

ANARKHIKÓS



STOOSER S.

LEGAL INFORMATION AND OTHER MISCELLANEOUS DATA

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Author's Note

Heya,

Whoever you are that has made the decision to read the following work-in progress attempt at Americana-realist-neo-naturalist furry fiction, whether you just stumbled upon this by accident through any of the places I could have posted it on, or were coerced/forced (probably by me) into reading it, I must thank you for doing so. It is not without effort that the idea of writing this came to me, and often, the process of writing it was quite painful, especially in the beginning stages. However, even as one trudges through the sludges that writing can sometimes cause to form in your head, in the end, it'll be worth it.

There is little other joy in the world that can compare to seeing someone immerse themselves in your work that you spent oh-so-much-time crafting, especially if they end up enjoying it. That is to say, please, if you feel like you simply must write; write. It'll hurt at first, it won't be pleasant, there will be plenty of growing pains, but by God, when you get over this all and truly begin to enjoy both the process and the immersion of other people in your work? There is nothing like it.

I understand that one might not feel particularly encouraged to write, especially considering that the currency of the current Internet is pure attention and engagement. But never, never, never let it stop you. You have a story to tell; tell it. No one else will tell it. No one else will imagine your characters as you have imagined them. No one else will write with the same voice and style as you will, even if given the exact same ideas as those in your head. Visual artists may get more engagement, but when writers get the engagement they seem to sorely lack in the current online landscape, it can be *incredibly* deep. AI? AI deserves no right whatsoever to even be mentioned in this discourse. *Why would I bother reading something that no one bothered writing?*

With that said, I would like to move on to some story specifics that might help clarify things. As it often involves anthropomorphic animals (furries, basically), a good chunk of the time that I refer to an animal (e.g, possum, canine...), it refers to an anthropomorphic character of that species. References to "standard" animals will be explicitly stated as such, to avoid confusion. Related to this, animal body parts are often used interchangeably with human body parts, such as referring to a hand as a "paw".

To finalize this little note, I would like to give mention some special people who helped me immensely through the creation and ideation of this piece. Tabsy, especially - for your infinite well of ideas and support for me, even in

my darkest of times. Fulikii - also for your ideas and your feedback. Signatelli - for your elaboration of a first, comprehensive critique of this thing and of my approach when this piece was just barely above 3000 words long. dissy/swineflu - for the hours-long conversations on our respective pieces and methodologies, and the exchanges of ideas that followed.

And this last paragraph, I'd like to dedicate it to the "true OGs", without whom none of this would have been possible. All the 7 people who, clumped together for 4 years (and counting) in a Discord group chat (along with me, so 8), roleplayed in a single setting long enough for it to grow its very own lore, factions, politics... All these 7 people who, even in the face of my utter stubbornness and even toxicity, decided to keep me around even through some of my darkest of times. Liam, Lemon, Roxy, Catt, Nem, Biscu, Ghost - thank you. Thank you all so much. Thank you for Hard Rain, thank you for being the ones that indirectly prompted me into getting serious about writing through RP. Through so many internal woes, we still stay together. It's funny, isn't it?

I hope you enjoy.

/s/ Stooser S, or just "stooser".



Also featured in <https://azon-bobcat.itch.io/tall-tails-worldwide-zero>. Go check it out!

DOXA - Act I

*“Of Platonic philosophy; opinion, common belief, unreasonable knowledge,
knowledge of the lowest type. Imperfect beliefs on reality.”*

PHYSIS

"Of ancient Greek philosophy: physical world, nature."

"You don't know shit about who I am or what I do!" Kade yelled out at the male figure across the room from him, his screams interrupted by the occasional throaty gasp for air. "I—FUCK!" He brought his hands to his head, clutching his brown, messy hair, his snarl made up of a white-yellowish mosaic of canine teeth. The figure across the room simply observed this reaction, their face completely emotionless. The conservative talk show that had been playing on the television had faded away into the background, as various politicians and self-proclaimed philosophers flickered on the screen, each echoing the other's opinion, occasionally introducing someone from the opposing side, only to give them a minute or two of talk time.

"I always knew it. They've indoctrinated you. It took only what, a year? Just a year for them to turn you into this... this fucking mess. Look at yourself!" The figure said and jabbed a finger at Kade, a gesture that had been repeated so many times before. "You should be glad I still let you stay here. Where the fuck do you even plan to work with an arts degree?" the figure asked as they crossed their arms, staring down onto Kade.

