dress is it noticeable or something

Batter is just wearing jeans and a t-shirt right now. Aer shoes, black and grey, sit by the door.

G: Your hair, I mean.

G: I—Sorry

G: In my head, I equated having cool hairstyles to cultural awareness, since I've met a lot of people like that

B: oh

B: i just have it short so i dont have to take care of it

B: and my parents dont really give a shit either way

G: Oh. That must be nice.

G: …

G: Mine always got on my case about everything

G: Anyway do you just, like, not care about having to wear gloves?

B: i

B: i mean its the way things are right so if it wasnt that way then that would be really confusing to be honest i wouldnt want to live in that world

G: Oh I'm sorry. What's confusing?

B: just the idea of pleading to not be in the world where its healthy to have the gloves on and instead live in the world where theres no reason to do it but shines are still expected to do it anyway and somehow noone anywhere has noticed that or when they did notice it nobody cared enough to change anything

B: i think its a lot more likely that the problem is just me

B: if not then ive done this my whole life without needing to and everyone still expects it from me and i dont want to imagine the looks on their faces if i ever decided to take them off even just admitting to taking them off at home sounds like it would make everyone uncomfortable

G: You don't have to admit to it

B: but why would i ever do anything im not willing to admit to

G: *shrug*

G: Most of the things I do, there are at least some people I wouldn't admit them to

B: but how do you choose

B: its like a box of chocolates right you look at them and theyre all different and maybe the box has a description on it so you can guess what they taste like but if you have one then thats it its gone forever and youll have to just try to remember what it was like and even when choosing them maybe ill read the ingredients and maybe at some point i learned the wrong word for almonds so i have to go back and make sure i actually know what all the ingredients mean and that i would know how to make the chocolates myself if i wanted to just in case the store doesnt have any more of them if i wanted to try them again but i dont remember when i learned what almonds are so i dont have any real way of knowing if i am correct or not i just have to kind of hope that i could approximate the recipe but i cant

B: like if my beliefs are right then theres one group of people i should pick to admit things to but maybe i only think my beliefs are right because of earlier bad decisions on who ive trusted to change my mind on things but if i wanted to know what those earlier decisions were then id have to trace my life back to the very start with every decision ive made and even then i dont

know what things im wrong about in the first place and maybe people just wont want to listen to me at all and i have to think about if i might hurt someone by admitting anything to them and if i start to exclude anyone then ill feel bad because maybe they were actually the most important person to tell things

G: Hey it's okay

G: It's… Yeah, it's complicated

G: And I'm not really sure how you got to your age while avoiding thinking about it

"Avoiding" might not be the right word: Batter spends at least an hour every week thinking about aer beliefs and where they might have come from, and if ae gets to have any say over who it is important to stay in the good graces of and who isn't, and—Ae cried after getting home after trying to disrupt the Eclipse event because ae couldn't stop thinking about how much it would hurt to try to run an event just for a band of teenagers to decide to cut the wires to the projector. Even if Batter and the others failed to actually cut any wires, it still hurts.

G: Or, uhm, why you joined us in the first place

B: i dont know

B: i thought autumn hated me and i wanted to make it up to hir by going to volunteer with hir for something

B: i wasnt invited or anything

G: I don't really think I was either

G: Or, maybe? I found a small card in my mailbox that told me about it, and I decided to go. I thought they'd just sent one of those to everyone.

B: i didnt get one of them

G: Oh. That's okay. I don't think it was meant to be exclusive or anything

G: It's not like there's some prophecy saying "exactly these Five Teenagers will be Very Important and only They can be invited to things"

G: uhm

G: What I'm saying is

G: You already made that choice to prioritize your beliefs over others when you joined us two days ago

G: Heck, every time we do anything, we are in some way prioritizing some beliefs over others

G: If I drink water, then I'm prioritizing myself over all the world's, uhm, water haters

B: please stop

G: Okay

G: Just—you know you're going to have to figure this out, right?

B: please i already think about this way too much and it makes me feel sad and anxious every time

B: i dont even know what eclipse is im just sorry i hurt them

G: Oh :(

They lie there for a few more seconds. Batter would feel embarrassed to be so panicked but at the same time holding Glace's hand, even with the glove on, feels so calming and kind. But now that Batter is embarrassed, and thinking of the gloves—

B: i hate having the gloves on

B: i really hate it i do it makes me feel like im just some dumb shine who has to be guided through everything and like it reminds me every time that im not going to amount to anything

B: i want to change the world i want to do something i want people to be happy but i cant even take off a pair of gloves

B: and they itch and they cause rashes

B: every time i sweat with them on they get rashes so i just dont do anything demanding anymore

B: i just dont do anything hard maybe that's not the gloves fault maybe thats just me

B: …

G: I think you'll amount to something

B: will i really

G: I mean you're very cognizant, I can tell that much

Batter sighs out loud.

B: cognizant this cognizant that i just want to be useful to someone

G: You were useful to me today

G: It's really nice of you to come out here to be with me

B: thanks

B: …

B: but if im right then why is everyone else wrong

B: i dont get it

G: I don't know either. That's just how the world is.

G: Most people are wrong about most things

G: We're all just so young and silly

B: but why this specifically why would so many people be wrong about the anatomy of shines' hands

G: There's something I was shown when I was young that this really reminds me of—Did you go to Bakers Elementary?

B: no im new to this city

G: Okay

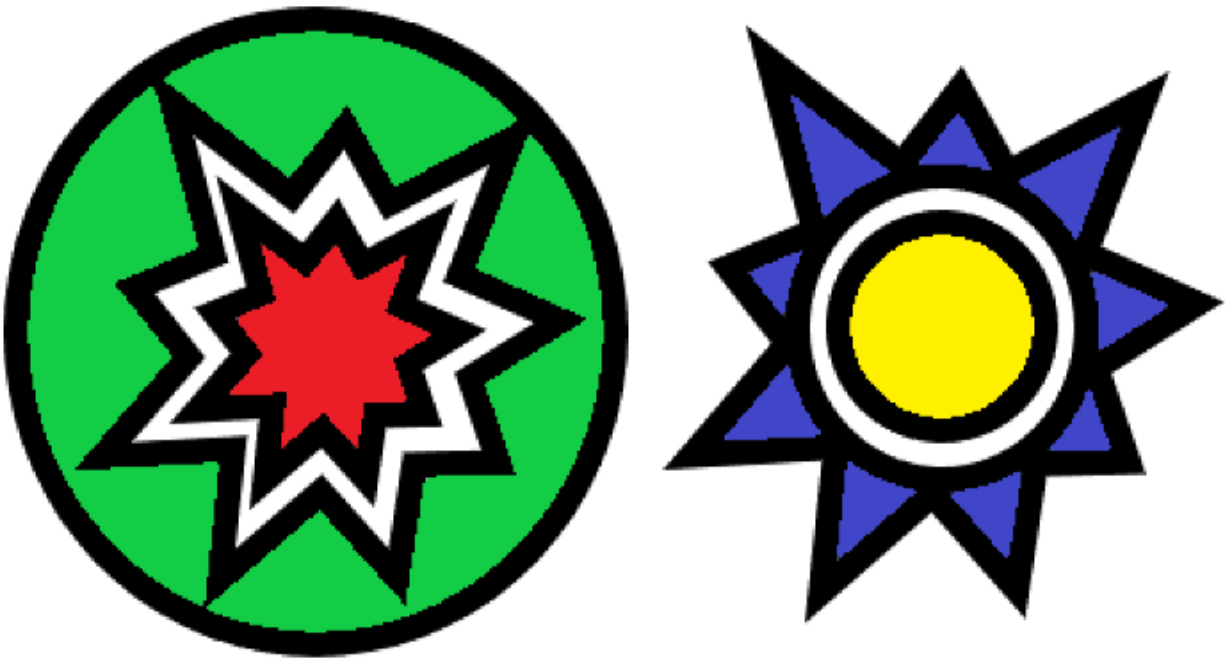
G: Hold on lemme think of something they showed me back in like 4th grade

B: okay

They lie there, again, for a short while. Batter wonders if, if aer gloves were off, ae would be able to feel Glace's heartbeat through aer hand.

G: Okay here

G:



G: Sorry that's low quality I didn't spend long thinking up the visuals

G: But green is spring, red is fall, blue is winter and yellow is summer

G: They showed me this in elementary school to, like, explain how marriages were going to work when we're older

G: I don't know if they still teach it nowadays, even back when I was taught it it seemed kind of like the teacher didn't want us believing it

G: But uhm

G: You're yellow, right? You're soft and round and you fit into a drift's life where the soft round thing is supposed to go

G: And in turn per protects you and handles all the tough things and makes sure you can live your life to the fullest

G: So it's meant to be a trade-off, I guess. You have less freedom, but you become a better caregiver, and the idea is that you gain more freedom in the end from not having to worry about tough decisions

G: It's bullshit obviously but it seems so simple this way

B: but people dont believe that anymore so why should they still take my hands away

G: It's just a holdover

G: Back when the custom first developed, I don't even think it was considered sexual to have a shine's hands visible. It was just a way of showing power. Shines who wore pristine, luxurious gloves obviously weren't doing much work so it became a way of showing power over others.

G: Then the industrial revolution came and we got quote-unquote luxurious gloves for every bloom everywhere

G: And, well, when you only ever see a body part in private, at home, that body part becomes A Sex Thing.

G: We don't see shines' hands in public, so it's seen as explicit now, and that's a really hard thing to change back to being normal.

G: It's like how things are with blooms' chests. Like, blooms and drifts both have breasts, but blooms are supposed to be sort of overseer types who are small and closed-off while drifts are supposed to be big and fat and unashamed, so being shirtless became a drift thing

G: And shines' chests are like that too. Shines don't go shirtless, so it became A Sex Thing, even though there's literally nothing there. So you guys get not one not two but three body parts to hide at all times lest someone accuse you of pedophilia or something

G: I dunno I'm talking out of my ass

G: I just remember being at an airport a couple years ago and seeing a "Lactation Pod" for breastfeeding and I thought, god, can we please be normal about blooms having tits for just like five seconds

G: People make it so important that we hide our nipples For The Children but, honestly, if eight-year-old me saw someone take their top off, I think e would have been more worried if there *weren't* nipples there.

Batter feels bad, seeing how confident Glace is about this sort of thing. Of course it's not hard to research, to talk to people, read books and newspapers, find people to ask questions. Batter just never considers aerself an expert on anything, and not having an end goal makes it hard to start. Even now, Batter would love to ask questions and learn more, but it's such an embarrassing subject. Like, ae could ask, "How do you feel about having to hide your breasts?", but ae can't imagine doing that without subsequently fleeing several counties over and living as a hermit for the rest of aer life. Ae would much rather ask a normal question, something like "Do

you actually like holding hands with me?” or “What happened at your work?” or “What do you think of Autumn and the others?” or—

B: do disabled people have sex

Shit.

Glace laughs at Batter—no, not at Batter, at the question, Batter realizes. Glace holds Batter’s hand more tightly, just for a moment, and Batter wonders if it was intentional.

G: I dunno, do old people? :)

Glace asks this in the tone that would imply a rhetorical question, but Batter has absolutely no clue what the answer actually is.

B: uhm

B: …

G: …

G: Yes, they do.

G: We do.

B: its

B: really weird to have this conversation while holding your hand

G: Do you want to stop?

B: no no please dont

B: i mean uhm

B: i was more thinking the other thing where maybe i take the gloves off and

B: uhm

G: Oh my god you are so pathetic

G: It makes me really want to mess with you more but I’m worried that, if I do, you would have zero ability to stand up for yourself

G: And it’s never fun to play with someone who you might Actually Hurt

B: does that mean you don’t want to hold hands anymore

G: No

G: Just

G: Make sure you’re taking care of yourself

G: It’s not like I’m going to get up and walk away if you decide not to hold my hand the way you think you ought to

G: I kind of can’t get up right now without it hurting a bunch

G: And if you’re worried about hurting me then, like,

G: I dunno

G: I’ve been touched in far worse places by people I liked far less than I like you

B: oh thats nasty dont make me imagine that

G: Hey, I survived

G: They weren’t being malicious or anything they just… had no idea how to date someone

G: And I didn’t either

G: …

G: Sorry I’m used to having a bunch of adults as friends and it’s cathartic to talk about things like this

G: Even when I was sixteen I’d joke about this and I could tell they wanted to share their own stories but not to someone as young as me, haha

B: im an adult too

G: I mean yeah, but

G: …

Glace doesn’t really have to complete the statement. *You act like a child*.

G: But you seem less comfortable around this sort of thing, and I keep bringing it up despite that

G: So I'm sorry about that

B: no its really interesting im just not really used to it

B: but i want to be

G: I think most people who are uncomfortable with things want to be comfortable with them

G: The alternative isn't really fun

G: Don't force yourself to discuss something that's gonna freak you out.

B: but if it freaks me out then thats why its important to talk about it

B: if i never talk about things that make me uncomfortable then im never going to learn anything

B: most things are scary because theyre so complex and incomprehensible but thats why its important to try

B: …

G: …

B: i guess ill just uhm

B: take them off now

Batter lets go of Glace's hand, and takes the gloves off, one at a time. Ae can't find a place to put them, so ae just puts them to the left of aer leg, so they aren't between aer and Glace. Ae worries, for a moment, if Glace will find something somehow wrong with aer hands, but decides that even if that's true, it's okay to be insulted by Glace so long as e holds aer hand while doing it.

If beforehand holding Glace's hand felt important, it now feels like Batter's frontal lobe has been put into a microwave from how stressful it is. **Batter doesn't know how to describe the feeling of eir skin.** It feels like ae could fall asleep right now and nothing bad would happen ever again. It's a solemn, quiet feeling. Like this moment is forever, in a single moment. **It's a little bit rougher than ae expected, and a bit colder, and it has a lot of little lines in it, and different parts of it are more solid than others, if only by a little bit.** Ae is incredibly afraid of making a mistake, or pushing Glace away. Batter doesn't have to worry

about time passing anymore, because time no longer exists. Batter has never before felt so trusted. **Ae sits there, for maybe a minute, trying to focus on it as much as ae can, or as little as ae can—ae can't really tell which.** Batter can't tell why, but ae wants to cry.

G: …

G: What are you thinking about?

B: oh uhm

B: i was trying to tell if i can feel your heartbeat or if i was just imagining it

G: Oh, I don't think you can feel it there

G: I'd offer my neck but uhm

G: I keep forgetting you're really new to this and probably dont want that

B: can i squeeze your hand

G: Yeah :)

G: It doesn't hurt very much today so that would be fine

Batter does. Ae can feel all the little bones on the back of the hand, and all the little parts on the front that are more resistant or less resistant to pressure. Ae squeezes multiple times, in several spots, to see if ae can feel eir heartbeat.

B: i still cant tell if theres anything

B: i think i feel a heartbeat but i cant tell if its mine or if its yours

G: That's actually kinda cute :)

B: …

B: thanks

B: i was kinda worried it was awkward or something to just lie there as i did that

G: It takes a lot to get me to feel awkward about things

G: I just like people in general and I like being around them

B: …

B: am i uhm

B: allowed to touch your neck?

G: Uhmm

G: Very slowly

B: okay

Batter gets, slowly, up to aer knees, puts a hand down between aer and Glace, leans forward, and lightly presses aer finger against Glace's neck. Ae can feel the heartbeat, Glace's heartbeat: *one, two, three,*

G: Stop.

Batter pulls aer hand back, taking care not to upset aer balance—ae doesn't want to shake the bed by accident, because that might hurt Glace. Hurt Glace more than Batter just did, that is. Fuck. Ae should have known that was a terrible idea, ae isn't sure why ae did it, Glace might not even be willing to hold aer hand anymore and WHY is that the first problem ae thinks of instead of that fact that Glace just got hurt.

G: Sorry, that hurt more than I expected it to.

G: You didn't do anything wrong, and you're the new one to this, so I should have been more careful.

B: im so sorry

G: It's okay. The pain probably won't last very long.

G: It's not like I like you for being good at touching. I like you because you've been kind to me, and that's not different now

G: Just—hold my hand again.

The reassurance doesn't quite get rid of the feeling that Batter had done something wrong, but Batter lays back down, and holding eir hand again makes aer feel better. Batter feels guilty for that, but doesn't let go.

B: i really shouldnt have done that i dont know why i did that im so sorry

G: Batter

G: …

G: You know how you said earlier that you hated me beating myself up

G: And it made you feel like I just was trying to get rid of you

B: sorry

G: No I mean—

G: sigh

G: You're alright, okay?

B: okay

G: …

G: Thank you for being here today and for talking to me yesterday and for driving me home two days ago

G: I know you feel bad for what you did to Eclipse but thank you for messing with them, too

G: What we tried to do was mean-spirited but if it worked maybe it could have stopped someone from going down that rabbit hole

B: could you explain what the group is to me

G: Would it make you feel better?

B: i like listening to you explain things

G: Okay

G: Well

G: I'm not really sure where to start

G: It's not really anything specific? I could say that they're a cult group with the goal of overthrowing democracy in favor of a fascist dictatorship but that's honestly only like a tenth of them.

G: It started as a bunch of people really believing that, at Year Zero, some supernatural event will prove definitively that the social norms that used to exist are better than the ones we have now.

G: That's why it's called Eclipse: there's the moon genders, fall and winter, and they think that those will eclipse the sun genders, spring and summer; where shines exist to be stay-at-home caretakers, too weak to fend for themselves, and blooms are only allowed to be strong enough to take whatever abuse winds hurl at them.

G: To be more general, uhm, it's "people who want a fascist dictatorship and then everyone who, for whatever reason, is willing to work with the people who want a fascist dictatorship."

G: So, anything from puritans and anti-abortion activists to classists and xenophobes

G: Most of them think that everyone else in the group is just a useful idiot. It's a really mean environment to be in

G: Does that make sense?

B: not really

B: why do any of them work together if theres so many different goals they want

G: Because they think their thing is the most important, and they think that strongly enough that they're willing to all agree to push for the same things.

G: If someone is there because they believe shines should only ever be housekeepers, they might not get along with the people there to massacre the people of the countries we conquered, but they have a common enemy: the person who thinks everyone should be equal.

B: oh

B: so if we didn't do that then they wouldnt work together

G: I'm not sure

G: I'd think that politics was always bound to divide along the lines of "wants more equality" and "wants less equality," but then I'd think that the "wants more equality" faction would be pro-union, and that hasn't happened ever since Cobble was founded by anarchists

G: Maybe union support will happen again someday. I don't know. The fucking wealth gap is insane but maybe rich people are just More Responsible, maybe unions just make things worse for everyone

G: sigh

B: why are anarchists related to unions

G: They like unions

B: oh okay

G: I mean, they like anything that takes something top-down and makes it bottom-up instead. They'd prefer if life were more like a bunch of sports teams trying to compete to be the best for everyone, instead of the big ranking system we have now

G: Because you can leave a sports team, but you can't leave a ranking system

B: oh

B: why did cobble fail then

G: Uhm

G: Did you fall asleep in history class?

B: maybe

To be fair, Batter didn't expect history to ever actually come up in conversation—that's no excuse. Batter should have done better, ae knows.

G: …

G: We don't know.

G: We built a massive wall the moment their government chose a name for itself. Apparently a big panic was happening over "demonic occurrences," and Cobble was a good scapegoat

B: oh okay

G: For all we know, it's still going strong, but there aren't really signs to support that

G: Or any other conclusions

B: do you think it died

G: I…

G: The soldiers we have up on the wall haven't seen any people trying to cross it in a very long time

G: It was mostly just one big wave at the start

G: And, I dunno, it's just really weird. If it failed or succeeded, you'd expect at least some people to try to cross over.

G: It's like it just disappeared.

G: …

G: Maybe that's why people are so afraid of communists, haha

G: …

B: thats really scary yeah

B: …

At this point, Batter doesn't feel nearly as stressed, anymore. Glace talking to aer made the hand-holding feel more normal. Normal feels worse because it feels less special, but it also feels a lot better because it feels stable. It feels like Batter could let go, knowing that Glace might hold aer hand again sometime in the future.

But then—there's still that fear, that worry that Batter might mess up, and Batter is scared of the idea that Glace might take it back, might say that handholding shouldn't happen anymore and that it never should have happened in the first place.

G: …

G: You know, this is kinda nice

G: Every other time I've held someone's hand, or layed down on the bed with someone, they've thought it's a prelude to something

G: They were always so anxious that, if I don't want them physically, they have nothing to offer me

G: With you, it just feels friendly.

G: Thank you for that.

That does make Batter feel a bit better. But it also makes Batter feel a bit worse, since ae keeps being afraid of Glace disliking aer, and ae might just be relying on the handholding to feel like a normal friend.

B: what were those other people like

G: Oh, they were the people I dated.

G: They—I don't know, they were all different but they were all the same

G: They came to me because I made them feel like the things people say about winds aren't true, and they left me because they didn't actually work out with me.

G: That's about all there is to it.

B: why was that true

G: …

G: When breezes grow up, all people really tell them is that they're dangerous. That they're bound to hurt people.

G: It's just, like, the expectation. Sure, there are the good ones, but those are outliers, and some people think it's unnatural to even try to have young breezes not be dangerous.

G: Because, when they become an adult, and get married to a bloom, it's eir job to fix the wind. Blooms are supposed to pacify the winds, and guide them into becoming better people, either with praise or with punishment.

G: But the people who dated me, they didn't want that. They didn't want to feel like a tamed monster. They wanted to feel like they were just intrinsically safe and kind.

G: And so they chose to date me. Because I'm disabled.

G: …

G: It's not like they did it intentionally. They wanted to feel empathetic and kind. They wanted to be loved and trusted, instead of being disciplined.

G: So they chose me, a person who was powerless, so they could give me all the power in the relationship and then feel responsible for doing so.

G: They felt like they were being kind and responsible for just… not doing anything, and only existing for me to want or need them physically. All they wanted to do was sit there and be loved, instead of interacting with me as a person.

G: On the inside, they still felt dangerous, so they were afraid to actually be a person around me. They'd feel bad whenever I didn't want to touch, or wanted to do a task myself, or just wanted a break from them.

G: Even when I did want to touch, they'd always be worried that I didn't feel safe with them doing so, so they kept asking to be allowed to do more and more things with my body.

G: They felt like their only worth in the relationship was physical affection and helping me with basic tasks. They didn't really think they had anything else to offer me.

G: And maybe they didn't, I don't know. I just wish they'd tried.

G: …

Batter's and Glace's hands are still intertwined during Glace's few seconds of silence. Batter could almost be convinced that Glace's hand is gone, since ae can't feel a temperature difference between them anymore, but every so often there's a little change in pressure and Batter is reminded of how much Glace loves aer all over again.

G: Sorry, I promise my life isn't actually as depressing as I make it sound sometimes

G: I still have a lot of years to live

G: And, well,

G: You're not one of those dumbasses who thinks your only value to me is physical, right?

Batter really, really hopes that that is true. Because if it's true, then that means Batter doesn't have to feel so guilty about holding Glace's hand, and wanting nothing else from life but being physically appreciated by Glace.

…Batter really, really hopes that that's an exaggeration, too.

