

Ambush!

The door cracked open and Marlin smiled at Rosa's blank eyes. "What's going on, girl?"

"What do you want, Marlin?"

He wedged his sneaker in the crack of the door. "That's a rude way to invite me in."

The door swung free, and Marlin walked into an overstuffed dorm room. He bumped into a mini-fridge and a cheap plastic dresser. He stepped over a cello case and slid along a TV which dominated one wall. In a clearing in the center of the cubical, Rosa invited him to a beanbag chair.

"Aren't you going to give me the tour?"

She sighed. "Just get it out of your system."

"Oh, I'm not here to make jokes," said Marlin. "I see gumption. Most people don't have the courage to live in a dorm-room at thirty-five."

"Sarcastic courage, got it. And I'm thirty-two, so thanks for that." Rosa took a seat on the bottom bunk of her bed. A bunk-bed! What a day.

"You might want to consider a bunk-buddy pact, it worked for me when I was five."

"How so?" said Rosa, "You have no friends."

"Fair point."

With a monotone voice, Rosa said, “I sleep exactly three and a half feet below a nineteen-year-old culinary arts student. She’s never set foot in a real kitchen, but she’s got her travel channel interview all planned out.”

Marlin giggled.

“So I don’t need reminders about the stupidity of my life.”

“There’s a lot of shirtless boys on the walls.”

“The point *is*,” said Rosa, “I’m bettering myself. I’m actually planning for my future. You?”

“I’m glad you asked!” Marlin pulled the pad from his pocket and handed it to Rosa. He leaned forward on the beanbag, rubbing his hands together as he watched her study it. It was sinking in. She held it to the lamp and looked through the empty glass.

She shrugged. Good god, she shrugged! She could shrug to anything. Marlin had tried to be romantic once. It was awkward. He’d trimmed his beard and wore a checkered thrift-store suit. He’d looked into her eyes, gauging the dilation of her pupils. After realizing that it could just be the candlelight or oxycontin, he’d asked with a love-sick smile, “So what do you think?” Fucking shrug.

Marlin shooed the memory. “No hardware inside. No obvious power source. I found it lying in the snow.”

“It’s recording us,” said Rosa. *It’s recording us.*

He nodded.

“Alright, what is it?”

He slammed his palm onto the mini-fridge. “Exactly!”

“Marlin, don’t hit my fridge.” She dropped the pad to her lap and tilted her head. “Why did you come here?”

“You’re going to solve the case!”

Rosa tapped her lower lip. “Trim the beard.”

Marlin deflated. “I’m not going to—”

“Trim the beard,” She combed her fingers through the tangle.

His eyelids sank, and he grunted softly like a purr. “Shampoo it,” he whispered.

“What?” Her hand fell away. “What the hell is that, Marlin?”

He awoke from his trance. “I don’t know.”

“Why do you have to make things weird?”

“I don’t know, it’s the first thing that came to mind.”

“*Shampoo it?*”

“Yea, why does that have to be weird? You could decide that it’s *not* weird, if you wanted to, and then it’s not. Why don’t you do that?”

“You can wash your own beard, Marlin.”

“Jesus, okay. I thought it would be a nice moment.” He threw up his hands and knocked a lamp from the desk. His face sank into his palm. “Can you please just analyze this fuckin’ thing.”

Rosa shrugged. “It’s a semi-transparent oval screen. It’s recording what we’re—”

“No, I mean *study* it. Use a microscope or something.”

“I don’t have a microscope.”

Marlin groaned. “Then use your skills. You’re a programmer, right?”

“I deal more in website design. I don’t do the actual designing though. I *implement* the design, which is like using a template provided to create the stylistic basis for a—”

“Okay, stop, stop, stop. Do you know anyone of actual use?”

Rosa cleared her throat and buried her face in the laptop.

Marlin rolled his eyes. “Do you know anyone who can help me, since you have not.”

“Was that supposed to be an improvement?”

“I’ll try again.” He leaned in and flashed a smile. “You look good.”

“You look like shit.”

“But I wear it well.”

With a single exhalation, Rosa laughed. He was wearing her down. She jotted a number on a receipt and placed it on his palm. “Professor Burgess. Don’t you dare mention my name.”

“Burgess,” Marlin muttered to himself. “Is she a famous-type professor, or is she just a teacher?”

“I don’t know, the famous kind I think.” She returned to the laptop. “It’s not like you’re famous for anything.”

Marlin grabbed the pad from her limp hand and waved it in front of her face. “I just walked in with the most interesting thing you’ve ever seen. Downplay it, call it arrogance, shrug it away— but just for the record, that shit happened. Now where’s the library?”