"You still have no right to completely try to destroy everything I stand for every time I talk to you! Every—EVERY time I step into the house I grew up in, you do everything in your power to talk me down." Tears began to well up at Kade's eyes as he shouted across the room. His voice lost tone, with him trying to shout between gasps that resembled sobs more than anything else. "You despise everything about me!"

With a heavy step, the figure moved forwards, their form partially basked in the dim blue light of the television. Their fur, a mix of blacks and browns, contrasted against Kade's lighter coat, filled with more beige-ish and orange colours. The figure snarled, revealing a similar set of canine teeth as they looked at Kade from head to toe. "As if your degree shenanigans weren't enough. Of course not. You had to go ahead and ensure that our family would never have any legacy because of your antics." The figure's dim grey eyes locked onto Kade's own glowing seas of honeyed yellow with a frozen stare, only interrupted by the occasional blink. "You are a fucking freak of nature, Kade. That's what you are."

Kade instinctively turned his head to the side to avoid looking at the figure in front of him. Even more tears welled up at his eyes, now rolling down his furred cheeks, leaving a burning, wet trail behind themselves. "How did mom even think about getting together with someone like you..." He spoke weakly, the volume of his voice barely above that of a whisper. "F-fuck you! How did I even think to call you my father in the first place?" He roared, his head suddenly whipping around to stare at his

father and his silvery, emotionless eyes. His fists were already clenched, as if in preparation for what might come next.

His father did not respond. The newly created silence between them continued for a few more moments. Kade's father narrowed his eyes, shook his head and, uncrossing his arms, he turned around. He walked back over to the couch in front of the television, his steps heavy and slow, perhaps burdened with the last few months of constant arguing with his son. With a barely audible grunt, he sat back down onto the soft cushions, reaching for the remote carelessly discarded next to him. His furred fingers brushed over the rubbery buttons with a noticeable tremble. For a moment, the flickering political figures cast upon him by the screen seemed almost afraid of being turned off, as if the liquid crystal display was the only thing keeping them alive.

But no; the figures were just ridiculing some unknown, far-off idea, and a politician's cacophonous laughter was abruptly cut off by the press of the power button on the remote. The living room went dark, and nor was there any blue moonlight to set a scenic environment; the room turned into little more than a dark square.

Kade, having observed his father's sudden retreat, could do little but swallow hard, wiping the tears off of his face with the back of his hand. Tugging at the straps of his black tank top, he attempted to ground himself back in reality through touch. His canine vision allowed him to discern the outline of the figure of his father in the dark, which was completely unmoving, and all he could hear was his own, and his father's breathing. Grabbing the worn-down skateboard leaning on the door frame, he left the house without much ceremony. He closed the door behind him rather weakly, certainly unlike how child-parent arguments tended to end; in most families, these usually ended with slammed doors and trembling hinges. But not with Kade.

He shivered slightly when he felt the night air lap at his fur once he stepped out. With one hand, he untied the plaid jacket tied around his waist, which was, at this point, more often tied there rather than worn as intended. He put it on without buttoning it up, and walked the brief paved path from his house until he reached the sidewalk. He began to walk along the street as he held the skateboard under his arm, with no direction in mind whatsoever. The harsh LED light of the streetlights above made him squint for a moment as his eyes adapted. This, however, wouldn't last long; after just a street, the neat and efficient LED light transitioned abruptly into the characteristic orange glow of sodium vapour lamps, the classic streetlight used for so many years. With the older lamps also came the graffiti and many other characteristics of the "rougher" part of town, from the occasional boarded-up window to old houses that had been listed as "for sale" for what seemed like decades. The rawness of it all was unlike the imposed sterility of home, but even here, his father's words kept bouncing around in his brain. Freak of nature. Indoctrinated.

On one wall, Kade turned to look at the squiggly tag of a long-gone graffiti artist. No one was quite sure where it came from, but some rumoured it had been drawn even

before the war. The trails of spray paint swirled about the old concrete surface, like a litter of kittens playing and mingling together in the sterile contrast of an animal shelter. A smile tugged at Kade's lips upon seeing the tag. He shook his head, trying to return to reality, and kept walking.