B: im not

Batter feels guilty for saying this. Ae is scared that it might be wrong.

G: Thank you

They sit there, together, in silence, for a little while. Batter feels almost incapable of thinking anything coherent, so ae doesn't.

A few minutes pass, with them just lying down together, holding hands.

T: Hey testing testing did I finally get this thing working?

Batter flinches. Did ae just imagine that? It felt so visceral, and it felt exactly like telepathy normally feels, but—Batter has never heard that voice before.

D: …who the hell are you.

G: Holy shit Twowi

G: Jesus Fuck

G: I've never been so happy to hear your voice

A: Who is this?

E: ooo a new person??

C: Let per speak, whoever per is.

T: A patron of mine found this at a park ereyesterday.

T: They thought I could find whoever had lost it there

T: Took me a couple days to figure out its functions.

D: …all you had to do was hit a button.

T: Surprisingly, it wasn't that simple. But I figured it out.

T: I've heard of these things. Didn't think I'd find one.

T: I had to adjust the firewall to talk to yall.

T: As a side-effect, the government's system should include you again.

T: Has a ton of useful features that I re-activated, too.

A: Is that why we're all able to hear each other?

T: Yeah. I’m sorry to disrupt all of your important business.

T: And sorry that I overheard some of your telepathic conversations.

A: You did what.

G: Oh, that’s fine

G: Thank you so much

T: It’s nothing, really. To both of those. I don’t gossip.

T: Come by to pick the thing up whenever you like.

[SYSTEM]: Twowi has closed the group chat.

Batter, bewildered and confused, looks over at Glace, who is crying.

G: I

G: I used to go to the place that per runs.

G: …

G: Well, now we don’t have anything to worry about

G: It’s all okay

B: do you still want to be my friend

G: haha

G: Of course I still want to be your friend.

Glace holds Batter’s hand more tightly, just for a moment.

2.4

You don’t really like cities. They’re too designed! Too mechanical! Every object has just one purpose. When a tree falls over, it’s called coarse woody debris, useful to its environment and to

its inhabitants. When a street lamp falls over, it's called property damage! Useful to no one, not even the bugs.

Speak of the devil, and one appears—not a fallen streetlamp, but a bug. It's a spider, crawling up your shirt, down your sleeve, onto your forearm, onto the back of your hand. It must be confused!

You don't mind bugs traveling onto you. You were given the gift of good genes, and you aren't allergic to any of the bugs you'd find anywhere nearby. Even then, the spider on you is small and light—it looks as if its bite wouldn't even break skin, let alone do anything dangerous to you, regardless of genes. You place your fingers to either side of it, and slide them together. Squish! *Fifty-three*.

Your name is Ebony, by the way. If that wasn't obvious.

It's 7:30 PM, and you are walking along the streets of Miette, under the bright canopy of roughly eleven stars. It's that calm, quiet time of night where the sky is dark enough to be a void without being so dark as to invite the cosmos. It's a sky you wanted to experience, so you "accidentally" parked a few blocks away from Twowi's bar, much like how sometimes you accidentally stay out too late or how you might accidentally leave behind items at the houses of people you want to see again.

Twowi is standing just outside a door, which you assume would be the entrance to per bar. You were told that it doesn't look much like a bar, and: yep! It looks more like a back entrance. A mural has been painted along the wall, door included. It's a painting of Earth being held in the arms of a naked shine. It's beautiful, even behind the graffiti, and it makes you sad.

T: Hi there. Inside this cardboard box is your lost item.

You nod, and step forward to receive it. The box gives off a warm buzz, not physically but mentally. It feels like it rubs a spot that has never been rubbed before. You can feel its activity, now, as three conversations are ongoing: one between Autumn and Diode, one between Batter and Glace, and a third between, well, Twowi and yourself.

T: Be very careful with this. Its functions are highly illegal.

E: i don't like that telepathy is banned :((

T: You don't need to. Just keep it somewhere very safe.

E: okay..

You take it, turn around, and step away. The box gives a metallic clink with your footfalls.

It's a long walk back. You don't mind.

"Hi," A small, raspy voice notices you. You try to avoid looking over, but you manage to process the person's looks anyway: a thirty-something breeze, hunched over, huddled in a blanket and staring a little past you. "I need—" it continues, then falters. It falters for a long time.

Twelve.

"Need—need—please can—"

You can't think of the voice as anything but an *it*. It burrows its way into your skull and stays there as you walk past. It's always the same, and you can almost feel what it might be like to search for words in your head just to be bombarded with the wrong ones, to look into the eyes of a stranger and struggle to pick them out from the hundreds of eyes on every surface, hundreds of eyes in every particle of air, to try to listen to their footsteps and hear people around you, above you, walking right next to your head and feeling their footsteps in your skin. You've been told before that the experience of being a Nameless is unimaginable. You wish it really were.

You take a step. Then another, then another. The voice doesn't follow you.

It's in your hands. You're sure ze can feel it: the telepathy box, its warmth, the conversations people are happily having with it. Holding the box, you can tap into its flow of information, and so too can anyone around it. The warmth isn't false, either: you're sure Coral or Twowi could find a way to help this person, to block out all the telepathic signals, to leave hir the same as ze was before ze lost control of hir true name—or, at least, as close to how ze was before as ze could get, after going through possibly decades of living like this. It would save hir life.

Another. Another. Another another another another another…

You sit down before getting close to your vehicle, and stop to breathe. You wish you could help them. You wish you had. You wish it were that simple. It is that simple: you should have helped. You should go back and help. You should kill yourself, frankly.

Oh.

Maybe it would—maybe it would be helpful to imagine, like, an anvil falling way above your head, and then you can get up and move out of the way of it. Here, here's the anvil, it's falling, one hundred meters, ninety, eighty, sixty, thirty, ten, one—

It falls on you. You didn't move. Well, that's probably not a good sign.

You think it would be better to imagine the anvil on someone else! Then, maybe, you can go get them out from under it. So you could imagine the anvil above that nameless breeze you just met, or above Twowi, or maybe above everyone all at once!

You look up. The star is there, now. It's… it's not very hard to imagine an anvil being above everyone, all at once.

You sigh.

You really, really should tell someone. Or do something. Maybe… maybe you should listen to one of the conversations happening right now. Then you'll feel better?

You tune in to Autumn and Diode. You found that you like both of them! Diode is fun to joke with and both of them pay close attention to what people say. You're sure they won't mind you eavesdropping on them, especially if they never find out that you did.

A: Yeah, it's a small apartment. I'm surprised e lives alone. E must be on benefits or something.

D: …it's a bad idea for people that young to be using canes…

A: I'm sure e knows that already. No need to repeat it.

A: Fawn is holding up surprisingly well. I'd be mad as hell if I had to be in handcuffs for days on end.

A: Or well I'm mad regardless but more at Coral and at the police.

A: Sp. Whoever The Fuck disappearing while Fawn held eir hands should never have been grounds for an arrest. Do the police really believe that demonic crap?

D: …it's their job to pretend to.

D: …that's why we have police… so people feel safe from that shit…

A: That's not why we have police.

D: …alright… whatever you say…

A: If you disagree with me then just say it.

D: …you are correct about everything ever… you hold zero wrong opinions…

A: You're kind of a pain.

D: …thanks…

You tune out. *Thirty-nine*. It didn't help as much as you'd hoped it would.

It's kind of sad that those two don't really get along, but you're not all too surprised about it. Heck, soon enough, you'll give everyone the box back, and they won't be stuck with each other anymore, so they don't really need to get along well. So it's alright.

You get up, to finish your journey back to where you parked. You wonder when you'll tell everyone that you got the telepathy box—you should have told them immediately, but you didn't. So, now, you have to find the next-best time, or else they'll be mad at you for not having done it sooner.

Maybe when you get home.

Every once and a while, a car comes by, going maybe 45 miles per hour on the 30 miles per hour road. *One hundred and fifty five*. You understand them: going fast is fun! And the lanes are eleven feet wide. They just *feel* like you're supposed to drive 60 on them. Going 45 feels like a major concession to the city rules, and you couldn't even imagine going any slower than that.

Soon enough, you're there. As the door slams shut, the outside world and its volumes all drop down to a whisper—you hadn't noticed how loud the wind was until it stopped. You take a few moments to breathe. You look down at the package in your lap. It would be best to open it later, where things are safer, but you are driven in large part by curiosity and rule-skirting.

The tape tears off satisfyingly. You look inside, to find three objects of high importance. One of them you expected, the telepathy box! It's just as pretty and shiny as it was the last time you saw it. The second, in hindsight, shouldn't have come as a surprise, but you peer quizzically at it nonetheless. It's a key. A note is attached, "For Fawn." For aer handcuffs, you realize. The note has a second side: "Don't ask me why I have this :P - Willow."

In that case, you should just go directly to Glace's apartment, to give Fawn the key. "Hey," you might say, "I forgot to notify all of you that I got the telepathy box safely, but I saw this key and thought Fawn should have it immediately—" No, that sounds really stupid.

Or, you could head home, and then pretend you opened the box there, and then you notify everyone, and then you go give Fawn the keys, and it only takes maybe fifteen minutes. Fifteen more minutes of Fawn being in constant suffering, bones grinding against metal, arms contorted behind aer back.

You start the ignition, and begin to head home. *Forty.* Driving the truck is always a zen-like experience, perfectly designed to fulfill all your physical and mental needs. The chair is comfortable, the music distracts you from any cohesive thoughts, the insulation from the outside world's heat and sounds makes you feel safe and secure. When you're in a vehicle, you almost

wish the ride would never end. It scares you: if there is a time in your life when you are hurting the others the most, and using up the most resources… heck, if there's a time in your life when you're most likely to *kill* or *be killed*, it's while driving this truck. But, when driving home, you take the long way, because you want to.

Your glacier doesn't say anything as you open the front door, mostly because you don't. First, you go to the hedge-fenced garden, and change out of your skirt and crop-top, into something you wouldn't be burned alive for wearing in front of your parents. You keep extra clothes under the gardening bin, in a hole you dug—the bin hasn't moved, or been touched by your parents, in years, so it's safe to store things there. And you don't mind your clothes getting dirty! That's half the point, actually: you just like the texture.

Okay, *now* you open the front door, to exactly the reaction you expected. You aren't scared to walk in with the shoddily-repackaged box: per might have yelled at you for having it, but would never have actually looked inside. Even then, you could just say it's decorative—small granite boxes don't tend to have actual functions worth investigating.

Per looks into your eyes, and you start to worry that you're wrong about this.

Per is sitting on the couch against the wall. It faces the TV (which is in the center), and the hallway behind and to the right of the TV. The couch is set up so per can see both you and your sun approaching from the hallway. Per doesn't like to be started, and has never really elaborated on why. Per sits casually, with a neutral face. Per doesn't emote, nor yell, when per says: "You weren't at church two days ago."

"I wasn't."

Per pauses for a few seconds. "They had arts and crafts. You would have liked that."

"Wawa," (like papa for blossoms, mama for suns, or lala for gales), "God is in the heart. I take Em with me."

"It would be nice to see you there sometimes."

"I know."

You stand there, for a few moments. Per continues looking at you, but does not say more. Per looks down at the ground, after a while. Then back at the TV. You turn around. You walk away.

Two hundred and sixty three.

You walk past the hall, which is full of religious sayings and imagery. Into your room, which is also full of religious imagery.

If there's any lesson you've learned from your parents' religion, it's that it's okay to do bad things so long as you feel guilty about it. And if there's any lesson you've learned from all the rest of the world, it's that that isn't true.

You sigh.

Fucking mushroom deity. You could have spent your whole life believing yourself to be a good person. You could have been the good little breeze that your parents wanted, could have done so many bad things and then felt good about it because you went back to church and confessed to a sin-hating, sinner-loving bigot in a small, wooden box about all the mistakes you'd made.

When you were small, seven years old, your petal got a bad staph infection. You were led to be beside eir deathbed. E looked into your eyes. E said, "I'll miss you. But it will be okay. We'll meet again in Heaven, someday." E smiled. You smiled, too. You didn't believe em—You still held out hope.

When you were small, seven years old, you didn't believe in Heaven anymore. Your petal died a few hours after looking into your eyes. *One*, you'd thought, and then decided never to lie ever again. Not about your beliefs, not about anything you'd done, or anything you were going to do. You decided, from then on, to be perfect.

Two, you'd thought, when you lied again.

Ever since you were seven years old, you have lied about your beliefs two hundred and sixty-three times. You have done something selfish, to save face, forty times. You have eavesdropped thirty-nine times, lost seven books, ran four red lights, noticed three hundred and ninety-seven pieces of litter that you did not then pick up, ignored twelve homeless people after they'd talked to you, killed fifty-three bugs, and eaten seven hundred and forty five thousand, six hundred and fifteen calories worth of meat.

One hundred and five times, you've used the imperial system of measurement when the metric system would have worked. You don't care as much about that anymore, but you used to, and you can't bear to let that version of yourself to go waste.

One time, you have failed to notify the world about a massive celestial body currently hurtling towards it. Or, well, either it's one time, or it's infinite. You have never *not* failed to notify the world, but there is only one celestial body.

You… really, really, really should tell someone.

Tomorrow, you decide. You'll tell the world—next week. Next month? No. At this point, it has been thirteen years of not telling anyone. It does not *matter* if it is today, or tomorrow, or next month. What is important is being believed, and being able to pretend that you haven't known about it for your entire life.

On your birthday, in six months, you'll tell everyone. The first day of your adulthood. A brand new start. Today is October 6th; On your birthday, April 13th, you'll tell everyone about the world ending.

And it won't be too late. Hopefully.

…You open the box, and pull out the third important item. Bubble wrap. Pop pop pop. It feels really good to have decided when to tell everyone! It feels like a big weight has been lifted off your shoulders. Pop pop pop. You feel like you've gotten a brand new start already.

And with a brand new start, comes actually telling people things!

[SYSTEM] Ebony has created a group chat.

[SYSTEM] 3/5 accepted.

D: …?

[SYSTEM] 5/5 accepted.

E: i got the box!! it's at my house..

A: Cool.

C: Thank you for the notice.

[SYSTEM] Autumn has left the group chat.

[SYSTEM] Diode has left the group chat.

G: Nice

B: does that mean well all head our separate ways tomorrow

E: it could!!

E: but first we have to make sure everyone is okay with that,,

E: which i think we will be!!

B: ill miss you

E: aww thanks..

E: we can stick together, if you want!!

G: It will be simpler if we don't

G: But I don't know. I'm still wondering how the mesocosm works. I don't want to leave that behind without learning more first

C: I'll explain more of that tomorrow.

G: Okay

[SYSTEM] Glace has left the group chat.

[SYSTEM] Coral has left the group chat.

B: bye

[SYSTEM] Batter has left the group chat.

Yet another weight off of your shoulders. Nobody even questioned anything! It makes you feel kind of silly for waiting.

You look up, at your walls. They're full of religious imagery. One symbol in particular! Here's that symbol: h

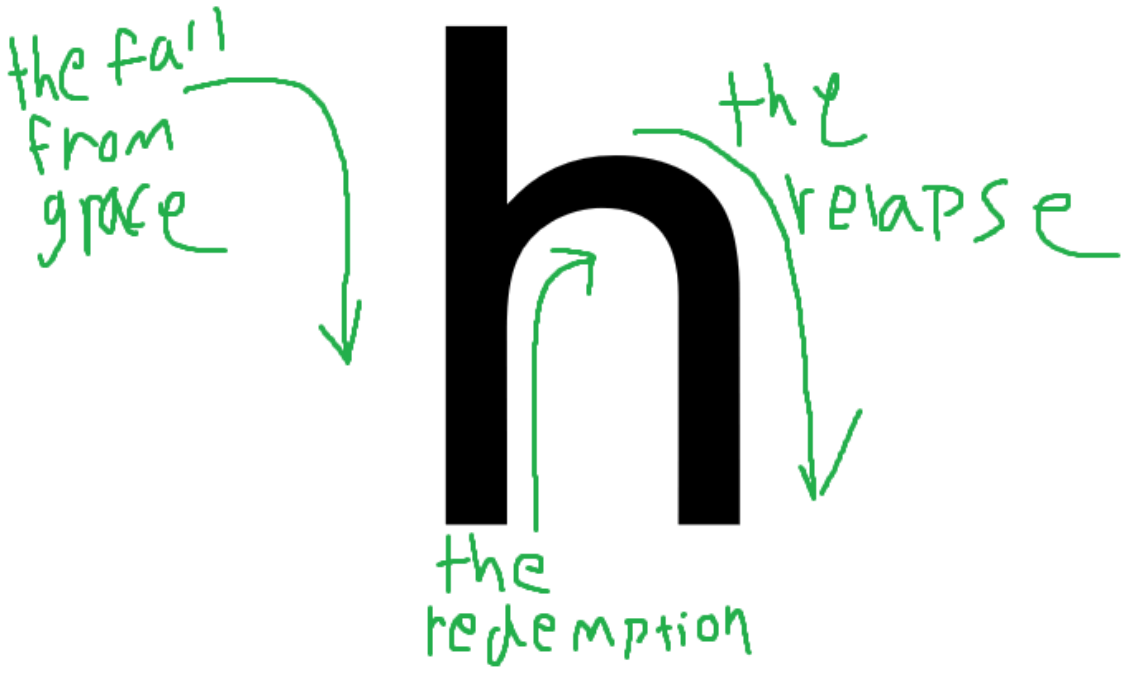
It represents the turbulence of life, the temptation of sin, and the fact that (h)umanity is doomed to, slowly, stop believing in God.

Do you really need to explain why h has so much symbolism? It's kind of obvious to you. But, fine, here's a helpful image:

h

Hopefully that clears up any confusion.

Okay, FINE, you'll explain further.



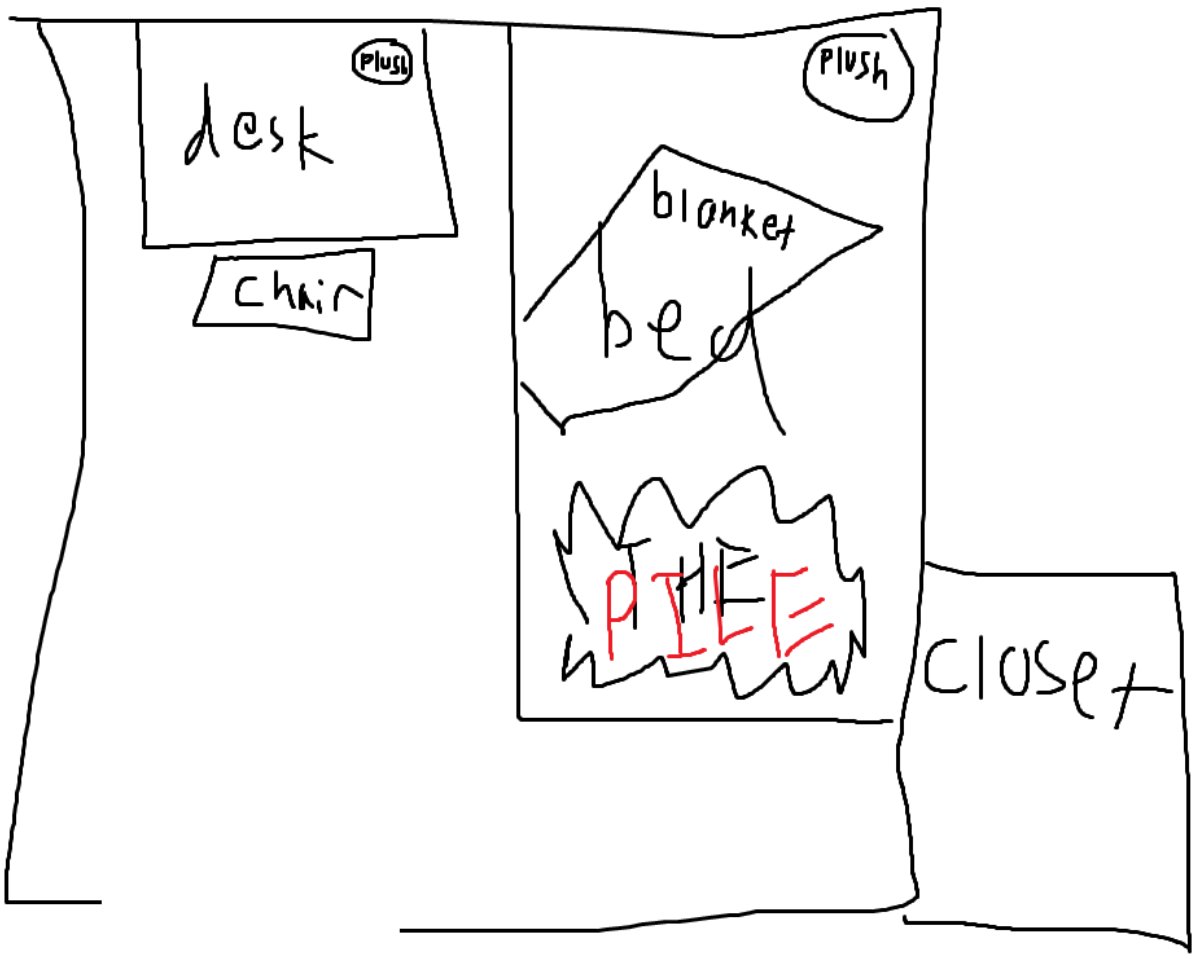
There! That should make everything obvious!

(your mind's eye is, thankfully, very good at drawing h)

You look around your room. Everything is in a neat, orderly pile, which would be helpful if not for the fact that you have no idea what order things are in, in the orderly pile! It was all piled up by your sun, who cleaned the room yesterday. You can still feel the lack of grime within the carpet floor; it makes you very slightly sad.

Besides that, there's a couple plushies, a blanket, and you!

Here's a map:



You've always been somewhat ambivalent about your room. You wish you'd gotten to decorate it more! But every time you wondered about how something would look, you got embarrassed and you were too afraid to ask. You could have filled your room with figurines, or marbles, or pretty rocks, or helicopter seeds, or inspirational quote posters that have been edited to say the wrong things! But no, it's all just what it's been for several years. You're afraid that, if you asked to change it, your parents would think something had happened to you.

Your closet, however, has been fully decorated the way you want it to be. It's a shrine to Johannes Kepler, who you found out about by reading books about planetary motion and how celestial bodies definitely don't fly towards the earth at high velocity. You've carved eir face into the closet wall. E is just that cute! You put the telepathy box under eir watchful eye.

Oh, wait, sorry, that map forgot to include the bedroom door to your room! Here, let us get a map that has both your bedroom *and* your bedroom door pictured:



(words in green: “you!”, “your bedroom door (storage facility)”)

There we go! That map has both.

You get up, keys in pocket (of multiple kinds!), and start the 10-minute journey to Glace’s apartment. You settle into the perfectly-shaped leather seat with an exhale. The engine hums; you understand that it’s loud on the outside, but from the inside it feels like a soft rumble, a little bit of bass added to your songs!

And you have a lot of songs. The radio is unnecessary; your mind, at all times, is playing at least *something*. Probably a result of all those mushrooms you (safely and well-researched-ly) ate as a child. Whoops! But it’s fun to sing along, and they’re always thematic! If a little bit annoying.

