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 a metal rib cage. Specifically, titanium kept Asa upright, anorthium halted further deterioration at the edges of the prosthetic, and foam and cheap aluminum filled in the rest. 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 non-essential 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 junk from the airport to get a golden torso. Subconsciously, Asa ran a finger from their flesh stomach, up the loose bolts, and over bumpy letters, so bold they could be felt through the sweater. The logo was a constant reminder that they didn't own all of their body yet. Their finger continued until it hit skin again at their collar bone.

Asa stretched their whining body and craned their head up. Above the shop, an intoxicating billboard flashed the picture of a three-eyed woman. There was a price below her face. Most interstates showed the sketch as a warning, but the way she was displayed over the mod shop made her look like a retro comic hero. The metal eye in the wanted woman's forehead

seemed to follow Asa as they shifted between sore feet. Maybe if Asa caught a criminal with a similar price tag, they could afford a modification as expensive as that third eye.

Of course, labor was the more practical way not to starve. 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.

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 anyway. No one was looking for veterinarians anymore, not since the Noah's Arc debacle.

Not for the first time, Asa wished the Noah aliens had abducted a few humans, too. Maybe their luck would be better under another sun. It sure seemed that that was the case for the fifty percent of animal life that agreed to become hosts for the parasitic alien race. That many were predicted to go extinct in the next twenty years anyway. Seven years [MOU1] ago, humans were the only fauna deemed unworthy for mass abduction. Asa didn't blame them. Most humans, Asa thought, were miserable, whether on purpose or not.

This reminded Asa that their thirty-minute break 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 today.

Sample 2

Immediately, Asa sat on the couch and peered into the tote bag. They were expecting some scrap metal that might get them a few bucks at a recycling plant. Instead, they found a bunch of metal fingers, all in good condition. The bag probably belonged to a body modder. Still, Asa couldn't help but think it looked like some sort of Jack-the-droid-ripper crime scene. There were a bunch of different metals, all probably laced with anorthium. While most of the fingers looked worn-down, the one right on top had been recently shined.

Due to their frequent visits to the mod shop, Asa knew exactly what a metal finger cost. "I'm gonna get in so much trouble."

Asa stood and paced. Those fingers were by far the most expensive things they had ever stolen. Asa was usually more of a convenience store thief. Maybe they would go back tomorrow and put them in the corner where the man had been sleeping. Then he might think they had just fallen out. Surely, Asa was the only person seen in that area around that time. Maybe Asa would hide the fingers somewhere.

Or maybe they would take another peek. Asa reached in and pulled out the shiny, silver finger. It had an inscription that included a name and a smiley face. Asa walked to their bedroom, turning it around in their hand. They pulled on pajama pants.

The second Asa put a toothbrush in their mouth, there was an official-sounding knock on the door. Asa stuck the finger in their pocket. If it was a late-night, unannounced visit of their landlord Asa didn't want to have to explain the metal body part. Asa pulled open the door, toothbrush still in their mouth. When they opened their mouth to explain the 24-hour notice policy on their lease, some toothpaste foam dripped onto the faux wood.

At the door–raising an eyebrow at the white splatters on the floor–was the man who had left behind the backpack full of metal fingers.

“Jack, I presume…” Asa’s words were garbled with minty froth. They liked making inside jokes with themself, even if they were the only one who got it.

“No. Kashton Wright. I’m with the Aerospace Force.”

In other words, he was a cop who could fly a spacecraft. At first Asa scoffed at the stupid name. Then their eyes widened. They had stolen from a cop. That certainly explained the fancy biowork making him look like a fully-flesh human. A set of handcuffs and a laser gun were at his hip, but he didn’t make a move for either of them.

“Would you… give me a second?”

“No.” He stepped over the toothpaste spill and followed Asa to the sink where they spit (a bit messily since Asa always found it harder to do a clean spit with someone watching).