Rummaging through his pockets, he retrieved an old, unmarked packet of cigarettes along with a cheap, navy-blue plastic lighter. He sat down the stairs of some long-closed store and set the skateboard to his left. The cracked 'OPEN' neon sign of the store threatened to fall at any moment. The interior of the front of the building itself was hidden by an opaque white tape stuck onto the glass from inside, and the logo of the local real estate company shone proudly as a sticker on the door, loudly proclaiming 'FOR SALE!' along with a phone number under it. Kade lit one of the cigarettes, taking a deep breath of nicotine-filled smoke. The substance flowed through his veins, his muscles somewhat relaxing despite his throat holding in a cough. He really had to stop smoking, didn't he?

He looked up at the sodium lights above and closed his eyes, breathing out a cloud of smoke. The effects of the nicotine, the warmth of the lights, and the cool air of the night seemed to brush away his worries. A relaxed smile spread across his face when he took the second puff of the cigarette and quickly exhaled the smoke, the lit end slowly burning up. The bitter taste of smoke didn't bother him at all, and instead only helped to numb his senses further. College assignments, his father's words... all of it began to fade away, tuned out into the background, replaced by the reality of the here and the now. These parts of town were raw and unrefined, but to Kade, they were authentic, and far more real than the glittery city centre. This was his domain, albeit not in a sense of control. He was utterly unbothered by the litter here and there, or the occasional broken window, or the graffiti sprayed on nearly every abandoned vertical surface. He let out a soft chuckle, thinking about how corporate agents would probably have a stroke if they dared to venture into these parts of the Citadel.

His trance was rudely interrupted by the soft hum of a hybrid engine. Kade opened his eyes and turned his head to the right to see a black car turning the corner. He quickly noticed the antennas on the roof and the little blue lights on the dashboard; an unmarked police vehicle. Two plain-clothed officers sat in their neat suits in the front. Kade immediately tensed up, but tried to remain calm. Previous memories of arrests and detainments flashed about in his head; mostly for vandalism when he was caught in the act of spraying his graffiti onto walls of buildings both old and new. The car slowed as it approached Kade, until it came to a complete stop. Kade looked up to meet the gaze of the driving officer who, after a second of eye contact, turned to his partner and began to talk about something. Kade heard muffled police jargon from within the car which Kade could somewhat decipher; something about "operational security".

The argument between the two officers seemed to end as quickly as it started, and the window rolled down. "Hey, you alright?" asked the driver, "Bit late, and this part of

town is pretty rough.” Kade froze up, as the last thing he was expecting was a friendly question, especially coming from a plainclothed officer. He extinguished his half-smoked cigarette against the concrete stairs.

“I’m... alright. Just needed a breather.” He tried to avoid eye contact with the officer, who observed Kade’s dishevelled form intently. The officer’s partner seemed to intentionally avoid participating in the conversation, looking out the other window.

“You sure you don’t wanna head home? We can give you a ride.” The officer offered, a wide smile present on his face. Their partner, on the other hand, just grumbled and facepalmed. Before Kade could respond, the driver looked about their vehicle for a moment, before grabbing the chilled can of Fanta sitting in the cupholder.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Home is the last place I want to be right now.” Kade muttered a barely audible “fuck”, as he remembered that he should have probably just shut up and ignored the officer instead of mentioning his issues in front of the plainclothed stranger. ‘Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law’ ... right?

The smile on the officer’s face dropped as he heard Kade’s response. “If you say so.” He put his hand up, letting Kade see the can of Fanta. “Want some? Haven’t opened it yet, I gotta cut down on my sugar anyway. Barely passed the fitness check-up last time.” He chuckled softly.

A smile appeared on Kade’s face, his tail wagging slightly behind him, the fur brushing against the concrete stairs as he reestablished eye contact with the officer and extended his hand to catch the can. “Sure,” he responded as his mind tried to fight back; what if the officer was trying to get his DNA? Or his fingerprints? Or accuse him of something? Kade tried to dismiss these paranoid thoughts as the officer tossed the orange can over to Kade, the still-sealed aluminium vessel landing perfectly in Kade’s right hand. “Cheers.” Kade said before pulling on the tab of the can and opening it with a pop. He took a sip and was very pleasantly surprised; European Fanta, undisturbed by the high-fructose corn syrup that the American version was famous for.

“Stay safe, will ya? We’ll be patrolling around tonight if anything happens, so you know who to ring.” The officer said as he brought his hand up to his ear, making a “phone call” gesture. He rolled up the window, and pressed on the accelerator before he could give his partner a chance to resume their argument, or create a new one. Kade just gave the officer a brief wave.