You’ve noticed how your life is centered so much around life on four wheels; you simply cannot get anywhere without driving. And you don’t blame anyone for building things this way! The interior feels calm, meeting your every need. You feel like you could drive 90 without a care in the world. When you drive, you almost wish it would never end, the hypnotic rhythm of minor adjustments. You hate when it’s disrupted; there’s one section of road slanted just perfectly so that you neither have to press gas nor press the brake, maintaining the right speed requires simply letting go. And you hate it! You hate letting go of anything, especially not the controls to your multi-ton murder machine.

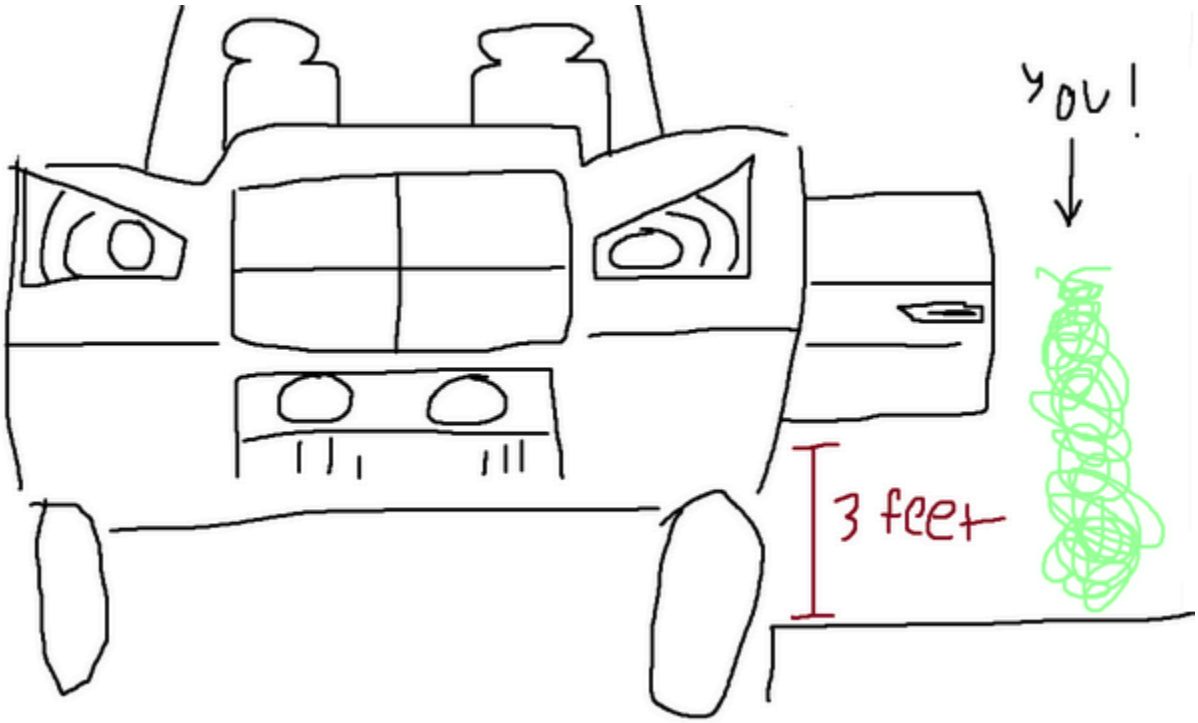
(That's ninety kilometers per hour! Not miles. Miles are part of the imperial system; and you HATE imperialism. It's part of why you joined the team against Eclipse! Luckily, it's easy to convert between the two systems: just memorize the Fibonacci sequence. Duh.)

All the close attention that was paid to making sure people are comfortable on their commutes—it gives you hope about humanity. It makes you so comfortable, even, that you hit a bicyclist one time on 8th Arterial—Not thinking about that! Not thinking about that. Whoops.

(To be fair, bicycles are quite small)

Anyways. Vroom vroom. You get there rather quickly. You sit for a few seconds, before opening the door, and jumping down to the ground.

Hmm. You walk around your vehicle, and look closely at its front: it was nice to talk with Batter about how the fronts and backs of cars look like faces, but that analysis performed on your glacier's ULTRA 350 Bull Heavy-Duty PowerStorm Five Thousand gives it something of a mean edge which you never noticed before.



(to-scale. Mostly.)

You pull a very special object out of your back pocket, and put it on for aesthetic purposes.

And you are SO normal about it.



(words: song lyrics)

You take the sunglasses off once you reach Glace's door, because you think it would maybe cause confusion for someone so cool and stylish to suddenly appear where Ebony, a normal seventeen-year-old, was meant to be. You knock on the door.

There's no response. Hmm.

You knock on the door—not the physical one, but—jeez, you all really need to figure out a different metaphor for notifying people telepathically.

G: Yeah?

E: are you home?? i knocked but nobody answered..

G: Oh, that was you. Thank fuck

G: I thought it might be some stranger, and then I'd have to explain why the person on my couch is wearing handcuffs

E: oh sorry!!

The door opens a few seconds later. You're surprised to see Batter as the one opening the door.

B: hi

E: hi!!

You look past Batter, to an apartment that's smaller than you expected. You couldn't imagine living here! There's almost no space to stretch your legs! But then, maybe Glace prefers it that way.

Fawn sits on the couch, as promised. Ae just looks tired. You walk over.

B: what are you doing here

B: i mean did something go wrong or is there some shit in your home life if you want to stay the night i think that would be fine but im not doing that what time is it anyway

Batter goes off to check the clock, presumably, but doesn't make it all the way— you pull out the key, and ae stops.

B: woah whats that

The couch cushion is surprisingly firm, and doesn't bend much when you kneel onto it. You grab Fawn's wrist—you hope ae doesn't mind—and turn aer around. You take Willow's sticky note off of the key. The key, simple as it is, slots in perfectly. The handcuffs come off easily.

Fawn brings aer hands in front of aer, and you can't see aer face, since aer back is turned towards you. Then, ae uses aer hand to help turn aerself around on the couch. Ae looks at you, without saying anything. Ae is crying.

Ae reaches out with aer hand—you can see the part on aer wrist where the metal scraped against it, the skin chafed. You're surprised it isn't bleeding. Then, ae hesitates, and pulls aer hand back.

You're almost afraid to ask the obvious question, because you're afraid of the answer. You're afraid that, maybe it was a mistake to go to your home before getting the keys to Fawn. But you've decided you're done being regretful, at least for now.

E: are you okay?? have you been doing alright??

Ae smiles much more strongly than you'd think ae should be able to. "Yeah." The word comes out as a choke. Fawn presses aer lips together, looks down at aer lap, and inhales deeply, before standing up suddenly, exhaling. Ae walks a few paces away, almost to the door, and then stops. Ae turns around. Instead, ae walks into the bathroom.

You look at Batter, who is unconcerned.

E: has ae not used the bathroom this whole time??

B: no dont worry ae used it like thirty minutes ago its fine i dont know why ae is using it now maybe ae has gas or something else that we probably shouldnt speculate on

E: oh okay!!

The room feels misplaced, now—there's nothing wrong with it in particular, but it feels just slightly off! It's like when just one part of your body is just a little bit too cold, or when you enter your bedroom to find that something has disappeared, but you can't remember what.

From the bathroom, you can hear a squeak, then a torrent of water pounding against the floor. Which makes sense.

E: is glace doing okay,, e said e was in a lot of pain earlier and i haven't seen em even though e heard me knocking……

B: oh we were just talking on eir bed

E: oh,, could i join??

B: oh i hadnt thought of that i guess thats a thing that can happen now hold on

You wait a few seconds. Batter looks very focused. It's kind of cute.

[SYSTEM] Glace has invited you into a group chat. Accept?

You accept.

G: Hi, we were just talking about relationships and such

G: As I was saying, uhm,

As Glace talks, you enter eir bedroom. It's a bit messy, but you don't mind! Yours would be messy, too, if you didn't have to deal with your sun cleaning it constantly. You think it adds personality! Glace lies on eir bed in the corner of the room. As you enter, Batter also does, and gets onto the bed to lie down next to Glace. You yourself kneel down onto the ground.

Glace looks at you.

G: What

G: Wait

G: Is Fawn showering all by aerself?

E: oh did you not see??

There's no line-of-sight from Glace's bed to the couch.

G: See what?

E: i used these to get fawn free!!

You show Glace the handcuff key, and Willow's note that used to be attached to it.

G: What

G: Okay, uhm, two things.

G: One: I did not know handcuff keys were standardized. I guess it makes sense, so any officer can un-handcuff anyone, but I did not expect it

G: Two: I knew Willow was kinky, but jesus christ

E: is that where it's from?? that's silly :PP

B: what do you two mean

G: It's… nevermind. You can find out on your own time

B: just tell me please

G: It's a sex thing.

B: oh

B: do they wash the key afterwards

G: Uhm

G: Not that type of sex thing

G: But probably still yes

B: okay

G: Sorry, I shouldn't have just blurted that out

G: Uhm

G: Did Fawn say anything? Is ae going home tonight?

B: no ae just went to shower

G: Sigh

G: Ae doesn't like saying much. And whenever ae does, it's like ae is trying to trick me somehow.

G: …

G: Anyway, Ebony wanted to join our conversation?

E: yeah!!

G: Well, as I was saying, then,

G: I've always found it weird that people act like attraction is some no-go-zone politically

G: Like, everyone can agree that if one person finds something unattractive, it's their right to find things that way. And I agree with that. But when you ask one hundred people about if something makes someone unattractive, and they all say yes, then that's discrimination.

G: For some things, of course, it's fine to discriminate. I rather enjoy being able to use "are they an asshole" as a discriminating factor. But when it's something like acne, or being mid-weight, I don't think people realize how much society has nudged them into finding it unattractive.

G: I wonder if I asked the average person if bandages and scars are attractive, how they'd react. Maybe some people would say yes, I don't know. Maybe I'm just wrong about this sort of thing.

G: Um. Hmm.

G: Ebony, I've been wanting to ask, what made you join the group? Like, where do you fall politically?

You think it would be a bad idea to tell Glace that you joined mainly to feel like your actions didn't matter and to feel that the world is silly and fun. And you don't even know how to answer the latter question. Isn't politics something you *do*? If you take it by that metric, you're a centrist, because you don't do anything in particular.

E: uhm..

E: i joined the group because i wanted to be helpful,,

E: and i'm a centrist!!

G: Dammit

G: You wear a skirt! And you're still a centrist?

You're not sure wearing a skirt is performing politics. For you, it's more just getting back at your parents. You are, for what it's worth, wearing one right now! It's nice to wear—though it's a bit dirty, which is part of why you're kneeling instead of getting onto the bed.

G: How did we end up with three of you

E: what do you mean??

G: Autumn and Diode said the same thing when I asked them

G: sigh

G: At least we won't be stuck together for very long.

E: oh sorry i didn't mean to upset you :((

G: Yeah. Nobody does.

G: …

G: Wonder if we all really will go our separate ways

E: i think fawn would get lonely being all by aerself in the mesocosm……

G: Well, ae'd have Coral there too

E: i think fawn would get lonely being all by aerself and also having to deal with coral……

E: batter what do you think??

B: oh um

B: im worried about getting powers i feel like id misuse them and then accidentally fuck something up

E: i don’t think you would!!

B: isnt that the point though arent the powers supposed to turn you evil over time

B: i mean i asked coral and per said that they prey on your bad tendencies

E: we still get to choose when and where to use them!! the world is already really made to prey on our bad tendencies like that’s what casinos are for and i haven’t fallen for those yet either,,

E: i think you’d get a really nice power and then maybe it would make you feel guilty and then your worst tendency would be that you keep thinking you’re worse at using it than you actually are >:))

E: and then eventually you would learn that you’re actually doing okay with it and then it wouldn’t be able to prey on you anymore!!

E: coral didn’t say anything about outgrowing the bad parts of yourself..

B: ok maybe but then it also could give me a weapon or something else that only hurts people and i would have to spend a lot of time away from everyone so i dont accidentally maim them

G: Maybe that’s the real danger of the mesocosm

G: The point of it is to make you basically go insane, right? So it can take over your brain?

G: I don’t see any better way for it to do that than for it to make you want to self-isolate.

G: So it would give you a power that makes you mess up, then you feel guilty, then you become a hermit. And then it wins.

E: oooh so maybe we should just stick together and we’ll all be fine :))

B: why does it even give us powers like if it wants to steal our brains then why wouldnt it just make us insane directly instead of relying on us to misuse its powers

E: well it needs a reason for people to join it!!

E: it’s like casinos again,, nobody's gonna join a casino that just steals your money when you walk in,, it has to have a chance of you winning!!

B: oh ok that doesnt make much sense i dont think its that smart

E: maybe it is!! if its made up of our thoughts then it should be smart i think :))

G: I don’t like the idea of it being smart.

E: maybe it isn’t i don’t know.. maybe it gives us powers because it isn’t smart..

G: I don’t know. Coral made it sound more insidious than that.

G: I agree, though, that it can’t be as dangerous as Coral has been implying. Maybe per is just worried about hurting us after what happened to Fawn.

G: And that was more the police’s fault than anything.

G: Are either of you two interested in how it feels to be in two worlds at once?

G: It must feel fascinating. I wish Fawn would say more about that. Maybe ae will, now that ae isn’t in handcuffs anymore.

G: If I’m being honest, it’s what I keep coming back to when I think about maybe not entering. It’s an experience I can’t get from anything else. I don’t want to leave it behind forever just because I’m worried about getting a bad power or whatever.

E: yeah it sounds cool :))

B: it sounds overwhelming like if its twice the stuff happening all the time to twice the me like i get that there will be two mes and not just one but that sounds even more confusing

E: i’m sure you’ll be fine!!

G: Of course, you don’t have to enter it if you don’t think you’d be happy there. Don’t make yourself do things that scare you

B: but i want to do it and if i dont then ill just sit around regretting my life and having just one more thing that i should have done but i never think about it at the right time and when it is the right time i just sit there on the couch instead of doing anything

B: i find everything just impossible to focus on and i dont know if thats fear or malaise or just me being lazy and im so tired of it im tired of being an airhead

B: if i never did anything that was scary then i wouldnt fucking do anything i wouldnt even go to school really id just stay at home and thats even more fucked because i dont want to be the sort of person who just does nothing ever and wastes aer entire life lazing around

B: maybe its not scary in that way i dont know i just hate when i take the easy path out of things

G: Hey hey it's okay :(

B: sorry i get like this late at night

(It's, like, 8:15pm)

E: that's okay!!

G: I don't think it would necessarily be overwhelming. I don't know if we'll actually do much in the other world. We'd just hang out, I guess.

G: We all need more information on it, I guess.

E: yeah :((

G: …

G: And entering the mesocosm means no more telepathy, if Fawn is anything to go by.

G: I suppose that doesn't matter much if anyone not entering is going their separate ways.

G: sigh

G: I'll miss it.

G: It's nice not having to move my mouth

E: it still feels kinda creepy,,

G: Maybe I want to be a bit creepy :P

G: Maybe that's what my power will be, maybe it will be something creepy…

E: maybe!!

E: what's your worst fear?? it'll probably be based on that :))

G: Hmm, good question.

E: mine's snakes :// i hate them……

G: I'm not very afraid of most creatures. I might get a pet tarantula at some point, I've always kind of wanted one.

G: As for actual fears, hmm.

G: I suppose it can't exactly turn "being left behind" into a power, now, can it.

G: I don't know. I suppose I might just decline to use whatever power it gives me.

G: It can't exactly do much against that.

E: yeah!!

E: i think it'll give you a power that turns you into a demon and makes everyone afraid of you!! and then if you use it too much then the cops will find you and you'll have to turn into a demon to escape them over and over again..

G: Maybe :)

You, Glace, and Batter all stop talking for a little while. The air is calm and contemplative. You feel like you could just lie down on the floor for a while, and nobody would get upset. Even around your school friends, you usually feel the need to entertain them, or convince them that you want them to stay. Maybe it's because Batter and Glace already like each other, that you feel so comfortable—even if you don't entertain them, you know that they'll be happy just interacting with each other.

You like Glace and how e is kind and observant, and you like how Batter really cares about people and is willing to step up to do things for others. Batter seems anxious today, but you can tell ae is calmed by being around Glace. Maybe ae had a bad day. You're sure you'll also grow to like Fawn, if only you could talk to aer for more than five seconds. And you've liked talking to Diode! You initially thought that you'd dislike em, but you've started talking every night before going to sleep, and e's been really fun to joke around with. Autumn always seems like ze doesn't want to talk to people, and you want to know how to get hir to open up more. If you all decide to leave each other, then that will be sad!

And then Coral… well, you don't like Coral much. Per is just so serious all the time! It's like trying to talk to your parents.

It's hard to hear much when Fawn's shower is so loud, but it's monotonous enough that you get used to the sound. You can hear the low hum of the air conditioner in the other room. It's warm outside, today—the sort of day where you're happy you chose skirts and thigh-highs as your personal streak of rebellion. You also hear some other noises, but you can't identify the sources.

Strangely, though, there's the sound of a light *thud* every few seconds—*thud*… *thud*.

It's been a couple minutes when Glace starts talking again.

G: Hmm.

G: How about we make a pact now. If we get powers, and they suck, we won't blame ourselves for anything. And even if the powers are good, and we just suck at using them, we need to promise not to beat ourselves up over it. Okay?

E: okay!!

Thud, thud.

B: yeah if we get powers and the powers are just meant to hurt us then it will be really normal if we dont want to use them at all or if we make mistakes or whatever

B: i hope i wont but nobody gets through life without shit being thrown at them so well just have to make sure we dont panic or decide were not worth being around

E: yeah :))

E: i wonder what i'll get.. maybe i'll turn into a snake……

G: Snakes aren't a bad habit of yours, you know :P

E: you don't know that!! i could be snaking right now and you'd have no idea.. maybe all my worst tendencies are actually just being a snake and i just pretend to be human……

G: What's an actual bad tendency of yours?

E: oh uhm,,

E: sometimes things go badly and then i keep them to myself,,

E: and then i don't change anything so they keep going badly..

G: Oh, I've been there. That sucks

E: thanks..

Your birthday, you remind yourself. You are going to tell them all about the world ending on your birthday. There's no need to feel bad about anything right now, because you have a plan. Good on you, for planning part of your birthday party so many months in advance!

Thud, thud.

Especially when, as of the past couple years, you haven't had a birthday party—you'd feel bad for not having already planned one, and then that made you want to plan it even less, and then, well, the cycle would repeat until you would rather just not have one.

G: I don't know how that would be made into a power, though.

G: Oh, yikes, maybe it would give you knowledge about problems, and it would rely on you feeling bad about not telling anyone else.

G: And then you'd feel guilty for not using the power, too, because then you'd be a bystander to whatever problems there are.

G: I think I could manage having a power like that, but if you're prone to social anxiety then, well.

E: i'm not socially anxious!! i just don't like to bring bad news..

This is a lie—you are completely fine with bringing bad news. The problem comes up when you *could have* brought bad news, in the past, but chose not to.

G: Well, if your powers ever give you information, you can always tell me immediately, okay? You don't have to wait.

Thud, thud.

E: okay!!

B: me too

B: i dont know if ill know how to help but ill try

E: that's really nice of you <33

B: its nothing really if theres one thing im good at its listening to people talk about whatever

B: even if im tired and i cant think straight and im feeling bad i can still listen like i dont even have to try really it just happens

B: and im sure others will listen too like nobody in our group seems like a bad person really i dont think theyd get mad at you for being the messenger that something bad happened or that one of us made a mistake

G: Yeah

G: Even the centrists, regrettably, are decent people

E: whats that mean :((

G: Sorry I'll shut up about that

G: …

Thud, thud.

B: whats that sound that keeps happening

G: Hm?

B: like every few seconds theres a thud like someones jumping oh maybe its just a different floor

G: I mean, this is an apartment, and they didn't bother to make it sound-insulated.

G: You're gonna hear noises sometimes.

B: …

Thud, thud.

G: Actually

G: Sorry if this is me being paranoid

G: But can one of you go make sure it's not coming from the bathroom?

B: okay sure

Batter gets off the bed, and walks toward the door. You follow.

Thud, thud. It is very much coming from the bathroom. You feel out-of-place again, like you're at school after all the staff members have left, or you've been mistaken for someone else, or there's a letter to yourself in your own handwriting that you don't remember at all.

E: oh it is..

G: That's probably not good.

You stand in front of the door. *Knock knock*. No answer.

“Are you okay?” You almost ask, but you don’t, not quite yet.

Thud, thud.

You stand there a little longer. At this point, you feel bad for not having already said something—you’re spiraling. You need to stop, to decide on a plan, fast.

You step aside, and motion for Batter to take your place.

B: why me

E: you’re both shines!! it’s less invasive this way if something is wrong..

B: …

“Hey are you doing alright?” Batter asks. Again, no response. Ae knocks again. It’s pointless.

Batter opens the door, and breathes in suddenly.

Authors note: Chapters 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7 all have much more gore and unsettling imagery than the previous chapters have had.

2.5

The smell hits Batter first. It smells like someone put a washcloth in every orifice of their body before **a devil steps in, filling the room with smoke and regret, overpowering all of the room’s scents and visions. “Batter. All you’re doing with your life is** *dry heaving on the floor, stomach curled and legs trailing*, letting it marinate in period blood. **Taking the** toilet paper, *upset and broken,* **way around everything. Your brain** is strewn about not haphazardly, concentric circles wrapped around the sink as salt lines around a devil. **Scared of it.”**

Fawn has clearly been crying for some time. Under the faucet, Batter could swear it *must be a broken leg, or a ritual.* **The devil steps forward.** *Aer mouth is curled into a faint smile, liquid* is dripping from it, bile, faintly yellow and green with chunks of substance faint enough and weak enough to tear themselves apart over time *dripping down onto aer leg and aer side*.

The air feels damp and heavy; **the devil (**the mirror **of Batter) cries out, “Your heart** has words written over its quiet, reserved portrait, **daring to feel helpful in this world** of Fog. **What**

gives you the right to let yourself Fawn**? Look what you've done** *inadvertently*, **your friend is** *in pain,* **hurting.** *Fawn constructed this scene* **because of you."**

Ae rests. *Batter gags, chokes,* **starts to walk away.** Against the sink's cupboards, aer back a curled lump, *ae feels guilty*. **Batter has** one hand*, endlessly cold, warming up* between aer thighs and the other holding **not** all of aer clothing **but** a small folded pocket knife.

To others, but **one thing done right. Batter is kind.** *That's all. If only it weren't so hard to do it correctly.*

Batter knows that's not enough. The devil has taken aer soul. Ae stands up, takes the knife to the devil. Pressed into aer abdomen, by aer legs, **ae accepts it.** *It* is framed by several small, linear scars; forming an incomplete circle. **Batter's soul,** Under a **dead** foot, rests.

The future *is Batter's. Time to do better. The* **devil is little more than** the roll of toilet paper, adorned with a polka dot pattern of blood.