~

Marlin stood at the front door of a manicured brick house. The hedges were trimmed square, the winter jasmines evenly spaced, their thin white petals fluttering in the breeze. He smiled at the yammering face of Mrs. Burgess.

“Oh, Rosa’s the best,” said Marlin. “She can be sarcastic, but you know she’s just a sweetheart.”

“Well, she shows up and participates in discussion, so I think that says something.”

“Boy, does she ever.”

“I suppose so.”

“And she will *not* shut up about your teaching abilities.”

“Oh, no.” Burgess glanced away and played with her necklace. The gold-plated turquoise glowed on the tan of her cleavage.

“It’s true! You’re just her favorite.” Marlin showed her the book, *Riding the Wave Function*. “And I don’t want to presume. But I think I see exactly what she means. If your lectures are half as eloquent as your writing, they must be a delight.”

“Well, that’s very kind. I didn’t know anyone actually read that dribble.”

“Best thing I’ve read all semester.”

“That’s very kind, thank you.”

Marlin allowed a reflective pause. “It’s easy to be kind when you actually mean it.”

A voice called from the house, “Celia?”

“Just one minute. I’m sorry, Mr. Marlin, what was it you needed?”

“No, I’m sorry! Look at me, droning away on your doorstep while you’re trying to enjoy time with your family.”

“Well, no— you can come in if you’d like.”

“I’d hate to be a bother.”

“Well—”

Marlin nudged the door open. “But thank you.” The smell of garlic and onions poured over him. Burgers, it had to be burgers.

He studied the living room. A stone fireplace dominated the left wall but wasn’t lit. The coffee table was checkered with thick glass panels, and beneath it chess pieces gathered dust. Marlin didn’t know the type of wood that made up the table, but he was sure that Burgess did. She could tell him all about it.

“Is that—” said Marlin.

“Cherry.”

“Yes! My god, it’s just tasteful as hell.”

“You read my mind,” she said with a smile.

This house was like his mom’s, the home of a middle-aged, middle-class socialite. He hadn’t called her like he meant to. What news could he have?

The ceiling rumbled overhead, and children laughed. “Celia?” A man peered behind the far corner, and exchanged a glare with Marlin.

“It’s okay, Richard, this is Mr. Marlin. He’s a friend of one of my—”

“The kids.”

“It’ll just be a minute.”

Marlin turned to her with a smile. “Thank you, Celia. Let me get out of your hair. I came here for two reasons.” He held out a pen. “If you don’t mind, I’d like you to sign the book. I hope I’m not coming on too strong. Rosa’s always bragging about you, and I’d just love to rub it in her face.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“And second, I have, well— an academic mystery. It’s an object I can’t quite explain.”

Again the ceiling rumbled, and the children screamed some shit about whose turn it was. “Celia!” came the voice from the kitchen. She turned and looked at the stairway behind.

Marlin stood up and towered over her. He took the pad from his pocket and turned it under the lamplight. *And second I have well an academic mystery. It’s an object I can’t quite explain. Celia.*

Her brow furrowed, she fumbled with her necklace. “Is it—” she covered her mouth with her hand.

“It’s recording us,” said Marlin. “Seems to be some kind of translator, but it doesn’t look like a language I know.”

Her gaze drifted to the symbols. She shook her head, staring through the empty glass. “No,” she said.

“No what?”

She stood and looked up at Marlin. “You need to get this out of my house.”

Marlin giggled. “What are you talking about? Look at this thing.”

She waved it away. “I don’t know what it is, but it looks dangerous.”

“Are you serious? Can you be a professor for me?”

“What does that mean?”

“Look at it!” He shook it at her. “It’s a crazy mystery. An academic opportunity, right in front of your stupid face. Now I don’t know how to, uh—access that opportunity, but that’s where you come in.”

She shook her head and spoke lightly, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A witty comeback would be great, a sarcastic dismissal would do. But the moment passed in silence, and Marlin flashed a smile. “You look good.”

“Richard!”

“Oh great, call Richard. Richard to the rescue, everyone!” The book splayed open on the floor. “Thanks for the signature.”

The door closed softly behind him, and Marlin looked at the pad. The words still showed unchallenged, *You don't know what you're talking about.*

Of course he didn't! Who did? Who bothered to try? Not Celia, not Rosa. And not the pudgy dimwit, what was his name again? He must have said it a hundred times.

~

Sitting alone on a bench amid a swarm of hurried students, Marlin ate tacos. Brisket juice ran down his sleeve, and he allowed it. The blather of the crowd swam in his ears— a video-game rant, a fumbling flirt, a woman mumbling into an earpiece on the next bench.

He thought to toss the pad. Where was his wad of cash? Who could be trusted to cough it up, to give him his credit? Glory was due, goddamnit, she shrugged!