He watched the vehicle speed off into the night as he took another sip of soda. A feeling of surprise overtook him; the CMPD’s “plainclothes” weren’t particularly known for being friendly. He took one last gulp of the Fanta before tossing the empty

can into an overflowing bin to his left that the garbage trucks had probably missed for the past few weeks.

He stood up and brushed off the dust that had clung onto his sweatpants, before picking up his skateboard. Faced with a decision, he looked out towards the imposing skyscrapers in the centre of the city that, even though they seemed to be so far away, were closer than one would think. Their silhouettes never lacked of illumination — either sunny in the day, or beaming with light from screens and windows. Despite the late night, many of the windows were still very much lit, most of which likely belonged to either overworked office workers or equally stressed students.

From this distance, the lights resembled an imitation of the night sky, in a place where the light pollution didn't allow practically any stars to shine through. The light in the windows turned on and off, almost like stars dying or being born.

“Oi, you got a lighter?” A voice called out from behind Kade, thus forcing him to pay attention to reality again. He whipped around; behind him, stood a possum just a bit shorter than him, whose hoarse voice didn't at all fit with what he looked like. He wore an oversized, grey hoodie, complimented with a pleated tartan skirt that reached down to just above his knees.

The confidence and casual manner in which the possum wore this all made Kade freeze up for a moment, before he mumbled a quiet “Yeah, one sec”, and fetched the lighter from a pocket. The possum leaned forwards slightly, an unusually long cigarette wobbling in his mouth as Kade lit it.

“Cheers, mate.” The possum took a deep breath from the cigarette and exhaled it off to the side, as to not blow smoke into Kade's face. “Shit, man, you look familiar. I seen you around here before?” He inquired, with his voice of a chain smoker.

“Eh... dunno. Maybe. I'm around here fairly often.” Kade responded, unsure of how to avoid having to say he didn't even live here, and yet pretended to be a part of this section of the city.

A sly smile made itself present on the possum's face. “Ah, you think I ain't got a brain in this skull of mine, eh?” He reached out with a hand, gently pushing Kade's shoulder. “All the city kids who pretend like they've been born in the rough say this.” He chuckled heartily, before giving Kade a few slaps on the shoulder. “Go on, lad,” he said, and with these words, he promptly left, walking down further into the ghetto.

Kade resisted the urge to scratch his head in confusion. Who even was that? The interaction planted a seed of a thought in his head. He wasn't from this place. He'd never been. He simply saw it as a refuge from home, as a place where nothing but emotion, intimacy, and honesty existed, as raw and gritty as it all got. But he didn't belong here, and at times, he came dangerously close to his cover being blown.

No matter. He had, however, already made a subconscious decision on whether going down to the city centre was worth it at this time.

First, though, clearing his mind seemed like a good idea.

He set the skateboard down onto the ground and, feeling the wood creak underneath his shoes, rolled off down the street.

□ □

Kade looked towards the general direction of the skate park, illuminated by the orange streetlights, the same way as the surrounding space. Just barely, he could discern someone sitting on the flat upper part of one of the smaller ramps, their legs dangling back and forth. Kade wondered: someone sitting alone in the park, at this time of night?

He took a few more steps and squinted his eyes to take a closer look, before a daunting realization crept up on him. The person's silhouette looked just like him.

Zephyr, his form recognizable even with his back turned to Kade in the dim light.

“Oh, this motherfucker..” Kade muttered through his teeth, clenching the skateboard under his left arm even tighter than before. A strange surge of anger flashed through his mind, and he began to walk towards the familiar figure of Zephyr, every step of his trot a precisely calculated movement, almost like a cat sneaking up on its prey. Kade, however, felt far more like the prey than the cat.

As he got closer, Kade could make out the furred dragon's appearance in more detail; the turquoise, smooth fur; the inky black tattoos along the sides of his waist... He looked the exact same as he did on that day.

In his mouth, Zephyr held a strawberry Chupa-Chups, twirling it around his tongue as he stared down onto the screen of his phone. He idly scrolled past unending, algorithmic content that shoved itself in his face like some sort of drug, to the point where he couldn't even be bothered to hear Kade's approaching footsteps behind him.

Kade jumped up onto the curve of the small ramp, the sound of his boots as they hit the worn concrete forcing Zephyr to spontaneously snap out of his phone-induced trance. Expecting it to be a certain someone else, a sly smile appeared on Zephyr's furred face as he turned around to face Kade.

“Oh, hello—” He mumbled with that usual, sickeningly honeyed voice that Kade knew far too well.