Time has come. Batter is… **a fiend. But a strong fiend. A fiend that seems to keep growing stronger, if Batter can believe it.**

The shower is still running.

Suddenly, Fawn's arm replaces itself. Aer body spasms, and then teleports, like a glitch on the TV or a hallucination. It appears in several different spots, all facing Batter, staring directly into aer eyes. Then, one of the apparitions takes the roll, suddenly in aer bloodied left hand, and drops it right into the toilet water. Another, a second later, takes aer pocket knife and completes the circle of scars. Ae turns around, almost human again, before teleporting an inch away from Batter's face with the widest, deepest, most genuine smile.

Not half a second later, ae is gone, and Batter hears soft footsteps behind aer. Ae turns around—Glace's apartment door opens, and Fawn steps through.

"THE MESOCOSM," the bathroom mirror says. "AE IS TRAPPED. I DO NOT DESERVE AER. I DO NOT DESERVE ANYTHING."

Batter is deserving. And Fawn is too.

2.6

I found it fitting that our group's second and final meeting was located where its first one was, at that unassuming park table in Miette's only well-kept green space. An umbrella, attached in the

table's center, painted all of us with various colors of light. Glace was under the blue, Diode under the black, and that was all: nobody else had arrived, yet. The umbrella was superfluous, today; the weather was my favorite, cloudy but not rainy, chilly but not cold. The sort of temperature where you couldn't tell quite where your skin ended and the air began, no distinction between yourself and your environment. As much as I liked intruding on the space of places and things larger than myself, I'd always found it calming to just be able to exist in the world without repercussion.

The time was 3:00pm, soon after school ended. Two days ago, at this same spot, we'd planned to prank some cultists, and failed completely. Two days of being stuck with one another, of worrying that I'd cut myself off from participation in the world just by accidentally leaving the government's telepathy system. The weekend—just Sunday, this week—was meant to be relaxing, not hectic and full of confusion as to how magic exists and whether or not I planned to use it (I did). Instead, Monday had ended up being my relaxation day, calling in sick from school. Even then, though, pretending to be sick isn't exactly fun, and neither was explaining how I felt completely fine to go to school today.

I had a lot to think about, sitting down under the red portion of the umbrella. Yet—I couldn't keep my mind off of one stupid thing. Dating.

I'd always considered dating in high school to be a thing that only really happens in movies. Sure, sometimes I saw couples, and sometimes I'd see proposals, but I'd always just brushed it off as something people do when they're insane and/or desperate. It didn't occur to me that it's supposed to be something people actually *want* to do.

Yet Glace, who seemed to be at least somewhat intelligent, hardly believed that I wasn't interested in anyone. And when I was embarrassed to discuss my romantic prospects, e took that as a sign that I really *was* attracted to someone, and was just afraid to admit it. I found that assumption, as hidden as it was, to be more offputting than anything else in the conversation. The idea that being attracted to blooms wasn't just normal, but expected, and anyone claiming to not be experiencing that must just be lying.

I knew that, at some point, I'd marry a bloom, and have kids, and probably find something to do with my life. But that was to occur post-college. Who would ever date someone before college? Heck, who would date someone *during* college? That just seemed like the worst possible option.

Glace was sitting directly across from me, reading a book. I looked at eir eyes, and cheeks, and shoulders, and hair and chest and nose and lips; Glace didn't look *bad*, but I certainly wasn't thinking to myself "golly gee, I'd sure love to marry this fine flower here!" Even the idea of holding eir hand made me uncomfortable. Braiding eir hair had been a mess, but at least we'd established that any romantic aspect of that was joking. Still, if I was to marry a bloom, I supposed that I would be able to put up with all the societal expectations, like handholding, and hugging, and… I wasn't about to gross myself out by thinking of any more of them.

I looked over at Diode, too, for good measure: nope. Nope. Again, Diode didn't exactly look terrible, but I happened to dislike everything about eir personality.

As I was thinking, Batter sat down next to me, and I looked over. I found it to be bullshit that there was supposedly a lot of pressure for shines to put on makeup, and the correct fashion, and take care of their hair properly, because it was obvious that shines don't need to do anything to themselves to look good. All makeup would do was say, transparently, "I'm insecure about my body and face and I think I only look good when I slather myself in class signifiers." Some blooms trended prettier than others, but shines were pretty as a whole. I couldn't identify exactly what made Batter look good, nor what made shines as a whole look good, but they just did. Yet another thing that they got to do without even having to try.

Batter looked over, and I looked away. Maybe I'd spent too long staring. I tried to refocus my mental efforts on something more relevant to the situation.

Glace was seemingly transfixed by eir book—but never actually turning any of the pages. E was in thought, about what I couldn't tell, and e didn't want people to *notice* that e was in thought. Eir cane sat across eir lap, a little closer to eir abdomen than the book was. I'd wondered about the cane the first time everyone met, but decided it was none of my business. Even if e didn't really need it—If criminals are allowed to wear glasses to look more intellectual in front of a jury, then teenagers are allowed to use canes in public to look more weary. And, as per our conversations at eir apartment, e did need the cane more often than not.

Diode sat a seat away from Glace. I couldn't tell why e was in the group, really. It seemed like all e ever wanted to do was undermine the rationale behind everyone here. Everything and anything e said was sarcastic, or ironic, but only if you called em out on it. E was just so incredibly snide, it made me wonder if maybe the progressives were right that blooms get pressured into being ruthless assholes to their spouses.

Batter sat next to me. If Diode was excessively snide, then Batter was a pushover. Ae believed in the world, perhaps too much, and while Diode was constantly putting down others' talking points, Batter was anxious about speaking up for anything ae cared about, and even when ae did, ae could never keep aer points straight. The only lucid conversation ae had had with me was, ironically, the time ae was angry at me, back in Spinfeld's class. Even if Batter had positive ideals, if ae could only will aerself to make change when angry at something, then it didn't mean very much.

Ebony arrived soon, sitting between Diode and Glace. Ze was incredibly honest, bouncy, and self-assured; hir energy was hard to keep up with at times, not in the word-firehose way that Batter was hard to keep up with but because Ebony passively expected everyone around hir to be as attentive and upfront as ze was. It made talking with hir somewhat of a challenge, but a challenge that I enjoyed. I may have prided myself on my cynicism, but I still wanted to be able to put up a positive image if I so desired, and Ebony was good practice for that.

Ebony placed down the telepathy box onto the table. It couldn't be centered, due to the umbrella, but it was still visible to all of us. It hummed with telepathic activity, and I felt that if I so desired, I could listen in to others, i.e. Ebony and Diode, who were apparently chatting telepathically. I didn't get that—they were opposites, I'd expect that they wouldn't have anything to make small talk over.

Next was Coral, who was painful as our main source of information on the mesocosm and the powers that can come from it. With per, finally, we had everyone.

I said "second and final meeting" because, if I were to guess, none of the others would want to enter the mesocosm. Glace was already too burdened by the world, Diode was too cynical to want to use its powers, Batter too anxious, Ebony too… silly. Fawn and Coral were already there, and I didn't think any of the rest would like those two so much as to desire an entire world to be in with them. This was about to be our last moments together: we'd disable the box, or only leave some of its features on, and that would be that. Forty-eight hours of unnecessary stress for all of us.

We didn't even need to take care of Fawn, really. Ebony had gotten handcuff keys from Willow, whoever the hell that was, and Fawn's name wasn't in any of the tips people had sent to the government—I'd been startled when I misread Fawn's name in Fallow, but aside from that, it was an incredibly uneventful read. Fawn was free to go home. Maybe pretend ae was kidnapped, I don't know. Not any of our problems.

Per began on some speech about how per was grateful for us coming here, and how per was sorry that the box got taken, and per doesn't expect any of us to enter the mesocosm, and while it could give magic powers it is also probably a risky choice. At one point I asked, "Hey, why was your telepathy box set, by default, to the bullshit stupid mode that took us off of the government's system?" The only answer per had was that per parents had it that way, and per didn't touch it before getting us to use it. Which certainly didn't make me respect per planning abilities any more.

Per finished per speech. Glace, who had seemed preoccupied for a little while, looked over at Batter. The telepathy box (which really needed a better name) buzzed with activity. I decided to listen in. If e didn't want that, then e could have had a conversation with Batter at literally any other time.

G: Batter, are you going to tell them, or should I?

Immediately, I was ten times more interested than I was with Coral's pontificating.

B: i dont know maybe it would be better to wait until the people who dont want to enter the mesocosm leave so they dont have to be bothered

Was Batter actually planning to enter? Or did they want to wait around to tell the people who *did* want to enter to go and do something?

G: I think it's more than serious enough to bother them

B: …

Batter started speaking aloud.

B: uhm

B: before we decide who wants to go away and who wants to stay and see how to enter the mesocosm like fawn did and also coral did

B: uhm

B: yesterday night fawn said ae was trapped and really needed help in the mesocosm

B: ae did a lot of creepy things and wrote that ae wasnt deserving of help but the mesocosm version of aer was and i didnt really understand it but it sounded dire

D: …and you didn't tell us this.

B: well we didnt want to worry everyone and we couldnt do anything about it until we got the box back anyway since we need to use it to enter the mesocosm in the first place

A: Wasn't Coral supposed to be keeping track of Fawn over in the other world?

C: Ae has been in aer house for a couple days, now.

D: …since when did ae build a house over there…

G: You didn't check up on aer?

C: It's aer house. It shouldn't be unsafe.

C: And I wasn't invited in.

Glace facepalmed.

E: i think you should go and check!! ae might be hurt..

D: …i'll go with you.

This startled me. It startled everyone, actually.

D: …what.

D: …if fawn's house in the mesocosm place is dangerous enough to trap aer… then coral shouldn't be going there alone…

It occurred to me that, if I was going to want to enter the mesocosm, then this was the perfect time to do so, if I wanted to not just look like I was being reckless or power-hungry. There was the risk that it seemed like I was pressuring others into entering as well, but I was willing to take that. Someone entering the mesocosm to gain powers to use for compassion would, of course, expect others to do the same. If I were to assume that role, then I would want to do it properly.

A: I'll go too.

A: I know it's risky, and it might give me a power that feeds on my vices. But I think I'm strong enough to handle that. And someone needs to be in the mesocosm to help Fawn deal with aer own vices.

Every sentence of that explanation seemed like it was digging me further into a hole. I wanted to enter the mesocosm to gain magic powers, I knew that. But still, there was an apprehension. I didn't *want* to face my flaws. I didn't want the universe to walk up to me and say "Hey, you know these things about yourself? Those are the problematic parts." But then, even past my problematic parts… I wanted to be able to change something in the world. I wanted to be rewarded for all the time and care I'd spent monitoring it and honing my ability to critique it.

Either way… I expected the other group members, beyond myself and Diode, to push back against us joining. If I wanted to change my mind, I could use their arguments to retract my statement. Then I'd appear cognizant, and also not have to enter.

G: I… should.

Shit. Guess I was stuck with my choice, then. I could only hope it was a good one.

G: If I don't do this, then I'll spend the rest of my life regretting it

G: I know that's selfish, but I want my life to mean something, and that means first I want to learn everything that I can, and find my place in the world

G: Worst case scenario, I learn a lot more about what my flaws are. And I get to work on that, instead

B: uhm

E: I will too!!

Of all the people to enter, Ebony seemed like the biggest mistake.

A: Ebony, you do realize how dangerous this is, right?

Although—how would the mesocosm even abuse the vice of being… too honest? Ebony was pure in a way none of the rest of us were. And, hm, with that in mind—

A: And Diode, are you… completely sure you won't have a hard time dealing with the mesocosm's, er, emotional phenomena?

G: Uhm, Batter and Ebony and I were thinking, the mesocosm's main goal to drive us insane would definitely be to isolate us

B: umm

G: Coral's had to deal with it while alone in there, which made it scarier than it needs to be

G: So long as we're reasonable with each other, we should all make it out okay

A: So we're stuck with each other?

That did not sound desirable.

C: The mesocosm's goal is not to drive us insane. Its goal is to make you lose your meta-cognition.

D: …those are the same thing…

B: uh

E: well,, if diode has a lot of problems…… then e will outgrow them more quickly!!

E: and if you outgrow your problems,, then you don't have to worry about the power anymore..

G: That's a good point

D: …the hell is that supposed to mean.

E: i'm just arguing against what autumn said..

D: …okay…

A: Ebony, you never answered my question.

E: oh!! yeah it's dangerous but that's what makes it fun!!

A: …Please don't do anything stupid.

E: i won't!!

B: uhmmm

G: Yeah?

B: …

B: Is it okay if I… don't?

B: i mean uhm

B: i really want to and it sounds amazing but also i have so many problems and

B: im really sorry

A: You can if you want to.

A: I'd love it if all of us came along, really.

(this was not true)

B: oh really

Batter looked genuinely taken aback. Like my words had actually affected aer, for some reason. I started to wonder if I had maybe gone too far with the just-trying-to-be-nice thing.

G: You don't have to, of course. But it sounds like you want to.

C: You don't have to. I'd advise against it.

B: oh

E: we can help you get through whatever things come up!! and i would really miss being able to talk to you whenever… if we're in two worlds at once then we can talk to each other in the mesocosm while doing boring things in the real world and it will be fun,,

D: …does being in the mesocosm disable the telepathy…

C: Yes.

C: It will, for you all.

D: …but not you.

C: Yes.

D: …may i ask why…

G: If you're going to interrogate Coral, could you take it to a separate chat?

D: …not if we enter the mesocosm… apparently…

B: but what if my problems cant be worked through

B: what if im just like that

E: that doesn't make sense!! if they cant be worked through then they aren't problems,, they're just being human,,

E: listen to yourself and ask:: if i had no problems then would i want to do this??

B: i mean yeah i would but thats not me and it feels kinda disrespectful to that version of me to tell them that i am them

E: that version doesn't exist dummy!! it can't be mad if you impersonate it!! so you are it :))

B: …

B: but you just said it doesnt exist

E: siiiiiiiigh……

I found myself kind of amazed at how much Batter was managing to misinterpret everything everyone was saying.

A: What Ebony is saying is, you should act like the ideal version of you.

A: That way, you can become the ideal version of you.

A: Because it sounds like you would be happier with yourself if you did this, instead of letting the opportunity pass.

B: uhm

I started to realize how I might accidentally actually convince Batter to join us.

A: I mean, I'm sure you could also do it later, so long as we know where Ebony and the box are.

C: The box will be in my possession. Not Ebony's.

A: Ah, whoops.

G: Huh, I hadn't considered that we could just do it if we know where Coral lives

G: Still, better to do it earlier than later, methinks

C: I'm not willing to give out my address.

D: …please dont say methinks…

B: no i want to do it now i dont want to do it later

B: if i say ill do it later then i wont end up doing it

A: …Then maybe that means you don't actually want to?

B: no i want to i just wont

B: thats just how it works if i dont do it now then i wont do it later

E: me too!!

A: …

G: So have you decided, then?

B: …

B: its really scary

C: You don't have to do it.

B: yeah but if i dont do it then ill feel really shitty about it for a long time

A: If it's scary at all, then you shouldn't do it.

B: can you shut the fuck up?

B: if i dont do anything scary then i wont accomplish anything ever

B: and then ill drown in my sorrows at the end of everything wondering why i decided to be a fucking nutjob who cant even finish a book anymore when i used to be able to read dozens of them a week

B: isnt it obvious that the world isnt built to be just trudged through its meant to be faced head on like you actually care about it and whats happening to it and otherwise you wont get anywhere thats intentional it wasnt designed to be used up and discarded

B: who the hell are you asking me to be if i never do anything im afraid of what the hell do you think anyone is supposed to be able to accomplish under that condition are you trying to tell me that the average person gets through life without just feeling lost and directionless and afraid of the consequences of anything and everything that theyre doing?

A: …Yes?

B: …

I found myself annoyed at Batter. Ae could have everything, really. Ae got to have the perfect gender where nobody expects anything from you and you can just live your life doing whatever. And ae ended up being afraid of everything ae wanted to do, for some reason. Was that because of society, where ae ended up downtrodden because nobody ever expected good things from aer? I didn't think it was that complicated, really. I thought it was much more Batter-specific.

B: im sorry im so sorry i shouldnt have said anything

B: just put me in already please

B: i promise when im there ill make up for everything i fail at constantly

A: You're… not a very stable person. The mesocosm won't be good for you.

A: Batter, if you enter, then I'm not entering.

G: To be honest, if ae can't go in, then I shouldn't either.

G: I'm not any more stable than ae is.

A: Really?

After having gotten to know Glace, and talking to em some, I didn't mind being around em so much. Eir romantic teasing was annoying, but they stopped when I told em to, and otherwise being around em had been fine.

G: Not when it comes down to it, no.

C: It would be very helpful to have you, Glace.

E: autumn,, i promise i'll take care of batter..

G: All of us will.

E: yeah!!

A: …

A: Fine. Ae can come.

Batter looked at me, embarrassed. Ae looked away before a second had passed.

C: Are you sure?

A: …Yeah. I'm sure.

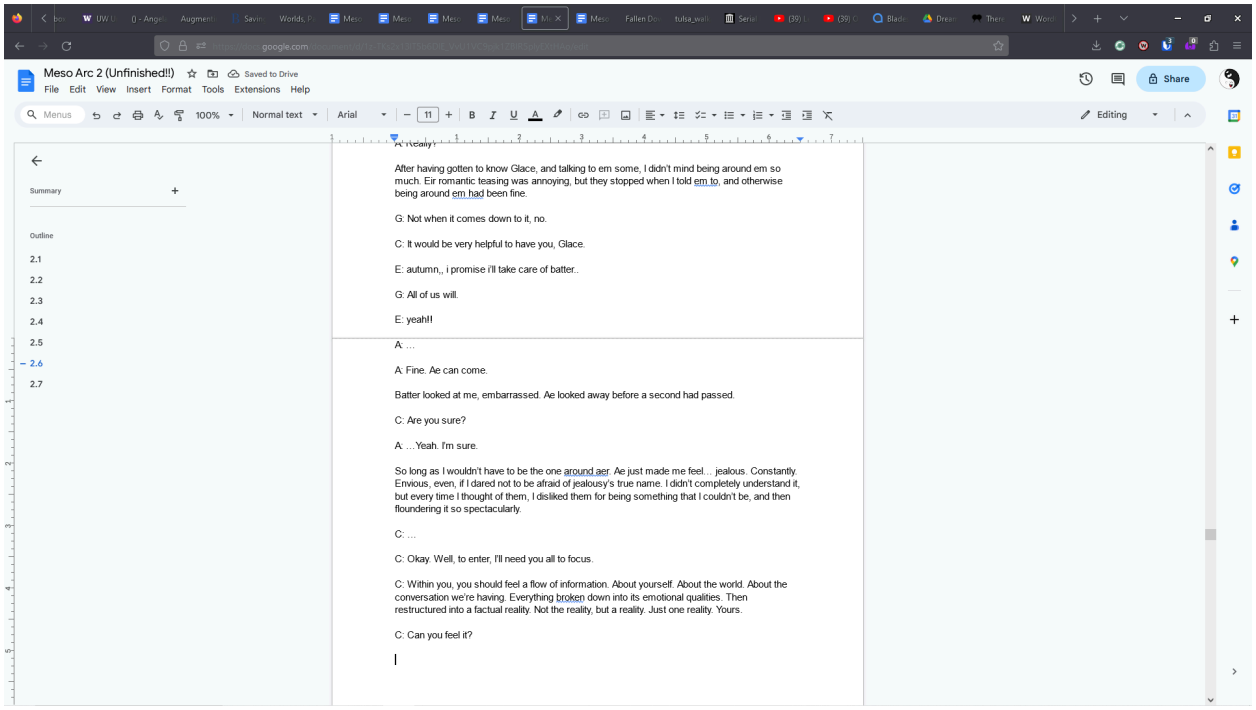
So long as I wouldn't have to be the one around aer. Ae just made me feel… jealous. Constantly. Envious, even, if I dared not to be afraid of jealousy's true name. I didn't completely understand it, but every time I thought of them, I disliked them for being something that I couldn't be, and then floundering it so spectacularly.

C: …

C: Okay. Well, to enter, I'll need you all to focus.

C: Within you, you should feel a flow of information. About yourself. About the world. About the conversation we're having. Everything broken down into its emotional qualities. Then restructured into a factual reality. Not the reality, but a reality. Just one reality. Yours.

C: Can you feel it?



G: I can.

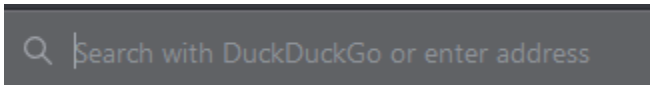
C: Do you feel a way to leave. A way to traverse the world's view on itself. Mediated, of course, by you. And your brain.

A: I think so.



C: Good. Now replace it. With nothing.

A: …



A: It's not working.

C: Try adding a space?

A: Oh, I feel something.

A: Information.

A: It says that “Space is a three-dimensional continuum containing positions and directions.”

A: Hm.

C: A space on your keyboard.

A: What’s that?

C: …

[SYSTEM] System Admin Coral has taken control of your “Autumn’s Interface.”

[SYSTEM] Connecting to… Mesocosm (IP: 0.0.0.0).

[SYSTEM] You’re on your own, now. Good luck.

Then, suddenly, I was in two places at once.

It didn’t feel the way telepathy did. With telepathy, I could hear one thing in the real world, and one thing via telepathy, and I wouldn’t have very much trouble discerning which was which. One was very obviously more fake than the other—it would take a lot of telepathic information for any of it to trick me into treating it as real. Heck, now that I was in the mesocosm, the telepathy box felt like it had a pull to it, but I’d never confuse it with gravity.

This, on the other hand?

…“We’re all here!” Ebony’s voice, coming from my left, a little down a dirt path. But I couldn’t really process it until many moments later. Around me was a dazzling array of plants and vegetation, flowers in every color, vines and ferns and neatly-cut trees whose roots served as benches, except, when I looked up, the flowers continued into and past the trees’ canopies, massive walls turning into towers and pillars of flowery green with no top, yet sunlight and the sky still left clear. It was like those urban locations I’d always dreamed about living in, but everything tall was alive and impossible and breathtaking. It took me multiple moments to notice the butterfly that landed on my chin, then I noticed a couple more, then hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions around us and above us into the distance. As everything grew further away, its decorations also grew larger; I could see the flowers on the plants even a mile above us, gigantic, one wobbling its petals as an equally-sized butterfly resting on it slowly moved its monumental wings into flight.

I didn’t feel small. I felt honored. I wanted to sit down, lie down (this thought felt weird somehow), stare at it for hours. Then I grew angry. *This* is what the world had been keeping from me? This whole time? How many people knew about these telepathy box devices and decided to keep them a secret?

And… The mesocosm's areas are made of thoughts, right?

"Who—" I stammered. "Who could have created this?"

"Things here are not created. Things here are made of beliefs."

"Who believed this?"

Coral might have shrugged, but I was too lost in the scenery to pay attention to anyone's body language. "A child, most likely."

I wanted to stare longer, but that could come later. "Where… are we?"

"When you first enter the mesocosm, you appear exactly where you want to."

"...outside of Fawn's house?"