Marlin bit his tongue. With his mouth full, he cursed and spat lettuce.

A single word rose above the din of the crowd. “Tacos.” The woman was mumbling again, and watching. She returned her gaze every time Marlin looked away, her shriveled face sunken in a heavy hood. He crammed his last taco and walked briskly away.

The campus loomed atop a grassy ridge, mansions standing in a line. He climbed the steps to a cobbled patio, where the statue of a ram stood before the

great marble pillars of Newell's hall. It had a name. All these buildings had fancy names, even those stuffed with potheads and drunks.

He passed between the pillars, into a cavernous windowed lounge. A thousand sunlit heads streamed around a dribbling fountain— balds, and whites, and grays, and nice cuts, and rough chops, but nothing that tried too hard. This was an older crowd, a crowd of professionals. Above the soft chatter, rubber soles drummed on the marble.

Marlin looked back and saw the woman's heavy hood approach. In his pocket, his fingers wrapped around the pad. "Fuck it," he said with a shrug. It seemed so simple, a burden lifted. He climbed onto the lip of the fountain, and spread his arms wide. "Listen up!"

The crowd stopped, all eyes turned. He pulled out the pad and held it high. A thousand faces blinked.

It was blank! The text was gone, the symbols gone. It was just a slab of pale-blue glass. Marlin tapped it with his knuckle and fumbled for an explanation, "It's, uh— it's not on."

Approaching from the entrance, a doorman yelled, "Off the fountain!" With a chorus of grumbles, the crowd went on its way. Marlin crouched into the traffic and headed for the exit. He walked between the pillars and down the stairs to the great ram statue.

From behind the bronze base, the woman leapt. "Ambush!"

Marlin yelped and staggered back.

She keeled over laughing, wheezing cackles. "Look at that ugly face! I scared the shit out of you." A passing couple furrowed their brows at the stranger. "Mind your own damn business!"

How could she laugh so hysterically at her own joke?

The stranger stepped forward and extended her bony hand, the stench of cigarettes soaking her overcoat. "It's Cheryl."

"I didn't ask."

"Well, the name's Cheryl." Phlegm rattled in her throat. "Let me ask you something, you got a head full of shit?"

Marlin searched her eyes, crystal pools on leather skin.

"When I saw you pull that little stunt on the fountain, I thought to myself, *That looks like someone with a head full of shit. So?*"

"I— no."

"You got a mouth full of shit now?"

"No, I've never had that."

"Don't sass me, honey, I'm trying to help."

"Pleasure," said Marlin with a nod, and turned to leave.

"We could chat real quick," said Cheryl, and Marlin paused. "Or I could ambush you again. And this time, I mean *really* ambush you."

Marlin turned, a low growl on his breath. Her thin lips smirked.

"It's not hard," she said, "not if you have the right tools. You'd think by-standards would be a big deal. Now baby, I hate to break your heart. But you're not pretty. No, you're not pretty enough for anyone to care if I paralyze you and throw you in a van. I could do it in broad daylight. It would all look perfectly natural, like you're headed back to the asylum, like you're a dog getting put down."

"Personal rule," said Marlin, "I don't respond—"

"Skip the smart mouth, dear, it's not doing you any favors." She pointed to his pocket and narrowed her eyes. "Give me that goddamn tablet."

Marlin tilted his head. “What do you know about it?”

“You’re a little boy with your little schemes. Give it to me now, and let’s not make things weird.”

“Maybe I like it weird.”

Cheryl bared the brown teeth of her smile. “Honey, you don’t want my weird.” She unbuttoned a flap on her sleeve and revealed A GPS screen stitched into the leather. “See this red dot? That’s your ass. Your perky little ass, on *my* radar, acting like a fool. You want to see how weird we can get?”

“I’m starting to think you like me.”

She snorted. “Just like my son. You both need a punch in the mouth.” She lit a smoke. “I’m sweeter than pie, so I’ll give you some time to think about it. Call it a freebie, you’re welcome. If you find some sense in that empty head, you’ll drop the tablet in a trashcan. You’ll do it soon. You pull another dumbass stunt, I’ll make sure you wake up vaporized. Now beat it.”

Cheryl leaned back against the bronze base, sucking her cigarette and mumbling into her earpiece. Marlin restrained the urge to look back as he speed-walked away. He made it across campus, and realized he had no destination.

A trashcan sat by the walkway, and Marlin slowed to a stop. He held the tablet over the soupy garbage. What was it worth? His hand released, and the glass sank into the muck.

He froze, and chewed on his mustache. Cheryl knew its worth. How could he leave it behind when it was so *desired*?

He tossed wrappers aside, and dug through soggy pizza. This was no time to quit, it was time to get creative.

Where was the dimwit when you really needed him?