The corners of Zephyr's stupid grin quickly went back down, and his eyes took on a stern frown.

“You again? Didn’t I block you from... just about everywhere?” Zephyr withdrew the candy from his mouth as he spoke to Kade, who glared at him with an equally stern stare. His voice returned to its usual, rather “bitchy” tone.

Kade forced himself to hold back a snarl. “Oh, I know that. If you think I’m here stalking you or whatever the fuck you’ve got going in your head already, then be relieved, that’s not why I’m here. I wasn’t even thinking about you, really. Just wanted to clear my head a bit, but obviously that wasn’t to be, was it?” He shoved his hands into his pockets, as to not let Zephyr see them turn into fists. He glared deep into Zephyr’s eyeliner-smudged eyes, despite the doubt that doing so stirred within him.

“Then what the fuck do you need from me?” Zephyr smirked, crossing his fishnet-clad legs as he stared down at Kade, eye level slightly above him thanks to the ramp’s elevation.

“Not much. Just wanted to, you know, catch up.” Kade’s voice brimmed with buried anger that, slowly but surely, began to emerge. “What are you doing out and about at these hours, anyway? When you’re not getting fucked, I mean.”

Zephyr let out a throaty chuckle, before once more shoving the Chupa-Chups into his mouth. “Pfft! What’s it to you? What, you interested in getting back together, big guy?” Zephyr leaned forwards teasingly, letting Kade catch a full glimpse of the furred dragon’s high-waisted, tight latex bodysuit that left little to the imagination of the upper part of his body.

“Not at all. Just wanted to see if you’ve changed or not.” Kade took a step back as Zephyr leaned in. “Clearly, you haven’t. Not one damn bit.”

“Come on, Kadey, don’t you remember me? All the fun nights we used to have?” Zephyr put his phone away into the barely-there pockets of his shorts, before he hopped off of the flat part of the ramp and landed right in front of Kade. Now, Zephyr had to look up at Kade, instead of down.

“Fun nights?!” Kade raised his voice, almost on the verge of shouting. He spread his arms as he leaned a bit closer to Zephyr, letting the skateboard fall down onto the concrete with a wooden thud. “You—you got fucked by like, three other people, in front of my own fucking eyes! And then you had the audacity of asking me to join in in your debauchery like you’re some— some new-hire at the whorehouse!” He brought his arms back down to his sides, practically shouting right at Zephyr’s face. Kade no longer tried to hide the scowl on his face that slightly bared his teeth, or the clenching of his fists.

Zephyr’s face took on an expression of pity, his head tilted slightly to the side as he looked at Kade’s angered form from head to toe. “Aw, come on, Kadey. You don’t have to get like this, you know? I can always help you out if you need me to.” Zephyr gave a

clenched half-smile, lowering his tone as he spoke. He reached out with his right hand, gently running it down Kade's side. Once his hand brushed over Kade's waist, Zephyr gave his jacket a gentle tug.

In mere milliseconds, the memories of that night flashed in Kade's mind as soon as he felt Zephyr's unmistakable, gentle touch, even through his clothing. How Zephyr oh-so-teasingly invited Kade out for a night in one of Citadel's underground clubs; how Zephyr ran his hands past the waistband of Kade's sweatpants; how he, having grabbed his arm, led him into one of the side-rooms that was already brimming with people, all grinning at the sight of the furred dragon...

Kade's eyes flashed with anger. With one fist, he slammed down onto Zephyr's arm that reached for his jacket. His snarl revealed itself fully, teeth bared as if he were about to bite down onto Zephyr's neck. Wrinkles formed all along his snout as he watched Zephyr through glaring eyes. The furred dragon stepped back against the raised section of the ramp, holding the part of his arm where Kade's fist made contact with a pained look on his face, teeth clenched together. "The fuck are you doing?!" He hissed at Kade and looked up from his arm, staring up at the canine. His eyes, open wide, betrayed the attempt at anger in his clenched teeth.

Without a second thought, utterly consumed by rage towards the furred figure in front of him, Kade closed the newly formed distance between himself and Zephyr. Keeping his gaze firmly fixated on Zephyr's pained eyes, he reeled his fist back, and, all within the fraction of a second, violently threw it right into the side of the furred dragon's muzzle. Zephyr's head jerked to the left as the weight of the impact forced him to spit out whatever was left of his half-eaten Chupa-Chups.