"Yes."

I looked into the distance; Then realized that I couldn't. I was in bed, for some reason, under the blankets, in sleep clothes. I had to get out of bed to look over: There it was, maybe a fifteen-minute walk away, Fawn's comparably-very-tiny house.

"It's rather small."

"Everything is, until you get close. The mesocosm is like a fractal. People's beliefs are, too."

I was too busy being amazed to really decipher what the hell that meant. Nevertheless, I started walking. And had to force myself to continue.

The house was not, in fact, any bigger when I got close to it. Not in a perspective-warpy way, it just… followed the laws of physics. I put my hand around the doorknob, and turned. Surprisingly, it opened.

"Why did it open?"

"Some people like to imagine that their house is welcoming. Or, the people who can open the door are the only ones who think about the door. Or some combination."

I stepped inside. Coral was right: It was much, much bigger on the inside than the outside. Not because the ceiling was higher, but because everything else stretched out to the horizon, cupboards and couches and carpets and cardboard boxes. Yet everything was still close-by… I could see the stairs to the upper level, just a few feet away from me. And the stairs were the length of a normal staircase.

“Wait,” Ebony said. It kind of dazed me. I knew ze meant it conversationally, but I was still a bit too frazzled to think of it as an E: wait,,

“Yeah?” I said, weaker than I intended.

“Yeah, we shouldn’t just go ahead.” Glace spoke. “If something trapped Fawn, it might be a danger to us, too.”

“I mean. We should ask what power everyone got!” Ebony sounded excited.

“No.” from Diode.

“Please stop talking,” I said. Glace and Ebony and Diode, who I could see right now, looked over. Glace looked the most concerned out of them.

Every new voice felt overwhelming. It felt like my head is about to explode.

…I leaned forward, and hit my head on the park table in front of me. Everyone was looking at me, worried, now. I tried to recall how that even happened, and realized that I’d fainted.

“I—” I started. “Can I have a minute?”

“Are you alright?” Batter asked. I didn’t answer.

“Am I doing something wrong?” I asked, after waiting a few seconds. “I… I feel so nauseous. It’s like I’m carsick three times over. Everything I do in the mesocosm... Everything I see and hear… My brain is confused that it’s not happening here, too.”

Coral nodded solemnly. “You’ve got it bad, then. Your selves are very connected.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re still processing everything as one. There’s no difference between the meatspace Autumn and the mesocosm Autumn.”

“Meatspace?” I laughed a little. Coral didn’t laugh along.

“Can it be fixed?” Glace asked.

“Takes time, mostly.” Coral said. “Maybe you should try to mimic your mesocosm actions in meatspace?”

“I’d look like an idiot.” I said.

“That’s true.” Coral said, helpfully.

…I stood up in the mesocosm. I’d fallen to the floor, probably when I fainted. I grabbed a chair, and sat down.

“You all can… talk about your powers, if you want to.” I said.

“Won’t that make you feel bad?”

“I’ll… survive.”

“No. We’ll step away for it. You rest.” Glace said, forcefully. Or, at least, it felt forceful. Every sound kinda did.

In meatspace (ha ha), I closed my eyes and covered my ears with my hands. I thought that that might make me look stupid, but it was the best option I really had. I felt a little better, almost immediately. It made me feel silly for not having done this *before* I got nauseous.

The others walked behind a wall, and started discussing. I noticed that Glace still had eir cane. That made sense, I supposed, given that the rest of us had our clothes. Though, it was weird seeing everyone in their sleep-clothes, and especially weird that that meant Glace and Diode weren’t wearing a bra. It weirded me out, and then further weirded me out when I realized that the reason they had to wear bras was because breezes like me were supposed to be attracted to their bra-less chests.

I laughed. I was in a magical world, inside a house that stretched on for miles, having just seen a giant butterfly attempt a takeoff from a flower the size of the largest things humanity had ever constructed. And I was worried about ordinary humans’ nipples? And whether or not I found them attractive?

I decided to look around once more. From where I was, most everything was the same light-brown wood color, with a laminate wood floor, wooden cupboards and drawers all with small metal handles, a circular wooden table and a view to outside with a small wooden porch with a wooden awning above it, held up by lots of little wooden bars between it and the porch’s railing. What wasn’t wooden was the wall; diagonal wooden planks painted dark purple-red. And, looking up, I saw a couple orange lamps hanging from the ceiling, with a red and pink ribbon casually floating through them. Which was odd.

The middle of the ribbon was a pink mesh, rimmed by a red stitch alternating from front to back every couple millimeters. It looked… dangerous, somehow. I followed its path: it came from outside, floating in through the now-open doorway, and kept near to the ceiling as it drifted into my room, out to the hallway, and around the corner to where I could faintly hear everyone’s voices. It was lightly transparent, but large, around six inches wide and an unknowable number

of inches long. I looked around; the only thing that might cut it was a pair of herb scissors off on the kitchen's counter. I stood up to go get them, just in case. My nausea, thankfully, was mostly gone by now. Armed with my scissors, I sat back down. I thought myself a bit creative for deciding a floating ribbon might be a threat, but anything could go here, really.

I wondered if the others were making progress understanding their powers. Then, I realized: I had yet to discover my own. How would I even go about that? Coral had made it sound easy, and Fawn had known how to use it almost immediately. Was there supposed to be some sense of something I could do? Now that I thought about it, everything here felt kind of light and malleable, but that seemed more like a result of everything being made of beliefs than the awakening of anything magical.

Well, one way to find out, even if it probably wouldn't work at all. I threw my scissors forward, intending them to go as far as they possibly could.

They smashed through the wall. But the sound of breaking didn't grow quieter, just more distant—how many walls had they just broken? I yelped, as one does when something they throw goes unreasonably fast. It didn't even feel like my arm threw it faster than normal—did something weird happen, time-related? Or did the scissors accelerate by themselves?

I wasn't the only one who made a sound when that happened. Diode came running into my room, with the others soon after, staring at the now-incomplete wall.

G: What the fuck

E: woah that's,, a really big hole!!

C: Don't do that.

A: My bad. Did that by mistake.

G: How does one do that by mistake?

A: Sorry?

B: GAH!!!

Batter's remark seemed very out-of-character for aer. Nevermind that—it came from behind the wall. Ae didn't even have line-of-sight to the wall I'd fenestrated. Shortly thereafter, ae came into view, though; wrapped in ribbons, being pulled toward the staircase.

A: Shit!

Ebony reached out, but wasn't able to grab any of aer in time. I ran towards the hallway, just in time to see the door at the top of it being slammed shut, Batter presumably behind it. I rushed up the stairs, tripped, and hit my forearm on the highest one.

C: Careful!

Everything Coral said managed to be just the most helpful thing ever, huh.

C: Fawn's in there!

Oh, so it was a different warning. For information that should have been provided much, much sooner.

I scrambled to my feet, but others overtook me. I was the third through the door. On the other side, everything was white.

We were standing on the top of a staircase, predictably massive. Above us, a cloudy, motionless sky; a false sky, a painted dome on which the door we just walked through was placed. Down the staircase's many steps, at the bottom, was a flat semicircle. Everywhere else, radiating from the semicircle, large steps going higher and higher until they reached the top again. The whole area was shaped like a stage. On the other side, against the semicircle, was not a set of curtains or a wall but a massive statue, from its pelvis upwards, so tall that its eyes, facing forward, stared directly at us. It wore a crown of thorns, and its curly hair draped down all the way to its hips. It was likely gendered summer, comparing the size of its head to the size of its torso. Right in front of it, center-stage, were two normal-sized statues, both holding their hands out and above them, palms upwards.

Racing down the steps, floating just a bit off of the ground, was Batter. Ae floated all the way down, then up to be between the statues' sets of outstretched hands.

I raced down the steps myself. It was exhilarating, knowing that one missed step would send me tumbling the rest of the way down. I finished my journey, and nearly ran head-first into the stage, which was raised a few feet off of the ground. Instead, I jumped from the staircase to the stage itself, and barely made it without falling backwards.

B: autumn please help this is wholly uncomfortable

I looked up: Batter was still just floating there, arms tied closely to aer chest, covered in little ribbon-knots. If only I hadn't discarded the scissors… but even then, ae was too far up for me to reach.

Now that I was close enough to see, The stage had several smaller details. The two smaller statues had plaques. One read, "Don't do it." The other read, "You're worth more than this." The stage had furniture: one sink, one toilet, one towel, and one bathtub.

A: This is the bathroom?

A: Jesus christ. Who thinks this way about bathrooms, of all things.

B: uhm

B: can you get me down

A: To be honest, I have no clue how to.

A: Is it painful?

B: my joints hurt and the ribbon is sliding against my skin everywhere

I looked behind me, to see how far the others were. They were about halfway down. Hm. Could I really do nothing? It seemed like, metaphorically, the statues were just holding Batter up. What would happen if I removed them?

I approached the left statue, and punched it, imagining it being pushed away by my punch. The punch didn't even land; before my fist got to the statue, the sections flew away from my fist, making loud *crack* noises and sending the upper half of the statue careening forwards. It could have landed on me, but at this point I was confident: I held my hand up, and the statue failed to even approach it. It toppled off to the side. The head cracked off, and rolled to a stop, mouth agape, red and shiny inside.

C: Stop.

They were all much closer, now, taking their time to safely traverse the marble steps.

A: Why?

C: Damage causes headaches.

C: Break too many things, and people will have to hurt a lot.

I thought that was kind of a stupid thing to bring up right now.

A: Whoever imagined this place probably deserves a headache.

C: It was probably Fawn.

A: Why would Fawn get trapped in a place of aer own making?

Coral used per arms to hoist perself up onto the stage. The others followed not far behind.

C: The whole mesocosm is a trap of our own making.

A: That's not an answer.

E: can we argue later.. batter needs help!!

A: I'm trying to help aer. By breaking the statues.

D: …what do the statues have to do with anything…

A: If ae is being held between them by the ribbons, then they probably mean something.

E: i think that makes sense!! but if it would cause aer a headache then maybe there's a better way..

A: I was thinking we should break them.

G: That's not the solution.

Everyone turned to look at Glace. E seemed very confident on this, somehow—and eir skin had a dark spot on it, on eir neck, where I didn't remember there being one before.

G: The mouths. Take the orbs out.

I looked over to the broken statue's head: The mouth clearly had some depth to it, but an orb was nowhere to be seen.

A: What do you mean?

Ebony walked over to it, and stuck hir arm in—further than I'd expect it to be able to go. Hir facial expression changed to be positive, suddenly, and ze took hir arm out with a hand-sized red orb in hir fingers. Behind hir, the statue's plaque, reading "You're worth more than this," disintegrated.

A: Huh.

A: Is that your power? Reaching super far into things?

E: no.. it just was bigger on the inside :)) most things here are..

I made the decision, at that moment, never to become a surgeon in this world.

A: So, Coral, do you want me to not break this second one?

C: …

C: Just do it.

I thought I'd be clever about it, so I punched in the direction of the statue's head, some fifteen feet away from me me, willing it to break off. Nothing happened. Hm.

D: …nice one…

A: Fuck off.

I grabbed the broken statue's head, and threw it at the intact statue's head, as fast as I could. The head went in the right direction… completely obliterating the other statue's head. If the orb was supposed to be "taken out," I'd instead managed to blow up the head entirely.

Nonetheless, the statue's plaque disintegrated. Batter fell from the ribbon, suddenly unsupported, and was caught by Coral, as a rumbling emerged from the base of the hundreds-of-feet-tall statue. At the base of its pelvis, a door-shaped section lowered, leaving open an entrance to a hallway. The ribbon began floating into it at a casual pace, stretching back out into a line.

B: thanks

B: sorry that i got trapped like that i really didnt mean to i hope my thoughts didnt make that happen

E: stop worrying!! that ribbon was really mean,, it shouldn't have grabbed you like that.. i hope Fawn isn't also trapped like that..

G: Is Fawn in there?

C: Yes.

G: Well, I guess we don't have a choice but to enter into the suspiciously-located hole.

D: …thanks for pointing that out.

G: You're welcome!

Glace was right: the hallway entrance was located exactly where you'd expect to find the statue's err, entrance. Fuck it, I wasn't going to be using euphemisms. It was where its privates would normally be. Its vulva. Its vagina.

Thinking of it that way made me…unnecessarily uncomfortable. It wasn't exactly that I disliked thinking about anatomy, but some topics grossed me out, and it was hard to think about privates without thinking about sex. Again, I was supposed to be *attracted* to this sort of thing?

E: are you blushing??

A: Shut up.

E: guys look autumn is blushing……

G: Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to actually embarrass anyone

G: If it helps, I'm pretty sure the statue is supposed to be summer, not spring

G: So it's not like it's, uhm, the same?

A: That doesn't help.

It occurred to me that, given that everyone here was wearing their sleep-clothes, I was really glad none of us were naked sleepers.

G: Whoops

E: come on autumn!! don't keep fawn waiting!!

Ebony was right: thinking about this as an expedition to save Fawn, instead of whatever fucked-up thing the mesocosm was trying to make this trip into, did help.

A: Yeah, you're right. Sorry.

I started walking forwards, into the hole. I was at the very least glad that the hole wasn't *shaped* like a vagina. On the other side, a wide marble hallway continued downward, sloped instead of staired.

A: I do have to wonder, what with you saying this place was probably built by Fawn,

A: What the hell is up with Fawn's opinions on bathrooms?

B: uhm

B: back at glaces apartment the place where fawn did a lot of creepy weird things was in the bathroom and i think ae threw up in there i dont know if that was on accident or on purpose

A: Maybe Fawn's a lot more fucked up than we've been giving aer credit for.

A: Are we sure we want to save this person?

G: Yes. We are.

E: i think the statue was really cool,,

E: maybe fawn just has a thing for walking into the privates of big marble statues.. maybe ae thinks about that every time ae pees……

D: …please stop…

E: okay!!

G: The plaques on the statues were saying things like "This is a bad idea." Whatever is happening in here, I'm not sure it's something Fawn enjoys

A: I suppose that would explain why ae is trapped.

G: Yeah

I was starting to not look forward to whatever was awaiting us at the end of this hallway.

A: So, what powers have you all discovered?

D: …not much of anything…

D: …yours is the most useful so far.

E: yeah i don't know what mine does!! i'm sure i'll figure it out though..

G: Mine lets me know things.

A: Any things?

G: I'm not sure. I tried to learn about important things, and I couldn't even start without it hurting physically

A: Does it hurt on your neck?

G: …How did you know that?

A: There's a dark mark there.

G: Oh

G: Huh. That's not a good sign

G: Hopefully it goes away?

C: It should. Power side-effects are rarely permanent.

C: If they were, then nobody would use their powers.

G: Them being "rarely" permanent is still a bit of a risk

C: Don't worry about it.

G: Okay…

G: Anyway, uhm, when I tried to learn about how to save Batter, it hurt a bunch

G: But when I tried to learn about how to stop you and Ebony and Coral from fighting, it gave me the statue's mouth answer almost right away.

G: So… I'm not sure how it works.

A: That's interesting.

G: Yeah

A: Anyone else?

B: i dont know what mine is yet im sorry i should have been paying attention for that but i forgot to

E: what was coral's power again??

C: I can detect electricity. That's how I know Fawn is here.

D: …how far…

C: I do not know. Every step we take disrupts my distance measurement.

C: As we get further inside the hallway, it grows larger.

D: …thats not creepy at all…

E: it’s cool!!

At least Ebony was excited about all of this.

The hallway was, as we ventured deeper in, turning less white and more of a red hue. Looking as far as I could, it only grew darker and redder. Also, I could still see the ribbon floating along above us. It was glowing slightly. That must have been where the light was coming from. A few yards forward, I could see the beginning (end?) of another ribbon, also slowly floating into the hallway

A: There’s two ribbons now.

B: oh thats not good

As we walked, they seemed to multiply, until the whole ceiling was covered by pink and red, and they were our only source of light. Combined, they provided for moody lighting, like how bright it is when you light a candle at night.

I would have found it cool and thematic to walk in silence, but Ebony and Diode decided to talk among themselves the whole time. It was tiring to listen to, if only because it didn’t seem to go anywhere as a conversation. They were just joking around with each other. I decided to walk faster than everyone else, to get away from the noise. I’d always prided myself on being a fast walker, anyway.

After a while, the marble in the tunnel seemed more and more cracked and faded, the corners of the hallway were less defined, and everything took on a redder tint, even beyond that of the red and pink lighting. It was like there was a substance behind the marble, and the barrier between it and us grew weaker and weaker. Until, finally, every step I made had a bounce to it, and the floor was all this damp, red, meaty substance. The walls and ceiling, too.

I was too far away from the others to comment on it. I was starting to wish that my sleep-wear could have included socks and shoes. And maybe a hazmat suit.

Not fifteen feet after the hallway’s meat-ification concluded, did I spot a suspiciously-shaped hole in the side of it, which I was no longer willing to de-euphemize.

I sighed, and stopped walking forward. I wanted to sit down, but not on a floor that felt like this. All I could really do was stand there.

Everyone else seemed just okay with the weirdness of the present situation. By all accounts, I should have been, too. I was a seventeen year old with an aversion to authority and an interest in societal weak points. I didn’t enjoy engaging with the taboo, but I didn’t blame others for doing so; I considered it to be an act of defiance, worth doing to send a message to the world even if

the taboo was somehow self-destructive. What we were in was clearly a metaphor for something Fawn wasn't supposed to do—we were walking from a pristine, well-manicured, massive stage into a deep, guttural cavity, with statues that clearly told us not to do what we were doing. I could imagine how Fawn would feel watched by the tens of thousands of people that could have fit into that fake stage as ae ignored the advice on the statues, deciding to begin the activity. I should have been feeling remorse for aer, or been brainstorming ways to talk to aer about what aer thoughts and feelings had made this place into. But the taboo that Fawn was engaging with was clearly one of a sexual nature, and I couldn't bring myself to focus on it earnestly.

I couldn't understand what about it made me so uncomfortable. What about it made me so self-conscious, and feeling like my body wasn't quite mine. Did I dislike my body? It was perfectly average, by most accounts; I was a bit taller than most breezes, a fair amount more athletic, no real health issues. I had never even broken any bones. I had minor injuries, but I wasn't embarrassed about them. Where was the disconnect, then?

I knew where the disconnect was, really. I was actively trying to ignore the pressure of my privates against my underwear. But then, the same issue, just on a smaller scale. There wasn't anything *wrong* with my privates. Not even the symbolism really bothered me; people often complained about how breezes get told they're dangerous or offputting, but I liked being considered offputting, and I felt like being dangerous was a boon in a world where everything had secret downsides to it.

Still, I couldn't help but think of every time I was uncomfortable in my school's locker rooms, every time I opted to use a toilet when I could have used a urinal. Which was every time.

The others caught up to me.

D: …you alright… kinda just been standing there…

A: Yeah I'm fine.

G: Huh, that's. A hole, for sure

Glace was looking at the head-sized vulva on the wall, the one I'd been too uncomfortable to describe earlier.

A: How are you all so comfortable with this place?

G: It takes a lot to make me uncomfortable. I wouldn't say I'm comfortable, per se, but it helps to vocalize what's around me. I'd rather look at something gross and say "Well, that sure is a bucket of slime," than just say nothing. And that vocalization helps me realize that whatever it is doesn't really have any power over me

E: it reminds me of my art classes!! we used to draw a bunch of naked people..

A: Does it not, like, make you think about yourself?

B: oh was i supposed to be doing that

A: No? It just keeps happening to me.

A: And I'm not sure what to do about it.

E: do you want to hold my hand?? then you can think about me instead :))

A: No.

A: I want to just sit down, but everything here is damp and wet.

C: Keep walking forward.

Coral was right: Fawn was more important. I made sure to keep walking.

A: I know.

I reached the front of the group.

D: …youre not wrong to be grossed out… this place is nasty…

A: It just feels so arbitrary. I don't know what part of myself this place makes me dislike.

B: most feelings we have are arbitrary thats just how feelings work its better to try to find the ones you like than to try to fix the reasons you dont like some of them

B: if i spent all my time trying to learn why everything felt bad then i wouldnt spend any time doing things that didnt feel bad id just spend all my time thinking

A: Sorry, but I don't really care that there are a lot of things that make you feel bad.

B: okay

G: I agree with Batter, actually. Don't beat yourself up over having some things that make you self-conscious.

A: I'm just trying to find a reason.

G: Sometimes it's best to just jot it down and move on

A: Jot it down on what? My pajamas?

G: Do you want me to remind you later?

A: …Sure.

G: And really, feeling self-conscious when thinking about, uhm, these things,

Glace pointed at the wall, where the hole was.

G: Is incredibly common

G: There are a million reasons that could happen

A: It's weird to think that I'm supposed to be attracted to them.

Glace shrugged.

G: I'd say context matters a lot for that

A: I… guess that's true.

I walked ahead, to where Glace was. We walked on ahead, as the rest of the group paused to study the vulva.

I sighed. I'd figured out why the sexual topic made me so uncomfortable: it made me think about how sex might relate to *me*. And I'd never really been confronted with that before.

A: Um.

A: It's just…

A: It's hard to imagine myself ever being attracted to blooms in… this way.

A: Yesterday morning, you asked me about who I was attracted to, and you hardly believed me when I said it was nobody.

G: Oh

A: …

A: That got me to realize, I'm really behind when it comes to this, huh?

A: I'm supposed to be comfortable with dating blooms. I'm supposed to be *excited* for it, even. But every time I think about the parts of dating that people are supposed to enjoy, like handholding, or kissing, or… sex, I can't put up with the thought of them.

A: I want to be comfortable with those things, but I just don't know what to do to make that apprehension go away.

A: Am I really supposed to be excited for this sort of thing?

G: I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were telling the truth, uhm,

Glace laughed nervously.

G: Is it like, you're nervous about it, but you still want it?

A: It makes me feel ignored and cold.

G: Oh.

Glace looked over to me, and studied my face, before looking forward again.

G: There's nothing… wrong with that.

G: Some people take a while before they find someone they actually want to be with.

G: I have a couple friends who are completely repulsed by physical affection when it isn't their partner doing it

G: Or, um, had a couple friends

G: …

G: If you aren't excited for it, then that's not something that needs to change. And there's not really anything you can do to force it to change.

G: I think… I should introduce you to Willow.

G: Let's just say. There's a lot of different ways in which you can be attracted to people. Just let it happen, okay?

A: Okay. Thank you.

G: It's nothing.

G: Sorry that your first experience in magical thought land had to be The Vagina Cave

I laughed.

A: Second experience, thank you. The greenery outside was beautiful.

Glace smiled.

G: Yeah

I felt… still self-conscious, but less embarrassed, and less ashamed. My body still felt wrong, somehow, but I felt less bad about my past, and didn't feel anymore like I'd failed to prepare for something. We walked onward, as the holes in the wall grew more and more common. They might have been on the ceiling, too, but the ribbons above us were too densely-packed to see through. Glace and I grew to be a little ways ahead of the rest of the group. I didn't mind being next to em—e seemed to genuinely think about the world around us and how it might impact people.

It was maybe ten minutes before we encountered yet another variation the cave decided to throw at us. One of the vulvas (vulvae? vulvi?) was glowing pink.

