

## Sample 1

Asa's chest ached (not for any medical reason this time). Their heart was cocooned in medical foam and the wires that forced it to beat at a steady pace. All the vital, mushy stuff was held inside by an aluminum rib cage. Despite all the cushioning, Asa's heart sank. Between two pillars that kept the highway from crumbling into the oily ocean, was a body mod shop. Metal mannequins leaned out of the second story window, illuminated by the afternoon sun. Asa had never gone inside. As much as they wanted a less squeaky torso that didn't give them dysphoria, they could barely afford to window shop. The closest Asa had ever gotten to body modification was dying parts of their wavy, short hair green to match their eyes. It was already starting to completely fade to brown. Fabric bunched right above their metal breasts, so Asa tugged down their knit sweater. In the street-level window, there was a masculine chest piece, without a belly button or nipples. It was pure gold. Maybe someday Asa would steal enough shit from the airport to get a golden torso.

Above the shop, was an intoxicating billboard with a three-eyed woman on it and a price below her face. Most interstates showed the sketch as a warning, but the way she was displayed at the mod shop made her look like a hero. Maybe if Asa caught a criminal as expensive as her, they could afford a modification as expensive as the woman's third eye.

Halfway through turning to leave, they noticed a job listing. Unlike the pop-up, neon-rimmed ads Asa was used to, this one was presented on a piece of paper, hanging from a lamp post. Of course, labor was the more practical way not to starve.

Asa ripped it off. The job description seemed like a perfect fit, but the only other information on the paper was a phone number. *Way too sketchy*, Asa figured, but put the piece of paper in their pocket anyways. No one was looking for veterinarians anymore, not since the

Noah's Arc debacle three years ago that involved a parasitic alien race abducting all of Earth's animals. It turned out, the animals liked living as hosts to parasites better than living on a planet suffering from global warming. Asa didn't blame them. Regardless, they still had a shitty job to do and their 30 minutes was almost up.

City static slowly drowned out the crashing of waves on concrete. The harsh collisions made Asa wonder if the partition would break, letting water flood the noisy downtown streets. Their heart pulsed faster as they walked. There were only a few situations that still made the medically-enforced rhythm of that organ fluctuate. One possible explanation is that Asa knew they were going to steal something tonight.

## Sample 2

At exactly six o'clock, Asa heard the sound of steel-filled knuckles against wet wood. Asa opened the door. Caz nervously tapped the toe of her permanent, metal shoe with pink stars painted on it against the asphalt of the driveway. Palmtress framed Caz on either side, sticking out of two patches of dirt.

“So you’re, like, max pissed at me, right?”

Asa didn’t respond, just threw the duffle over their shoulder, stuck one hand into the front pocket of their corduroy overalls, and walked past Caz.

Caz trailed behind for a bit, until Asa stopped at the foggy street.

“Storming off doesn’t really work when you don’t know where you’re going, huh?”

Caz walked down the street a bit and opened the door of a hovering EV. It resembled a convertible car without wheels, blowing palm fronds onto the sidewalk with its propulsor. Working for the Space Force must bring in a good paycheck. This hovercraft looked especially fancy. Asa figured it would never be in their budget to get to work quickly without actively killing the planet.

“Are you coming?”

“I don’t really have a choice.”

If Asa had been in a better mood, maybe they would have been impressed when the hovercraft drove straight off the old, rickety pier that was nearly entirely submerged and into the ocean. Water splashed up onto the windows as they drove, so Caz pushed the windshield wiper button. Red and green lights from passing boats glowed through the hazy morning air. They drove, over the ocean, in complete silence.

Caz parked the hovercraft at the harbor next to an air-travel-capable yacht that made the hovercraft look about as impressive as a moped. Caz turned her vehicle off and it rested, tied up, in the water.

“So where are we going?”

“We’re headed in the direction of work. We’ve gotta go pick out a ride.”

Asa followed Caz off the dock, the metal clinking together with every swell, and down the street. A bubble of rage grew in their stomach. Trying to take deep breaths, they listened to the crashing waves over the concrete barrier. The fog was so thick that the ocean wasn’t visible, only the blinking lights of the port’s runway above it. The bubble popped.

“What about my vibe made you think I would be fine with you being a cop? I’m not a fucking bootlicker.” Asa’s jaw clenched along with their fists. Staring daggers into Caz’s aluminum back, they stopped walking.

So did Caz. “And I’m not a cop. I’m their surveillance tool, property of the US Space Force.” For the first time, Asa noticed the tiny cameras circling Caz’s forehead. They probably gave her 360 degree vision.

“You could have deleted the evidence! You already screw with-”

Caz’s eyes widened. She put her cold hand over Asa’s mouth. When she let go, Asa was about to finish their sentence, but Caz put a finger to their lips. Then she motioned for Asa to give her the wristband. Only slightly, Asa trusted Caz more than the device that they just realized must also serve as a listening device. Caz toyed with the thing for a minute, using their finger as a screwdriver and laser.

“There. Now we can talk.” Caz tossed Asa the high-tech bracelet and put her hands on her hips.

“Alright. Let’s fuckin’ talk. You turned me in.”

“I had no choice. I can turn my surveillance system off when I’m not on the clock, but the second I punch in, everything I see or hear goes straight to the space pigs.”

“You’ve almost completely rewired yourself, Caz! Can’t you just rewire that? Or work for someone else?”

“Ugh. You’re such a human.” Caz’s golden eyes became dull. “I understand why you’re upset, but there’s nothing I could have done. If not me, it would have been another bot on your doorstep. You’re just lucky I’m not as brainwashed as the others.”

Asa’s shoulder’s sank. They rubbed their collarbone. Some of the bolts could use oil. The pair walked in silence for about a minute before Asa broke it. “So... do the cops know you mess around with your wiring?”

Caz shrugged, then swiftly moved to a different topic. “By the way, I reprogrammed the Links, so the cops will only pick up our conversations when we want them to.”

“Is talking to you any different than talking to the police?”

Caz let out a single-syllable laugh. “Yes.”

Asa touched their wristband curiously. “How do you get away with breaking all this stuff that belongs to the Space Force?”

“I’m still following my job description. They never explicitly said they wanted to hear all of our conversations.”

“You’re being used as a surveillance device. I’m pretty sure that’s implied.”

Caz waved her hand dismissively. “The point is: I’m decent at finding loopholes. I’m allowed to bend laws if I’m doing it for the benefit of another agent... which you technically are

now. Also they trust me because I have a high clearance level due to being a surveillance tool. Their mistake, really.”

“So... what does your clearance level include?”

“That’s classified.” She smiled sneakily.

“It was worth a shot. So now what?”

“Like I said, we go get a spacecraft and do the only thing we can.”

So Asa continued to follow Caz, now a lot less angry, but much more demoralized. The sun that was rising higher in the sky turned the fog pink. A lack of gulls cawing made the mornings more ominous than they were before the Noah aliens abducted all Terran animals. Asa wished US cities had better transportation systems as they felt their energy drip into the ground with each step.