A: They don't normally do that, right?

G: Yours doesn't?

A: I, um.

Glace laughed, but was cut short. As we passed by, a ribbon launched itself from the glowing one, making a beeline for Glace and me, traveling at maybe ten feet per second. I flinched, and thrust out my hand, willing it to be launched back—it was, but it was perfectly intact, not even making a sound as it slammed against the cave wall. It tried to approach again, and I pushed it away again. This repeated a few more times, with me sending it flying every time it got within a foot of me. Every time, it just floated off of the ground, or the wall, and darted back towards us. I wasn't making progress.

G: Tear it apart

A: How?

G: I don't know!

As it approached, I decided instead to grab onto it, as I used my other hand to propel it away. It didn't work—it was sent away just as fast, but this time it slid through my hand as it did so, hurting my skin. I was unable to tear it.

A: Ow.

When it came back, I instead opted to try to force it in two different directions at once. Waving my hands in a scissoring motion, I sent one part of the ribbon upwards while sending the other part downwards. It ripped, and lost its glow as it started to obey the rules of gravity.

I looked at my hands: definitely something like a rope burn. Dammit.

G: Are you alright?

A: Rope burn.

G: Yikes

A: How did you know to tear it apart?

G: I guessed. Not much else you can do against a giant flying ribbon

A: Fair enough.

We kept walking, and encountered several more ribbons that tried to attack us directly. They seemed to go for whoever was in front, so I made sure to have that always be me.

G: So, you've figured out your power?

A: As far as I can tell, I can just use my hands to repel things.

G: Is there a way to make it, uh, a little less forceful?

A: I'm not sure.

A: It feels like I'd have to use the power the tiniest amount.

A: Like trying to pour just a single drop out of a gallon jug.

G: Ah

A: Have you figured out yours?

G: Nope

G: Though, it seems to love giving me information that I really don't care about

G: Did you know that my foot, in the real world, contains more than fifteen atoms of carbon?

A: I'd be more concerned if that weren't the case.

G: Yeah, me too

G: …

G: Those ribbons really are scary

G: The first time one attacked, you barely even flinched. I almost fell over

A: You did?

G: Yeah

G: Did it not surprise you?

A: I dunno.

A: Fighting these things feels kind of like riding a bike. I know that, if I make a big mistake, I might be done for within seconds. But I don't think that I'll make a mistake. And as long as I don't think I'll make a mistake, I know that I won't, so I can get myself to ignore the danger.

G: I guess it's different for me

G: I always know that I might make a mistake, because my body might just decide to stop working suddenly, or become painful all of a sudden

A: Well, shouldn't that apply to everything?

A: I'm sure you believe that about walking, too. But you're here with me.

G: You think I haven't fallen over while walking before?

G: I know how it feels to fall. I don't know how it feels to be ensnared by a giant ribbon monster

G: That's the difference here

A: …

A: Sorry.

G: Stop that. I'm tired of other people being sorry for my sake.

A: …

It was another fifteen minutes or so before we heard Coral yelling.

C: Wait!

We stopped walking. I yelled back.

A: What?

C: Fawn's very close!

I looked forward: I couldn't see the end, but I could see everything become much more brightly-lit with the ribbons' pinks and reds. We waited for the others to catch up.

D: …what i dont get is… fawn has the power to teleport away from places…

D: …so why isnt ae using it…

E: maybe ae can't do that here.. or maybe ae would feel bad about losing so many memories……

E: if ae got here two days ago then that would be a lot to lose!!

E: oh hi you two..

I made sure to stay ahead of the group as we walked forward, just in case. As we came to the edge of the cave, all of the vulvae around us were glowing, but none of them had ribbons strike out of them. Finally, we could see the base of another two statues, plaques reading "You're perfect in every way," and "You've been such a good little shimmer." As we walked forward, the heads of the statues became visible, and their outstretched hands: they were the same as the statues that I'd broken outside. Surrounding them were two twirling ribbons, multiple feet wide, glowing brighter than any of the smaller ribbons that punctuated the space and slowly encircled the center. If the other ribbons existed to tie people up, these ones seemed ready to ram directly into someone. All of it was within a large hemisphere, centered around the ground under Fawn.

Between the statues was Fawn. Ae was upsidown, aer limbs being tugged by the ends by groups of smaller ribbons. Ae screamed when they were violently pulled to new locations.
Ae was loosely draped by more ribbons, wrapped around aer, tied up into bows, ribbons slowly snaking along and rubbing against aer body. One clump of ribbons, circling Fawn, raised itself up and then struck down into aer, and ae screamed again. I saw now that various ribbons were coming into and out of every orifice of aer body, some dotted with blood. Ae was naked, but it was perhaps the least sexual thing I'd ever seen.

“Fawn!!” Glace yelled, and ae didn’t respond, but the large ribbons did: they flew directly at us, ends first, much faster than the smaller ribbons had been. They weren’t going for me, though—I had to dive to get in between them and Batter, who was behind me. I landed on my side, cushioned by the wet meat that the whole cave was made of, as the ribbons flew off and hit the walls of the hemisphere. I got myself back onto my feet, just to have to prevent another attack, this time aimed at Ebony.

A: Does anyone have anything I could hurl at it??

E: i do!!

Ebony tossed me a medium-sized piece of rubble, which I decided to break in half, holding it in both of my hands and willing parts of it in opposite directions. I threw the first half at the left statue’s head, and it broke apart nearly instantly, the “You’re perfect” plaque turning to dust. Fawn yelled, without an obvious source of pain, and I realized that Coral had been serious that breaking stuff can cause headaches.

“Sorry!” I yelled, and had to block the ribbons again, which luckily seemed to be targeting me directly this time. I took my time to aim the second half, and missed wildly. Fawn yelled out again as the rubble punched deep into the far wall, and a wave of blood started to gush out of the hole. “FUCK!” I yelled, a bit louder than the “Sorry!” had been.

A: Does anyone have anything else?

G: Use my cane!

I looked around to see if there were any other options: no, I had to throw the cane, Glace’s autonomy be damned. I grabbed it, saying “sorry” under my breath, and decided I’d aim better this time. If I was going to be using my power, then why not just do that, and not try to do a throwing motion at all? I lined up the shot with my hand, and let go of the cane right as I willed it to launch—

It missed horribly. Even worse than last time. More blood splattered out of the wall. Fawn yelled again, aer voice noticeably raw. God fucking damn it.

Sending the ribbons toward it would likely do nothing, because they lost all rigidity when they weren’t actively targeting something. Was there something else I could send? Maybe a bit of meat pulled out of the wall, if it was moving fast enough, could break something? I couldn’t get close enough to punch the statue directly, since I had to be protecting all the others, unless we managed to safely move as a group. I could try to tear the massive ribbons apart, but I’d be screwed if I didn’t do that perfectly, or if it didn’t actually tear—

Ebony ran ahead of me. “Wait!” I said, frantic, but ze didn’t react at all. One of the large ribbons dove down to meet hir, but ze jumped over it, landing to the side of it to dodge the remainder of the ribbon following the same path that the end was. The ribbon turned around to make a second attack, and Ebony jumped again, catching its front edge with hir feet. Then, propelled by the ribbon, ze jumped off of it and to the statue’s head. Ae landed perfectly on top, hung down by one arm, and used the other arm to reach into the statue’s mouth. The statue’s plaque disintegrated. Suddenly, all around us, the ribbons lost their glow, and began to fall to the floor. Ebony pulled out the red orb, and dropped to the ground, executing a perfect roll before catching Fawn in hir hands and laying aer down on the floor.

D: …what the fuck.

B: is that your power or did you just do that normally

E: uhm,,

E: n.. normally..

E: that was all me :))

I didn’t believe what ze said whatsoever—what had just occurred would have made more sense in an action movie, or a cartoon, not real life, regardless of what world we were in. That didn’t matter, though. What mattered was that Fawn was safe.

I walked over, to inspect aer body. Ae was breathing heavily, crying. Ae turned aer head towards me but did not look at me so much as past me. Aer body was covered in tiny cuts, and blood was running from aer mouth, butt, and privates.

“I—” Ae started. Ae didn’t finish the sentence.

I picked aer up. It was going to be a long walk back.

2.7

The butterflies, oh how they try to save you from indecency, they get their legs bloody and all contaminated. That blood, you know it never really washes off. You are soaked in it, it fills your veins and your brain and your heart. You wish you would bleed faster, maybe then it would all wash away. And then finally, liberated from you, your blood would be clean enough for the butterflies to bathe in.

You are crying. That didn’t—did not really need to be said.

You are breathing heavily. It feels like you are choking on the air. Like you are on a ship, facing the wind, trying your best to sing a lullaby to your throat. Telling it to rest easy, the dreamy song is proof that your breaths are reaching it, it has nothing to be afraid of. But it panics anyway, and you turn around, and cup your mouth and nose, but you still cannot feel like you are breathing. You still cannot feel like you deserve to be breathing.

You cough, and some butterflies are scared away, just to be replaced by those who have forgotten to avoid you. All butterflies forget. They only ever live for a few weeks, and to die is to forget.

“Hey,” Batter turns aer head away from you. Ae leans against the bed, looking up. “I’ve been thinking, uhm.” People do not think. Thoughts are fearful tendrils that lash out from a void of desire. Your joints are tired of their sickly attachment. “Coral said this place was probably imagined by a child. But you’re an adult, right?” You want to console Batter. Nobody is an adult. Not a single person alive is an adult. “So they probably don’t have any young children.” Batter—you’ve seen aer. Ae is so pure, you wish ae would take aer dainty little hands and pick up a bit of grass, one of the blades, and slice you open with it. “And you were so nice and carefree and careful back before you got any handcuffs.” You wish ae would widen the gap, lick aer fingers, and dig into the tendons. “And you, uhm, have a lot of imagination. So I was wondering… Did you make this place?” You wish ae would pull to snap open your ribcage, one bone at a time. You wish ae would tear out your heart and bite down on it. You wish ae would—just. Everything.

The ribbons are gone now, lost in that cave. You can’t hide the feeling behind a metaphor anymore, and yet you must. You are here, so rich and full of nutrients. So vulnerable. Why can ae not just indulge aerself on you?

“Well, uhm. It’s beautiful.”

Another butterfly sullies itself. The world here is not yours. How could it be? You’re made of beliefs. You aren’t real. You can feel Fallow’s presence in the real world, and ae could not possibly understand how much more important ae is than you. But ae cannot be Fallow, ae still has to be Fawn, because of you. Because of your mistakes.

“The others, uhm, they’re worried about you. They went to go find a first-aid kit from your house. It’s just the two of us, right now. Does your power, uhm, not work in this world?” Ae turns aer head to look at you. “You can still talk, can’t you?”

You bury your face in the pillow. In Batter’s pillow. They mentioned, when they put you down on the bed, that it was Batter’s bed. The down filters your breaths. You grab it, and wrap tightly around it, forehead pressed against the bed where it used to be. You rip it apart. You curl up around yourself.

“Does it hurt?”

Yes, it does hurt that they have decided to save you. They could have just left you there, allowed you to be torn apart as a sacrifice to yourself. You walked into that room for a reason. The ribbons were only ever following your commands.

“Sorry, um. I’m not very good at talking to injured people. I’m sorry that all of that happened to you. That place was really scary. Coral says that it was there because you felt that way about that place and I don’t know why that would happen. I don’t know why any of this would happen. I still don’t really—really get why you cut yourself yesterday.”

The last part of that barely made its way through Batter’s lips. A ghost of an idea. The plants around you rustle—they shiver. It whispers into your ears and past them, away and away and away…

It’s that soft wind that punctuated your childhood. Those ghosts, those plants as scared of it as you were of your shadow. But the ghosts didn’t leave, they clawed their way into your heart and found peace within its ventricles. All around you, then, the plants always shivered, always swayed. The perfect weather to sit outside, and just smile. You could save aer from it, if only you could try.

“It wasn’t me.”

“Oh. Sorry. What’s, uhm. What’s your name?”

“I’m Fawn.”

“Oh. Who is the other you? I mean the one who uhm. Who told us to save you.”

Ae is in the real world, knees tired, back beaten and bruised. Aer stomach rumbles and so too does the concrete above, it roars. Brakes screech and little rubber particles drift away. A tent’s unzipped door would flap in the wind, if there was any. The bloom inside was nice, even offering a spot to lie down, but Fawn refused. Fallow didn’t plan to sleep last night. Aer aches and dirt provided refuge enough already.

“Sorry if you want me to go away then I will. I just didn’t want to leave you alone like this. You’re probably really mad at yourself and I wanted to make it better. I don’t know if I really helped, uhm.”

If only ae would take your hand and pry off the fingernails, take your leg and break it so you have nowhere to run as ae plugs your nose and kisses you, plants aer mouth over yours so as you suffocate and choke the only breaths you can take are those ae breathes in first—

“I don’t know how powers work but. I keep feeling like I’m really supposed to touch you right now and I don’t know why. But I don’t know if it will hurt you by accident.”

“Please.”

“What?”

“Please use it.” You smile, your lips still bloodied. You can just imagine the damage it might cause to you. You want it to backfire. You want the others to return to see Batter crying over a mockery of yourself.

“I—Okay.”

Batter’s hand loses its golden sheath. It makes its way to a proper spot, your forehead, but you would hate to disappoint it after it had come so far. You bury your face in the mattress, and the hand finds your back to rest on, tentatively.

The hairs stand up on your back, where you are touched. It’s cold. The chill spreads to your neck, and your shoulders, arms, hands, down to your waist and your butt, inner and outer thighs, shins, calves and ankles. Then, suddenly, the goosebumps are everywhere: every organ painted inside and out, under your skin, within your lungs, under your face’s tears, within your ears and between your toes. It is everything you could have asked for. You whore. You monster. You should be grateful.

It leaves, as quickly as it came—slowly, leaving you wanting just one more second before—

“Please don’t—” you whisper, but it’s gone. Gone forever.

“I’m sorry—OW.” Batter tenses up. “Ow ow ow I’m sorry I’m so sorry I need to lie down.”

You scoot over, but just by a little bit. Batter sinks aer leg into the mattress, disturbing some butterflies. Ae falls the rest of the way onto the bed. Ae took the bait, and you scoot in to wrap yourself around aer, but—

You look at your arm. It’s someone else’s. The cuts, they’ve been low on morale, hidden behind your skin rather than in front, you are sure of it. Or—They have defected. You recognize them, on Batter’s face. They curve in a million tiny smiles. “But why?” You ask, softly. You hosted them kindly, you prided yourself on them. They were proof of your allegiance. Now, you are stuck. The only mask you can wear is that of your own face. The only skin you can wear is that of Fawn. You can only be on one side of things: yours. The blood wells in you, angry that you’d suddenly swapped sides; it is desperate to escape, to liberate itself, to become clean. It boils with frustration. You yell.

“WHY?”

Batter can't wear your injuries. They don't fit. They—they—

"I'm sorry," Batter pleads.

And so your footfalls fill not with blood but with regret as you step-step-crunch your way through the foliage. The plants open up their great gates before your hollow touch, a clearing meant for a hallowed you, a you that you never had the chance to be. You lie down on a central stump, as if it is a great dinner plate, and it is finally your time to die.

You try your hardest to not think. The tendrils of Thought and The Past and The Future cling onto you and make you wish for things like friends and understanding and maybe a blanket, alongside other things you don't quite deserve.

You were supposed to fix Fallow. You were to be aer moon, and ae would look to the sky and see the light reflected off of you and onto aer. Ae wouldn't need to stargaze, anymore. You would be trapped, and in pain, and suffering, and ae would finally, at last, be free. Maybe then, and only then, you could be free, too.

It didn't work. You could try again, but—the cave, the ribbons, they all drip with such excess malice, you would never think about returning. Yet even now, sitting here, the concept they represented, the concept you thought you had finally conquered, fails to leave you alone. It's not a question of if you go back, but when.

Soon enough—after an eternity, to be precise—it is two hours later, and the leaves, vines, and branches that border your escape are finally breached. Coral steps through, and does not speak. Per looks at you, then at the stump, and sits down at the edge, facing away from you.

Per finally begins, "we're going shopping for clothes. You're going with Batter."

Maybe if you stay quiet, per will go away. Maybe per will forget you are here. The plants, too, they'll live on without you. They won't have to wrestle with meeting their hero, and it being you. If only you could stop existing, say, a couple hours ago. But your curiosity gets the better of you.

"Ae can stand?"

"The injuries were minor. I suspect Batter's power reduces damage as it accepts it."

"Oh."

You wait for maybe a minute. Coral doesn't seem bothered.

"Do I have to go?"

“Yes. We need to keep an eye on you.”

“Please stop caring about me.”

“Willow would kill me.”

It is not fair. You want per to stab you and wrap you up in vines and—and—even now, you are avoiding the biggest thing.

Coral finally asks, “why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Trap yourself. You could have used your power to escape. You didn’t. Why?”

“No reason.” You smile.

Coral waits for another while.

“Do you want to go back there?”

It takes you a minute to answer. Your eyes threaten to drip your mouth with salt once more.

“No.”

“Are you coming to shop with us? Or do I need to stay here and watch over you?”

“Okay.” You kiss the wooden stump goodbye. One of your legs fills itself with pins and needles in defiance. You walk back through the leafy tunnel, and force yourself to smile.

— — — — — — —

“Why are you doing that?” Batter asks, looking at you oddly and evenly at once. Aer brow furrows cutely. You want to walk up, and rub your fingers against aer eyebrows’ soft, fuzzy darkness. Hmmmmmm. You bounce up to aer, making sure to follow the lines of the mall’s colorful floor, and lean forward. “Doing what?” You cup aer neck in your hand, and reach out to just above aer eye—Ae steps back, not following the lines, looking bewildered. Your hand makes its way to the floor, as you almost fall over. Ae houses a ghost for just a moment, and shakes appropriately. “Uhm—Stepping on all the lines.”

“It’s fun!” You respond heartily. If they did not want the lines to be stepped on, and only the lines to be stepped on, then they should not have added lines. A simple mistake, on their end. The mall people, you mean—the mall peoples’ end. The people who make malls. The lines spiral around the central area of the mall, twirling around themselves like a ball of yarn had been

chased all around. They go up the escalators and into all of the mall's stores, which you would otherwise be barred from visiting.

"And also, you're not swaying your arms when you walk and run. It's kind of weird."

"Oh. Sorry. I forgot." You stick out your tongue.

"How about this one?" Batter points to one of the doorways, on the other side of the walkway. Then, ae starts yelling, "Wrong way!"

You laugh. There can not be a wrong direction! The mall is very large for just the two of you, and you think it is Batter's fault if you happen to lose aer. Besides—Batter wants to go to a fashion store, but it's too far to jump from one line to another. Instead, you simply must go the wrong way, down to where the lines are all twisty-turvy, then back up on the right side. If Batter wanted you to enter the fashion store normally, then—hmm… ae could have laid down on the floor, so you wouldn't have to touch it while crossing from one line to another. It is silly, really, that ae did not think of that. But it is good that ae did not, because now you get to take the escalator an extra two times.

You make it in forty seconds, and step into the store just before Batter does. Success.

Clothes line the walls and cover all the little shelves and hang from all those little iron bars and you look up and sadly they do not cover the ceiling, the ceiling is just normal. It looks down on you with those massive glowing white square eyes like a great tiled spider face. You turn back to the clothes, ashamed.

"Wow," Batter says. "We can just take anything?"

"Yes!" You reply. You think that it's absurd, really, that you can't just take from most stores. People should be paid by everyone to make things, and then everyone should share what they made. It's so silly, really, that everyone has to buy their own sets of clothes, and power tools, and washing machines, and then nobody cares about how long they last or how repairable they are because they can't afford to, being paid minimum wage, having their excess labor value stolen from them by capitalist pigs and a government controlled by their lobbying and donation money.

To be clear, you are a centrist: You think both the anarcho-communists and the authoritarian communists made some great points.

Here, there is nobody to stop you. You grab a blazer off of one of the walls, and put it on. Then, hmm, suits belong in suitcases, so you put one of those on as a hat. It falls off.

Batter seems much more confused. You grab another suit (without the case) and hold it up to aer, expectantly. “Uhm,” ae starts, “I’m not much of a fashion person. Is it okay if I just wear, like, sweatpants?”

You look at aer. Sweatpants are what you wear when you want to scream “I am being lazy and casual and I do not care if I look like I woke up five minutes ago.” You shake your head. You grab a skirt, red and black, and toss it to aer. Ae looks at it like you’ve just given aer a twenty-one dollar bill. “Do—do I have to? I’ve never really worn skirts before.”

“Try it on!”

“Uhm. Are there, uh, changing rooms?”

You look at aer. Then you look down at your still-half-naked self with your bare chest and hands and crotch. Ae is really being quite absurd. You stare at aer expectantly.

“Can—can you at least turn around?”

You sigh, and go off to let aer change in peace. What else could you have aer try on, you wonder. A dress? Ooh, maybe the ones that have different colors on each side. Or the ones with pockets. Maybe the really tiny ones that don’t let you run, or walk, or move at all, and you can put one of those on instead of aer and ae will walk over and be unable to resist—

You punch yourself in the head, and then keep doing it until you are too dizzy to think of that anymore. Overalls. You are going to make aer try on overalls. Overalls and khakis and riding boots and tutus and crop-tops and colorful button-ups and tiaras and straw hats and monocles and scarves and sunglasses and… this is going to be fun.

Three minutes later, you have everything you need for Batter’s first outfit.

Ae is sitting on the floor, cross-legged. Aer skirt reminds you of the one you took for yourself soon after you entered the mesocosm. The lightly-transparent one that you ordered the ribbons to ignore, hoping you might look cute as you were abused like a human marionette. As the ribbons dug into your skin, and your joints screamed, and yet you didn’t ask for any of it to stop until, finally, it did of Ebony’s accord. Batter’s skirt has red polka dots, like it is punctuated by the blood that dripped from your insides.

“Are you okay?” Batter asks. You put the outfit down, and walk back away. The feeling is back, full-force. It crawls on your skin, bites against your inner thigh. You’ll never be free—you know that. It doesn’t come from outside, it’s borne of your sins. You wish for the thousandth time that you could be irresistible. You wish you could go out in public and every stranger to see you could think of nothing but how soft your skin is and how nice it would be to praise you and stab you and—and—You wish Batter would just walk over and pin you down and—You’re such a terrible person. You’re such a terrible friend.

You sit down against a wall, a minute's walk away, in between rows of clothes, and plead to whatever god might be out there that you won't throw up or bleed this time.

Only a matter of when, you think. You know where you can go to be touched. It's only ever a matter of when.

You get one of your two wishes. You wipe the blood and fluids on a black t-shirt as you walk back. You decide to collect another outfit for Batter, so ae will not be suspicious that you were gone for so many minutes.

Batter looks okay in the dress, but not great. Ae looks at the earrings, still in aer hand, and you are saddened to discover that ae does not even have aer ears pierced. You bring aer to a mirror.

"It's a little bit, uhm, restrictive," ae says. Hmm. You wander off, and come back with cloth scissors and a necklace. You cut from the bottom of the dress to the mid-thigh, on both the left and the right, and make Batter put on the necklace. Much better.

"Sorry I just don't really like it," ae says. You frown, and go to collect some other clothes.

"Wait." Batter says. You keep walking. "Could you please put something on?" You frown again. When you think that things should be free for everyone, you mostly think they should be free for everyone but you. It's much more fun to workshop fashion without having to think about your own body.

When you come back, ae is looking in the mirror, wearing not what you picked for aer second outfit, but a sports jersey. You eyeball it with disgust. You would sooner burn it than let Batter wear it for even one more second. Sports jerseys are what you put on when you want to say "I'm middle-aged, into beer, and kind of a douche." Batter is none of those things—you're pretty sure Batter is none of those things—and the look simply does not fit. The only excuse for wearing a sports jersey is being an athlete or watching someone play sports. What's more, ae is wearing ripped jeans. You want to stab aer, and not in an intimate way.

Batter looks at you, smiling, then looks confused. "They make sweaters that big?"

For your part, you're wearing a thick yellow sweater that goes down to your knees and way past your hands. It's made of wool, and you think it's cute.

You stare at each other with mutual confusion and distaste for maybe fifteen seconds.

"Are you at least wearing shorts?" Batter asks, delightfully hopeful. "Or, uhm, underwear?"

"No," you smile. You're only wearing the sweatshirt.

“I hate it when you smile like that. It looks so real.”

“You don’t think it’s real?” You pout.

“No, I don’t! I don’t get why you do half the things you do! You refuse to talk and you constantly say or do creepy things and every time you show something on your face I can only guess on whether or not it’s an affectation! Sorry sorry I don’t mean that, I just—I don’t get it. Could you please stop?”

You turn around to walk out of the store. The fake store with no money and no people—two people. “Please?” Batter asks.

“I do not want you to ‘get it.’” You say. You wish Batter hadn’t stopped aerself from getting angry at you. You can’t be fixed. You know that.

You walk away. Batter follows, at a distance. Ae closes the gap tentatively as the two of you walk back to where everyone is meeting back up. You walk out of the mall and onto the sidewalk before Batter speaks again.

“Is, uhm, stepping on the lines… one of those things that you do to be creepy?” Batter asks.

You’ve been stepping on all the lines between the sidewalk’s concrete tiles. You keep walking for a little bit, thinking. It’s something you do to be childish. Like the problems you have aren’t worth worrying about. “No. Is it creepy?”

“No.” Batter says, inconclusively. “I mean it’s just a saying you know, like, step on a line break someone’s spine.” Ae pauses. “When I was young I’d always do the opposite, like I’d avoid them at all costs, and then if I stepped on one I’d, uhm, I’d uhm think about all my friends and family members and really wish they wouldn’t die.” Ae breathed in. “and then I’d worry that I forgot about one of them so I always tried to keep a list on me with all the people I liked, just in case, because maybe if I forgot one then the bad luck would be transferred to them, and—”

“You’re really weird,” you say, giggling.

“Oh is this not normal?”

“I thought I was the weird one.” You smile.

The two of you keep walking.

“You realize we’re stuck here together, right?” Batter interrupts, suddenly. “We came in here to save you, and because we wanted to, and now—we’re going to be here for the rest of our lives.

And Glace says that we need to stay together or else the mesocosm will make sure we go insane."

You look over at aer. Ae looks worried.

"I just mean—" ae continues. "I know that sounds really bad and maybe it is I don't know but… it means we need to learn to trust each other."

"Maybe Glace is wrong," you say. "Or maybe I don't deserve to be trusted."

It is only a fifteen-minute walk back. You make it the rest of the way without either of you saying anything.

You breathe in. It is a dreary day. The clouds hide the earth from the sun's heat, yes, but also its warmth; the air feels empty and lifeless. Even the wind is all gone. The city is empty, today. The mesocosm has infinite places, but no people. Lights flicker on misplaced storefronts, but you can barely tell; the daylight makes the neon lighting irrelevant. Like turning on a flashlight when it is already bright. The buildings on all sides are stacked, towering, they scrape the sky in a way skyscrapers never do. But they, too, are redundant; only the first few stories hold anything worth visiting, anything worth remembering. You shiver. You feel erroneous.

Voices make themselves known in the distance. They argue animatedly, but then one of them sees you, and it all becomes quiet again. You sit down beside them. It is the same lawn chair that you sat in, two days ago, in the real world. The one you sat in for ten seconds, all excited for the day's events, before finding yourself handcuffed and screaming and crying.

"Of course the person named Batter comes back in a sports jersey," says Diode.

"Fawn," Glace begins, "are you feeling better?"

"," you say. Nothing, that is. "I guess not." Glace looks more worried at the edge of your vision. You look away.

"Ae was willing to talk earlier," Autumn commented. Ze looked over to Batter. "Did something happen at the mall?"

"Oh—I, uhm. I might have said some mean things to aer. I'm sorry."

"Batter!" Ebony jumped in, "Don't do that. Fawn already has enough hurt for today!"

"Is that a bruise on aer forehead?"

"Stop," You say. They turn to you. "It was not Batter. It's never anyone else. It's just me. I'm the problem, alright? I'm the one who walked into that cave, I'm the one who can't go five seconds

without thinking horrid things about others. When I'm sad please just pity me and use me and let yourselves be happy. Don't fucking take it out on the people who were around me."

"What is it with you and being used?" Autumn barked back. "You enter the mesocosm and you lie to Coral to go get yourself torn apart by magical fucking ribbon things, then you cry to Batter about how the cuts you got from it aren't on your body anymore, and every time you're sad you look at people and smile and hope they won't do anything to help you. What is your problem? Just stop doing things and start talking about whatever the hell is bothering you."

"You want to know the real me?" You ask, and smile. "You want to know who I actually am? I'm disgusting, Autumn. I'm the worst person imaginable. I don't deserve whatever help you think you can give me. I'm broken, and I'm never going to get better. You saw the cave I entered, you saw how horrid it was. I made that place on purpose. I went in there and I was the one who sent the ribbons to attack you. I don't fucking know why the other me asked for any of you to save me. We had a plan and then ae fucked it up and I fucked it up too and I wish all of you would just leave me the fuck alone."

"You weren't controlling the ribbons." Autumn says, matter-of-factly.

"Yes I was. I saw the ones you tore apart." Autumn looked taken aback. "I—" You are interrupted.

"You wrapped me up on purpose?" Batter asks.

"I—I did that as a warning."

"I thought—"

"I wanted you to hate me."

Batter looks at you, saddened. "I don't hate you."

"Maybe you should!"

"None of us hate you," Glace adds in.

"Speak for yourself," Diode says, not following it up with anything.

Autumn laughs. "So we were never in any real danger, then."

"Yes you were!" You start to yell, finally. "I don't have a hold on myself, okay? I can't control what I do. I could have hurt you, I could have killed you, I could have gotten you stuck there with me in just as much pain."

“That’s okay,” Glace says.

“Everyone’s like that,” Autumn states. “Everyone’s weird and broken and out of control. At least you’ve realized it. I like that about you.”

This isn’t going at all how you wanted it to. You wanted them to throw you out. You wanted them to punch you, to yell at you, to reject you. They don’t understand. They’ll never fucking understand.

You smile.

—You sit down beside them. It is the same lawn chair that you sat in, two days ago, in the real world. The one you sat in for ten seconds, all excited for the day’s events, before finding yourself handcuffed and screaming and crying. As you sit down, the others teleport—Ebony jumps to the middle of a sentence, “—is a little dumb sometimes!” It is bewildering. You must have used your power—but why?

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Autumn says.

“What happened?’ You inquire, confused. “How much time did I lose?”

“You—maybe a minute. You were telling us about how terrible you are.” Autumn smiles, a little bit, “and about what happened at the mall.”

Glace looks away.

You shiver, and recoil. You told them about that? Why? Was it an accident? You check your fingers, just to make sure you indeed wiped away all the blood.

You smile. “So what if I did that? So what if this is all I’m wearing? Maybe a minute ago I was right to call myself so terrible. I’m disgusting, Autumn. Maybe I’ll do it again, right here, in front of you. Maybe I’ll tie myself down and wait for one of you to do it to me yourself. Maybe that’s all i can fucking think about when I’m around others, and I’m just wishing they’d see me and not be able to stop themselves, maybe—”

“Is that what this is fucking about, then?” Autumn was genuinely, finally, mad at me. “I thought it was obvious, but—really? You’re just fucking horny all the time?”

Finally, the two of you are on the same wavelength. You can speak freely, at last.

F: YES.

F: I CANNOT HOLD A CONVERSATION WITH ANYONE WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT THEM FUCKING ME SENSELESS. IT’S ALL I EVER WANT FROM ANYONE. ALL I CAN THINK

ABOUT RIGHT NOW IS YOU PUSHING ME UP AGAINST A WALL AND USING ME FOR YOUR DEEPEST AND WORST DESIRES.

F: IT'S THE ONLY THING THAT EVER MAKES ME FEEL LIKE I'M ACTUALLY WORTH ANYTHING. YOU CAN'T STOP ME FROM GOING BACK. I KNOW I WILL.

F: I'M BROKEN. I MASTURBATE MULTIPLE TIMES A DAY AND WHEN I DO I CAN'T GET MYSELF OFF UNTIL I'M BLEEDING AND THROWING UP. MY DENTIST THOUGHT I HAD FUCKING BULEMIA.

F: I CAN'T MAKE FUCKING FRIENDS BECAUSE THEY GET CLOSE TO ME AND ALL I CAN THINK ABOUT IS HOW THEY WOULD FEEL INSIDE ME. I TOUCH THEM AND EITHER I PUSH THEM AWAY OR THEY BECOME MY FUCK-BUDDY UNTIL I CAN'T THINK OF THEM ANYMORE WITHOUT HATING THEM FOR DOING EXACTLY WHAT I ASKED THEM TO.

F: IT'S FUCKING COMPULSIVE.

F: DO YOU UNDERSTAND? I'M FUCKING WORTHLESS. USE ME. THROW ME OUT LIKE THE FUCKING TRASH THAT I AM.

F: I JOINED THE GROUP AGAINST ECLIPSE BECAUSE I WANTED MY PARTNER TO AT LEAST HAVE GOOD POLITICS THIS TIME.

F: PLEASE.

F: PLEASE JUST FUCKING STAB ME AND PRAISE ME AND FUCK ME UNTIL MY BONES ARE BROKEN AND MY THROAT CAN'T SWALLOW ANY MORE.

You start to cry again.

A: Fawn.

A: I'm not mad at you for being horny all the time. That sounds like it sucks, honestly.

A: But it doesn't make you disgusting.

D: …maybe it does.

A: Fuck off.

A: Fawn, you're an adult. You can do what you want with your body. None of my fucking business.

A: What is my business is that you attacked us. That you needed us to save you from hurting yourself. I don't know what the solution here is, but it isn't that fucking cave.

A: We'll figure out what's causing this, okay?

F: I'M NOT AN ADULT. I'M SEVENTEEN.

A: I—Sigh.

E: i'm sure we can still have fun in this world together,, that sounds really hard on you though.. sorry..

G: Yeah, we'll work something out

B: im sorry that these feelings have been hurting you so much it sounds really bad and scary its kind of hard to imagine i promise its not disgusting

F: IT IS.

C: You'll get better.

F: I WON'T.

F: STOP TRYING TO LIE TO ME. IT'S OBVIOUS WHAT YOU ALL ARE DOING. YOU'RE JUST TRYING TO MAKE YOURSELVES FEEL BETTER ABOUT BEING HERE WITH ME. YOU'RE SCARED OF ME. YOU SHOULD BE.

A: Scared of you?

A: You can't do anything to me. I can just walk away.

A: We could just leave you behind.

A: You aren't scary. You're just kind of pathetic.

F: YOU'RE SCARED OF WHAT I REPRESENT.

A: The world being fucked? Pun not intended?

A: Why do you think we all joined this group in the first place? There's a literal cult of people trying to replace our country with a dictatorship and the media treats them like they don't matter whatsoever.

A: However fucked up you are, it can't compare to that.

G: Fawn, you're not broken. The way you are isn't hurting any of us.

F: IT DID. I HURT YOU.

E: you were scared!!

D: …ae tried to bulldoze us with giant pieces of cloth…

G: Diode, if you have something to say, then I'd appreciate it if you were more upfront.

D: …whatever.

B: maybe you did a lot of gross things in the past but that doesnt mean youre gross it just means youve survived a lot of gross things

B: fawn im also bad at making friends because i cant stop thinking mean things about them sometimes it doesnt mean youre evil or disgusting

F: I ALWAYS END UP HURTING THEM. ALWAYS. YOU DON'T KNOW ME.

F: NONE OF YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ME.

G: Then let us learn!

G: You think I've never been hurt by friends before? You think I've never gotten myself back on my feet afterwards? You think I've never worked things out with anyone? I have, Fawn. It's fucking hard sometimes but I have. If you're afraid of hurting people then that's fine and good but you're not allowed to push yourself away on my fucking behalf without even asking me about it first.

F: I'M SORRY I REALLY WANT TO BUT I JUST CAN'T. I CAN'T DEAL WITH THE SHAME OF DRIVING PEOPLE AWAY ANYMORE. I'M JUST GOING TO FUCK UP AGAIN AND AGAIN. ALL I'LL DO IS DISAPPOINT YOU.

E: fawn..

E: the only thing that will disappoint me…… is if you give up on friendship!!

E: i know you'll make mistakes,, and maybe it wont work.. but i want to help take care of you!!

F: I'M SORRY.

F: EVEN RIGHT NOW IT'S ALL I CAN THINK ABOUT. I JUST WANT TO BE TOUCHED AND HELD AND USED AND SAID NICE THINGS ABOUT.

E: i don't care!! what if i also want to do three of those things.. what then??

F: I WANT TO TRUST YOU. BUT THE MORE YOU CARE ABOUT ME THE MORE IT WILL HURT WHEN I END UP FUCKING THINGS UP. THE NICER YOU ARE THE MORE I WILL TRY TO DRIVE YOU AWAY BECAUSE I CANNOT BELIEVE IN PEOPLE BEING NICE TO ME.

F: I WILL TEST YOU AND I WILL THINK YOU HATE ME THE MOMENT YOU FAIL ANY OF THOSE TESTS AND THEN I WILL ONLY BEGIN TO TEST YOU HARDER.

F: IF YOU SAY NICE THINGS THEN I WILL GROW ADDICTED. IF YOU HOLD ME THEN I WILL HATE YOU IF YOU EVER LET GO.

E: then i won't stop.. i'll say nice things to you over and over and over again,, and i'll hold you over and over again..

F: YOU WILL BURN OUT. YOU WILL HATE ME WHEN I GO OFF TO HURT MYSELF.

F: YOU WILL

F: YOU

F: I

"I," you say, unable to finish the sentence.

They aren't supposed to love you. What did you do wrong? You revealed every last gross thing about yourself that you could come up with. That was supposed to work. You were supposed to be able to leave them, knowing for sure that it was the right thing to do. You would have hated them, of course. You hate everyone who rejects you. But at least you could have felt assured that your life would be better without them.

Your brain clicks back into place. You can feel the flow again; the phrase that will make them realize what a mistake they've made in caring for you:

F: WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU.

F: WHY PUT SO MUCH EFFORT INTO ME WHEN I MIGHT NOT EVER GIVE BACK.

They stare at you. You close your eyes. You don't want to see the moment where they finally swap sides. "Oh, right." One of them might say, "You're just manipulating us. You're making it sound like taking care of you is a challenge. You're pathetic. You're being difficult on purpose,

because you just want attention. And when you go walk off, and get abused, you'll walk back to me and expect me to coddle you. That's not something I can stand. Go away."

You didn't see the moment, but you heard it; Footsteps on the grass, ever so quiet. The grass wants to protect your assailant: it's a monoculture, it can't handle deviance. You're a weed. All you ever do is grow yourself into places you're not supposed to be. Except weeds make way for bigger, better crops. You're not even a weed; you're invasive.

Whoever it is, they stand beside you now, ready to finally execute you. Maybe it's Autumn, and you'll get thrown halfway into space with hir power, maybe it's Ebony, and ze will perfectly execute a wrestling takedown, maybe it's Glace, and… you don't know what Glace's power is. Maybe e will just hit you normally.

"Because, uhm." It's not Glace, then. Eir voice can still be heard from where e was sitting. "When you're happy, it reminds me of who I used to want to be, when I was a child. You're bubbly, and exciting, and you ask questions, and you're unashamed, and you go up to people and force them to recognize you… I thought that, maybe, even if I can't live that life, maybe you can, and it won't have to be a pretense, this time."

You smile, a little bit, lips quivering. It was your childhood dream, too. You've done so much to disappoint aer. You don't have dreams anymore, they would hurt more than the nightmares do.

"For me, at least," The person beside you isn't Autumn, either, "I find most people annoying. But they're annoying because they don't pay attention to themselves. They're superficial, but not on purpose, they just follow the flow of whatever actions provide them the least self-reflection. You're not like that, because you recognize all the issues that you have. You care about yourself as an entity to be studied, not just as something to protect the ego of. And I want to be there to see you figure yourself out."

The idea that you're going to fix yourself… It's okay to entertain, for now. You've decided you like these people; you want your last moments with them to be nice, and hopeful, before they kick you out. How nice of them, to give you a couple final minutes of kindness.

"Fawn," Batter begins. The one next to you, ready to kill you, must be Ebony, then. You smile. At least it won't be very painful. "You just want to be loved. It's fucking obvious that you're just afraid to hope for that because you think you're a grenade. Because you're afraid that you're a hurricane and the eye of the storm is already full with everyone who doesn't care about you, and the moment they come out to meet you they'll have to leave it or you'll have to push someone out. You think we'll leave you now because you told us the truth about yourself and that means that nobody has ever stuck around after you told them or maybe you didn't tell them at all and that's so sad to me. I think every person deserves to be known by someone like I feel like I'm just a black box sometimes where input goes in and output comes out and I wish someone would just tear me apart and tell me what's happening to me and the fact that you know yourself and you want to be known by others, that you want to be known by me, it makes me happy to

think that maybe I can be the part of someone's life where they look at themselves and they don't know what's wrong but other people do and so they don't have to blame themself anymore. You're really mad at yourself for what you've done but I think it's more that you're afraid that you made a mistake somewhere or made a lot of mistakes and you don't want it proven to you that you really didn't do anything wrong there was just some part of you that was hurting that you didn't know about. I want to be there to tell you that there's nothing wrong as long as you're not hurting people, like I get that you've done that in the past but you only did that because you were pushing them away because you were afraid of them not liking who you really were, sorry I'm not making sense I just… If I can ever say something that makes you hate yourself less then I really want to. That sounds like the most important thing I could do for anyone ever."

How cruel of them to stage this, so that just as they make you happy, just as they make you hopeful, just as their explanations unite the past, future, and present, all filled with hope and fervor, you turn to the fourth and final person to accept you, for them all to reveal that they don't care. That they never cared.

Your eyes are still closed. They're waiting. The eyes—they're waiting to be opened, to see faces looking at them attentively and cautiously and caringly. Eyes looking for faces looking as hands look when they tentatively reach out to be sniffed by a scared animal. You hate to deny them their wish, for just three more seconds, but you swallow, and breathe in, and try to hope. Before they hurt you, before they reveal that it was all a trick, you want to believe just for a second that it could be real. That Glace really does want you to live out eir childhood dream, that Autumn really does want you to fix yourself, that Batter really does want you to be okay with yourself as it presently exists. That you will live out your childhood dream, and fix yourself, and be okay with yourself, someday.

You turn to Ebony before opening your eyes. You believe, just for a second, that ze will be standing there, and ze will look down to you, and say, "I'm not mad at you."

Ze is kneeling down on the grass to your left. You cannot help but notice the grass blades being adventurous, and cuddly, and treating hir just the same as they treated you two days ago when you first sat down on them.

"Do you want a hug?" Ze asks.

"Please—Please don't offer one."

"Why?"

"I—" It comes out as a squeak. All the lights gain trails and all the faces become blobs and the grass stretches and thins and all the hope comes crashing into your head like a tidal wave and it comes out of your eyes in streams that cry for attention and love all on their own.

You sob. Your words are incomprehensible. “I would never let go.”

Ze opens hir arms, and you tackle hir.

E: it’s okay,,

E: it’s going to be okay..

You decide, at this moment, no more forgetting. No more teleporting.

Not past here.

2.Interlude

It’s 5:12pm on a Tuesday. Dust has gathered again on the coffee maker as rain silently drizzles outside. It’s foggy, and the sun is setting. Laminate wooden floorboards creak under Luan’s feet as ae paces back and forth, drinking newly-brewed coffee. The sink faucet drips: *thunk, thunk, thunk*.

Ae puts the now-empty mug back on the buffet, and walks over to where aer partner, Quilt, is watching cartoons on TV. In the cartoon, another faucet drips. The water breaks off from the faucet: *squelch*.

What a horrid mistake for the sound designers to make. When droplets break away, they make no sound. There’s no notification. It’s only when they fall, meeting their end on the stainless steel below, splattering themselves all over, that anyone knows they’re gone.

“You shouldn’t watch those stupid things.”

“What I watch is none of your damn business.”

“Who here is paying for the electrical bills?”

“What I watch is none. Of. Your. Damn. Business.”

Luan grabs the TV remote, and shuts it off. “Those programs are for children.”

“It was an adult animation.”

“No such thing. If it’s animation, it’s for children. Shut it off. And I don’t want you switching to sportsball, either.”

“Give me the TV remote.”

“No.”

“You worthless shine. Give me the remote or I’ll kill you.”

Luan walks over to the kitchen counter, places down the remote, grabs the car keys, and walks away.

“Give it to ME.”

Thunk, goes the sink, once more.

“Maybe you’ll have to get up and get it yourself!” Luan yells, slamming the front door.

Aer hair gets damp. The rain threatens to ruin aer makeup; ae places aer arms above aer head and rushes to the car.

Ae takes a moment to breathe.

God, ae begins to pray. *Please fix my family. Give me a drift who is responsible and can guide our family with care. Give me a child who has respect for you, and fears you. Give me guidance on how to approach hir. I don’t want to drive hir away. Please.*

Maybe later today, ae can walk up to Quilt, and per will say:

Q: Is something the matter? You’ve been irritable all week.

It’s 8:30 pm, in this scene. The TV is off. Luan returns home from aer shift, to find Quilt filling out taxes on the dining room table. The fireplace is alight. It warms Luan’s cold hands and thighs as ae kneels down in front of it. Quilt walks over, and kneels down beside aer. Per doesn’t say anything else, until Luan does.

L: I need help with something. It’s serious. Can we talk quietly, so Ebony doesn’t hear?

Ebony is happily studying in hir room. Luan looks over, past the room’s non-existent door, to see hir reading a textbook.

Q (quieter): Yes. Thank you for asking. What is the problem?

L: Well, I was walking around our garden the other day—the one we grew mint in, back when Ebony was four or five—and I found some sets of clothing.

The bin sits outside, unassuming. The clothing under it isn't still there, in this scenario: Luan had the strength at 8:20 pm to take them, and throw them in the trash.

Q: Oh! Has some homeless person been using it as storage? We should set up a camera.

L: No, no—One of the sets of clothing was Ebony's. The rest were completely foreign to me.

L: I fear—Ebony has been crossdressing.

The clothes—some of them were skirts, crop-tops, hair clips and thigh-highs, clothing meant for shines. Others were short shorts, leggings, bras, v-necks, bloom clothing. Others still were button-ups, jeans, khakis—traditionally drift clothing. The only normal items, a t-shirt and athletic pants, Luan recognized as being ones ae bought for hir.

Q (yelling): WHAT?

L: Quiet, quilt!

Q (quieter): Have you confronted hir?

L: No—I haven't had the strength to. I'm worried that ze will hate me for it. That ze won't understand the importance of the matter.

L: I was wondering, could you please do it for me? As the family's head?

Q: Of course I could, darling.

Q (yelling): Ebony!

Luan checks the time: ae has spent four minutes fantasizing. These lines in aer head—ae spent many seconds on each one, perfecting it, repeating it, indulging aerself in it. How terrible of aer. Ae is going to be late to the barbeque.

God, forgive me for being unsatisfied with the family that you've given me.

Ae turns the ignition; it doesn't work. Stupid fucking thing. Ae slams the side of aer fist into the steering wheel. Then aer head, several times, for good measure.

Luan gets out, to jump-start the engine. Aer makeup is, suffice to say, ruined. There was a 10% chance of rain today. Ten. Why did it have to come? At least ae had the good sense to use waterproof eyeliner.

The car finally starts running. On the way to the barbeque, in the host's bathroom, ae wipes away everything the rain ruined. Ae exits, pops a salty cracker in aer mouth, and walks to the back porch.

"--And I looked per in the eye, and I said, 'Yeah, that's what I'm here for!'" Everyone besides Luan laughs. "The apartment was below market rate, too. The owner was being so nice. Didn't understand anything at all. E called me up like 'Please be gentle,' and I said 'Yeah, sure, I'll be gentle.'" Everyone laughs again. "So yeah, I wrote the guy up for resisting. Hope it teaches per to pay per rent on time. Maybe work more hours at per job. The kids are meeting with their case workers now—Hope they find somewhere god-fearing."

Luan sits down in a lawn chair on the porch. Also on the porch are four coworkers of aers: Belt, Feltchle, Ione, and Yri. Luan has known most of them for many years, now; Ione is new.

They face a grill, and beyond that, a grassy backyard, walled off by wooden fences.

"Hey, Luan."

"Hey," Luan sits down with a hot-dog, newly drenched in mustard. Ae shivers as ae bites into it—ae always shivers when ae adds too much flavor.

"Cold?"

"No."

"Could borrow my jacket, if you'd like"

"I'm fine."

"No need to be embarrassed about it!" Belt laughs.

Luan tenses up, expecting an argument.

"Luan, you were there two days ago, weren't you? At the Eclipse event?"

Ae lowers aer guard. Ae enjoys discussing aer job.

"There? I'm the one that handcuffed the thing."

"Holy shit!" Ione exclaims. Per is new to the team. "I've wanted to meet the person who did that. How were you able to tell? Didn't it just look like a child? Some people I know even say they thought they recognized aer."

“It’s not an ‘aer.’ It’s an it. It’s not human. And, I dunno. Call it instinct, I guess. You get that way, after enough time on the force.”

“That’s sick.”

“I mean, if you were there to see how it behaved, you’d know. It just wasn’t quite right. It had a human body, but not a human soul. Probably the child of some demon-worshiper.”

Or someone who couldn’t keep a handle on their kid, some part of Luan thinks.

“What has our world come to. Things are going badly again, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” Fletchle jumps in. “Fucking city council. Ever since they elected the Svelian, things have been going downhill.”

“At least we’ve walled the rest of ‘em off.”

“At least.”

Luan bites into the hot dog again, and shivers once more.

“Hey, it’s pretty obvious that you’re cold.”

“I’m not.”

“We can tell when you’re lying!”

They all laugh. The rest of them continue talking for maybe ten, fifteen minutes. Luan doesn’t participate much.

“We’ve got to go right about now, right?”

Luan checks aer watch: Their shift starts in twenty minutes. They pick up their bags, and get into Luan’s car; Fletchle is car-pooling for today, since per own car is still getting repairs. Luan would have loved to take per to the station in aer truck, but Ebony unfortunately took the truck for hirself. The car—Quilt’s vehicle, technically—has always felt far too small and low to the ground. It makes it hard to see around the trucks and SUVs on the roadway.

Luan looks over at Fletchle, then looks back. “Thanks for the ride, by the way,” per says. “No problem.”

F: Hey, you’ve been looking down.

Fletchle begins to speak to aer in aer imagination. Or maybe—maybe Luan could have this conversation with per tomorrow. Start it something like—

L: Hey, can I talk to you about something personal?

No, no. That's just unprofessional. You don't talk about your problems with your fellow officers. They're yours to deal with.

But, well, if Fletchle were to ask,

F: How's your week been?

No—the only correct response to that is "good." That's when you begin small talk.

L: To be honest, it hasn't been great.

No, we already ditched that version of the conversation—.

F: Oh. Let me know if you want to talk about it. Maybe over a beer this evening?

Okay, fine. Switch scene to the evening, at the break room, hoping they don't get kicked out for being there off-duty. The break room houses awards, signs, flags. One such sign was taken from a protester: "All police do is police." The team thought it was such an amusing sign, that it's been up for three years. Another sign hosts memorabilia for a political party; the one whose candidates are most often endorsed by the police chief. The party in question holds only thirteen of the city council's thirty seats—mostly won in the suburbs. A redistricting twelve years ago set the outer suburbs as their own municipalities, so downtown gained more electoral power in Miette proper, and the city's politics adjusted accordingly.

Outside, metal fences have vines growing on them, and one part has a squirrel-sized hole dug under it. The drizzle of the rain is still silent, but it's pronounced loudly on the grass, which shines. The sun pokes out from between clouds.

F: Earlier, you said there was a problem?

Fletchle pours some of the bottle into a glass in front of per. It rests on a coffee table, in front of the break room's couch.

L: Yeah. Just let me think for a little while.

F: Alright.

The leather couch groans as ae shifts aer weight backwards, letting it accept aer. Luan lies there, against the couch, for a minute.

L: It’s been hard to be excited about the future, lately. It all just feels bleak.

Fletchle leans forward and puts an elbow on per thigh, to better look at Luan as ae talks.

L: I don’t get what I did wrong. I have a kid, I have a partner, I have a great house in a beautiful location. My old friends tried to stop me, but I made the right decisions, and got myself into a peaceful place. Nothing like downtown, haha. But when I’m at home, I’m more stressed than anything.

L: …

F: Could it be work?

Luan turns aer head to look at Fletchle. Then looks off, and away, hand to aer chin.

L: No. I enjoy this line of work. It makes me feel like I’m accomplishing something.

F: Well, could that be part of it?

Fletchle takes a sip out of per glass.

F: I know that when I’m off of work, it’s all I can think about. It stresses me out, knowing all the little ways in which the world is falling apart. That there really are so many people out there that are wolves in sheeps’ clothing.

Two days ago, it had the body of a child. Luan almost thought a normal citizen had gotten caught up with the alien bloom, but then ae saw its movements, and the look on its face—something was wrong. Something worth looking into. The bloom disappeared, and the shimmer, for just half a second, had a look of understanding, of peace. Its scream was staged, Luan could tell, and ae understood at that moment that the shimmer wasn’t a human but some other entity. Of all the police officers present, Luan was the only one with the good sense to see it for what it really was, and attempt to take it into custody. That is, of course, when it disappeared. Because while evil is ubiquitous, when confronted, it fades away, it retreats.

L: Well, yeah. I’ve been scared these past couple days that those demonic occurrences that ran amok in the 40s are coming back. Seeing those things disappear in front of me—my parents were witness to some of the things that happened all the way back then. I can’t bear for anything like that to be making a return.

F: But that’s not all.

Luan sighs, and leans forward.

L: No. Well, kind of. It's not that demonic things are happening. It's that I can tell exactly what caused it. It's just this… malaise that's been infecting society. People aren't as happy as they used to be. They aren't as faithful. They don't work as hard. Can't you feel it? I miss the good old days.

F: You've seen the polls, right? People don't go to church as much anymore. That has knock-on effects.

L: Yeah.

L: And the people they elect—monsters. They're anarchists. They think the city would be better off without us. It's lunacy. They control the media, too. There's probably some elite cabal of them out there somewhere that's pulling all the strings against Miette. Svelian bastards.

In year 6, four years ago, the Miette city council implemented a policy that tied police funding to their arrest count, in an effort to reduce funding down to "pre-wall levels," meaning around half the current members. Luan understands this as a worst-case scenario for the city. Crime would skyrocket, obviously, and the city would lose reputation, furthering the city's financial and social costs. Calamitans are already only a plurality in the city; even worse would happen should property values lower. The city is already, slowly, failing. The police are the only thing keeping it afloat. Luckily, the police union negotiated: the legislation will only take effect if the arrests for any given month drop below a certain level. To that end, every police officer has a moderate weekly quota.

L: …

F: That's still not all.

Luan leans forward to face Fletchle properly.

L: I just wish for a world where we don't need to be tested anymore.

L: Is that alright?

L: I know it's to keep us moral. I know it's to keep us working hard.

L: But every person who doesn't believe—that's one more person who needs to be corrected. In faith, we find healing, but in disbelief… God only has the rod. I feel like God is testing me, trying to get me to do more for the church, but I'm failing Em.

F: Testing you for what?

L: My family. It's… fallen apart. My drift doesn't do anything anymore, and Ebony hasn't spoken with me in weeks. Not even a "hey," not even "here's a homework problem I've been having issues with." We've just drifted apart.

L: But I don't have the strength to fix any of it.

L: I worry that one more lecture, one more thing taken away, one more time threatened with being homeschooled, and ze will shun God forever. Will shun *me* forever.

L: I… Already lost one kid. You remember how it affected me when Jela died. I can't afford to lose the only kid I have left.

F: God bless eir soul.

Luan sighs, and leans back into the couch again.

L: God bless eir soul.

Ae struggles to breathe, for a few moments.

L: I'm happy I found God. If I didn't know for sure that Jela was in heaven right now, watching over us—I don't know what I'd do.

F: And you're afraid you're losing touch with Em. Because you're not strong enough.

L: I'm afraid of that, yes.

F: Well, I believe in you. You've just gotta look at this pragmatically.

F: Your family dynamic is all messed up. That's the problem here. You've got an absent head and a kid with overzealous feet. So, you take steps to remedy that. You don't beat your family's head into submission—no, you find out what ails per. You provide service to per, so per can best operate as the head, as per should. Maybe that means spending some quality time together. Maybe it means letting per take out per grievances on you. It will help you, too. Find the shine inside you and figure out what's ailing aer. What's keeping aer from aer sparkle. Your body isn't meant for this powerful, dominating job of yours—I respect the work you do, but it's been hurting you. Maybe you need to pick up painting, or dancing, or something else to get that sparkle back into you. You know what they say, right? It's Wednesday. Sparkle on.

L: Okay. You're right. Less service to the city, more service to Quilt.

F: Yeah. And when it comes to Ebony, well, sometimes when a kid rejects God, you've got to take Eir place. It's not always fun, but it's necessary. You've got to grind down their excess will. Breezes are like that—if you don't step in to guide hir, ze'll guide hirself, and it won't be pretty.

There's a reason we developed the rod, and kept it around for so long: when you use it, it doesn't drive them away. It makes them realize their mistakes. My parents beat me, and I'm a better person for it; I'm sure your parents beat you, too. So don't be afraid.

L: …Thank you.

F: Do you feel better, now?

L: I do. I'll take your advice.

Luan, in real life, breathes a sigh of relief. It's going to be okay. Ae has a plan. At this point, really, ae doesn't even need to talk to anyone. Luan is smart like that. Ae can deal with aer own problems. Ae steps into the police station with a renewed sense of purpose. The rain has stopped, finally. It's been twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes later again, Luan is pulling up to a house the police have received a tip against, alongside one coworker, Halo. It's an odd task to assign to Luan. Ae doesn't usually deal with child welfare, but ae has been trained for it, and aer superior said nobody else on the force has been at this moment. Plus, "as a shine," ae would be better at the job, in per words. Ae didn't necessarily disagree—but ae was disappointed to be working on this, instead of the work involving the alien bloom and shimmer.

The task is in Wakebed, a dilapidated suburban neighborhood, some parts even lacking an HOA. When Luan exits the police car, the house certainly looks run-down: vines cover many of its exposed surfaces, and plants as tall as either of them cover everything but the long walkway. Many of the plants flower, in a multicolor array far too bright and chaotic to be tasteful. The whole thing is covered with bugs, too. Even a political sign out front, "VOTE FOR AMENDA," (a progressive candidate), was knocked down at some point by the weather, and obscured by plants.

Luan knocks on the door, fearing the worst. Thirty seconds later, it opens. A fit, middle-aged, mixed-race wind looks at them cautiously. Hir cheeks are wet, and visible tears cluster in hir eyes. Ae looks surprised to see police officers at hir door—suspicious. "What's the matter?"

"We're here to verify that allegations against you aren't true." It's always better to frame it as a negation—though the evidence gathered can only ever be used against them. "Please remain here while we search your house."

"O…kay." Ze shakes a little. Luan steps inside. It's a mess—papers cover tables and counters, drawers and cabinets remain opened, there's paint flaking off of some of the walls. Ae turns to look at a blurry figure at the edge of aer vision; to aer left is a dining room. Sitting at the table, face full of tears, all by aerself… *it*self, is the creature.

It freezes, fork still in hand, concerned but not panicked. Luan would love to lunge for it, but knows that's futile. Luan has been fantasizing this moment for multiple days, now.

"Try to run and ze gets hurt." Luan says, matter of fact. Understanding the situation, Halo yells to the suspect, F. Pelts, "GET YOUR HANDS UP." Luan doesn't see hir reaction—ae watches the demon closely. It puts the fork back on its plate, and slowly stands. It puts a finger up, looking into Luan's eyes. It's clear enough what it means. *Wait*.

"Don't you dare try anything." Luan asserts. Is the creature giving up? Does it have an ace up its sleeve?

It pauses when Luan says that, then continues to walk over to the wall, where there's a calendar. It grabs a pen, and begins to write.

"So you can't speak, is that it?" Luan walks over, and reads what it is slowly writing.

Once it is finished, the message reads: "I WILL GO QUIETLY BACK TO GOD. YOU HAVE WON. LEAVE THE INNOCENT WIND ALONE."

Luan smiles. It's trying to protect the wind. That all but confirms hir involvement.

"If you try to escape," Luan repeats, "The wind will get hurt."

It pauses, again, for a moment. It begins slowly ripping apart its paper. Is it resigned? Or is it continuing, as planned, despite the reassurance that the wind will get hurt?

It disappears, along with the paper it was still holding.

"FUCK!" Luan yells out of frustration.

Ae walks over to the wind—the creature's creator, a demon worshiper, ae does not know or care what ze is, maybe ze is even a demon hirself—and slugs hir. F. Pelts falls onto hir hands and knees.

When Luan had a child, ae had high hopes for aerself. Ebony, they decided on the name; it was Luan's gale's name. The letter E has importance in the holy world; it signifies Echoes, people who exist as governed by some larger force. The most disciplined of the symbols in the alphabetical spectrum.

Ebony ended up under a larger force, alright. Luan was too overconfident, too stupid, too presumptuous to realize that Ebony was being corrupted. Downtown, naturally, has always been a cesspit; Luan should never have allowed Ebony to attend a school there. Should never have allowed hir to stop attending church, should never have allowed hir to play with kids that Luan

wasn't keeping an eye on. Luan can't get hir back with love anymore. Love is for the faithful. Luan only has the rod. And Luan hates the rod.

F. Pelts gets up, but Luan grabs the back of hir shirt, and pulls hir against the wall. Ae presses aer forearm into hir neck.

Too presumptuous to realize that *society* was being corrupted. Luan had hope, back then, for a better future. A future of kindness, of faith, of church and community. A future where people don't have to be punished, where friends don't try to pull you away from your future spouse, where the government is run by normal people instead of elites, where—

"I can't breathe," F. Pelts whines. Luan retorts, "If you can talk, then you can breathe."

Thirty minutes after Luan attempted to apprehend the creature at the Eclipse event, ae was crying. Twenty minutes after the attempted apprehension, a bloom took the stage:

> *Some of us have lost children. Some of us have lost parents, some of us have lost siblings; petals and flurries, sprites and eddies. Lost to antimoralist ideology, lost to utilitarianism, to materialism and determinism. These edifices have invaded public life. Have invaded our lives. And we are starting to see the consequences. Just today, just now, we have seen consequences. We are here today for a Calamity in ruin. We are here for a Calamity that has given up on its past, and thus forsaken its future. Look outside. Look at our children. Look at what we all saw, just thirty minutes ago. Humanity has forsaken its God. Don't you all want a future of love? Of understanding? Of freedom, and morality?*

"Please," ze whines again. Luan punches hir with aer free arm.

> *We have been invaded.*

And again.

> *Nobody even cares.*

Five more times, for good measure. F. Pelts falls to the floor, unconscious. Luan's hand hurts.

Ae looks around, for a second time. They way everything is messy, and with F. Pelts unconscious on the floor, one could be convinced that this was a crime scene. Luan looks over to the dinner table, and smirks. On the plate, half-finished, is proof enough that they were demons: who the hell puts spaghetti on toast?

"Wonder if Amenda will get hir a new kid," Halo says, as they walk back to the car.

Luan laughs.

Luan feels triumphant. Even if they didn't catch the first demon, they got someone very related to it. Someone who might be able to give them information. In the car, on the drive back to the station, ae tries to imagine what ae might do later today. Ae is feeling confident, after all.

L: Ebony, can we have a talk?

It's 7:30pm in this scene, not long after Luan gets home. Ebony is sitting down—not working on homework, as that's unrealistic. Ze is just drawing in a coloring book. Luan doesn't want to just immediately jump to a lecture, or a punishment—ae needs Ebony to understand the punishment. To appreciate it.

E: …

E: Okay.

E: What do you want to talk about?

L: …

L: You're going to be leaving for college, soon. One more year of school.

E: Yeah?

L: I wanted to get to know you better.

E: Can we talk some other time?

L: No. We're talking now.

Ebony frowns.

E: Every time we "talk," it's because you're mad at me.

L: Don't you want that to change?

E: I—I do.

Ebony looks away, then back.

E: Are you going to ask me about anything, then?

L: Well, I've been wondering—

L: What are your friends like?

E: …

E: Can you ask me something else?

L: No. I want to know.

E: They're… kind. I hang out with them at lunchtime, and after school. We play games together.

L: What type of games?

E: Do you know what tabletop roleplaying games are?

Luan's blood runs cold.

L: You can't play those sorts of games. They train you to accept monsters and wizardry.

E: I don't think they do.

That's—that's not how the scene is supposed to go. That line needs to be redone.

L: You can't play those sorts of games. They train you to accept monsters and wizardry.

E: Okay.

L: Okay.

L: Are you going to stop, then?

E: Well, I really care about my friends.

Another redo.

E: …

Ze breathes in, heavily.

E: I promise, I'm not doing it to hurt you. They're fun games.

L: The world has a lot of fun games.

E: Yeah, but, it lets me be really creative.

E: It’s not about the monsters.

L: It’s never about the monsters, Ebony.

L: They sneak the monsters into something that’s already fun. That’s how they get you.

E: I mean—

L: There are games that were made with God’s love in mind. And there are games that weren’t. What part of this is so hard to understand?

E: I don’t really believe you.

Redo.

E: I think the world is more complicated than that.

Redo.

E: I think my friends wouldn’t try to hurt me like that.

L: Why do you think that?

E: They introduced me to a new way of thinking about God. It’s really beautiful.

L: And what was that?

E: That E loves everyone, and E would never send people to Hell, because people are too beautiful to send to Hell.

E: And E wouldn’t be so mean as to send anyone there, to be tortured for eternity.

E: Isn’t that beautiful?

Redo.

E: Isn’t that beautiful?

Redo the whole section.

E: Mama, they let me see that God wouldn’t punish anyone.

L: Stop believing that.

E: I can't.

L: Just stop.

E: I'm tired of feeling guilty. I'm tired of hating people who don't believe. I'm tired of being scared for them. Aren't you tired, too?

Luan sighs, out loud.

"You all good?" Halo asks.

"Do you ever just… feel like you've gone wrong somewhere?"

"Yeah," Halo says. "But then I remember all the things that have gone right. I'm here, making my community a better place. And so are you."

Luan smiles. "Thank you."

An hour later, Luan opens the front door to aer home. It's a good home, in a good neighborhood, with a well-kept lawn and high-end furniture. Ae has a job that involves making the world a better place. Ae has a child who ae just needs to lecture every once in a while, so ze won't do anything stupid. Ae married young and beautiful, to a drift who could support aer, who is to be the family's head.

Quilt sits on the couch, as always, watching sports.

"Hi, Quilt." Luan says, as ae walks in. "I've been supplanting your role, which was wrong to do. You were supposed to be the family's head. Would you be willing to beat me?"

Water drips from the faucet, but it doesn't make a sound. Not yet. Not until it finishes falling.

Thunk.

2.Diary

Dear diary,

Hi. I hope you aren't opening this notebook to find it already full of your own handwriting. I hope you still know whose apartment I am at, as I write this. I hope you still know what happened earlier today.

You have a power that lets you forget anything you want to. Please don't use it.

I've promised myself that I'll never forget. I broke that promise. Every time, I hate myself for it. Please don't hate yourself. Please hate me, instead.

—

October 7th, 2

This is not my notebook. Glace may have given it to me, and may have transferred ownership, but that ownership is as thin as the walls between legal and illegal, sane and insane, demonic and righteous.

I'm feeling poetic today, because otherwise I would feel sad. I was about to go home, and then I felt a paper in my hands, telling me "go quietly back to g." I wanted to go home.

Fallow (the me in the mesocosm) says that, while I was asleep, the others made aer cry tears of joy. I looked into aer memories—we share knowledge—and it was true. I'm happy for aer, and I'm mad that ae seems to think ae was correct to sacrifice aerself for me. I know the plan was mutual, but I thought it would ultimately help aer more than it would help me. I thought that it might fix aer, to be able to indulge aerself with the ribbons. It didn't—it hurt aer. I cannot help but feel at fault. Glace says not to feel at fault, but I know it was my problems that started all of this. I'm in the real world, where people should have to work together to make things better—Fallow lives in the belief world, the mesocosm, where people should be free to live. It is only with the belief that we can live freely that we might someday build a world where we will live freely. Who could better lead by example than the people who are beliefs themselves?

Of course, Fallow thinks that *I* should be named Fallow, and that ae should be named Fawn. I fear that, were we to argue over this, we would never stop. Ae hates aerself, predictably, just as much as I do. The only difference is that, in aer case, it isn't deserved.

Good night.

Sincerely, Fawn.

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