Zephyr leaned back against the slope of the ramp as he brought his palm to the impact site on the side of his muzzle. His face contorted in a grimace of pain; his teeth were clenched hard enough that he feared they'd crack if he put any more pressure on them. Finally, he gathered the strength to look up from the floor back up at Kade. There still stood Kade, fists by his sides, his expression as angered as before. He unclenched the fist he had used to deliver the impact and gave it a few brief shakes in the air, as if trying to get rid of the pain.

Involuntarily, Zephyr looked behind Kade as he noticed strange, shadowy movement in the dim sodium lights. Once he could discern the figure approaching Kade from behind, he instinctually smiled through clenched teeth.

"The fuck are you grinning at, whore?! Or do you want me to knock out those pearly whites of yours—" Kade screamed at Zephyr, his vocal cords threatening to rip at any moment. In all of his anger, he had been completely oblivious to the stomping of steel-toed military boots right behind him.

“HANDS OFF, MUTT!” A rough male voice sounded, close enough to make Kade’s ears ring.

He felt someone’s firm grip on both of his shoulders. Whoever it was, he spun Kade around in place fast enough so that all Kade saw was a brief flash of tan fur and a shimmer of leather clothing in the light; a sight followed up by the pressure and crushing feeling of an uppercut straight to his chin that sent vibrations rippling through his skull, and left little lights floating around in his vision.

Before he could even bring his head back down, the strange figure swept Kade’s legs with the accuracy of a martial artist. With a thud that reverberated through his spine, Kade collapsed on his back, landing onto the cold concrete of the ramp, right in front of Zephyr. Thankfully, his back and his neck had received the brunt of the impact, so his head remained relatively untouched.

The orange glow of the streetlights above swam and mixed with the sight of the strange figure towering right above him. Kade brought his hands to his face, giving his injured chin a rub to try and help with the sharp ache that still pounded in his jaw. He blinked, and saw that Zephyr had already repositioned himself to stand to the side of the figure, holding the side of the muzzle where Kade had delivered his punch. Even through the pulsing pain, Zephyr still managed to force out a sly smile, that exact same one that Kade knew all too well.

As his vision somewhat cleared up, he could finally discern the new figure before him. A hyena standing at just about 6’2, clad in a leather jacket and pants, the outfit accentuated by a strange, red armband tied on his right arm. He reeked of cheap cologne. Kade instinctually moved his hands to try and get back up, only to be met with the hyena bringing his boot right onto Kade’s gut, knocking the air out of the canine’s lungs.

“And stay down, dog.” The hyena grumbled, his dark brown eyes boring deep into Kade’s soul. He looked around, and quickly saw his next target; Kade’s skateboard, carelessly discarded in the heat of the moment. With a scowl on his face, the hyena picked up the fragile board. All while keeping his boot firmly planted on Kade’s abdomen, he slammed the frail wood of the board against his knee, sending splinters of painted wood and remains of clear tape flying onto the floor as the whole thing split in half with a painful crack.

The hyena tossed the remains of the skateboard off to the side before turning his gaze back towards Kade. “Let’s just hope you’ve learned, hm?” He hissed through his teeth.

A pained groan escaped Kade’s mouth as he let his head fall back down onto the concrete. The floating lights that had invaded his sight just a few moments ago remained there, and gained a certain clarity to them; as he stared up at the night sky,

clear of stars and of clouds alike, for a moment he thought that the bright blurs in his vision really were stars. After a few more blinks, however, the illusion was gone.

Zephyr and the hyena conversed, their voices too quiet for Kade, in his stunned state, to properly make out what they were talking about. He could almost feel the duo hurl another penetrating glance at him, before the relieving sound of fading footsteps and conversation finally reached Kade's ears.

Once the hum of a diesel engine filled the air, Kade at last found the strength to rise up from the ramp. He brushed off the concrete dust from his clothes, before he shot a glare at what remained of his skateboard. The sad two chunks of wood with two wheels each lay abandoned on the floor. Kade ran over and picked the parts up with trembling hands as he desperately tried to fit the two parts back together, hopelessly sticking together the little bits of tape that used to hold the whole thing together. He crouched down, still in his futile attempts to try and repair the board. Once the bits of tape could no longer stay stuck to the pieces, he at last gave up and practically threw them down onto the ground.

Involuntarily, memories of him as just a 15-year-old skating around the park most of the day once school hours would end, without a single care or bother in the world, made themselves known. The taste of bubblegum in his mouth growing gradually more and more stale as the hours went on, the roughness on his knees from the constant scrapes and falls, the laughs of older teens in the park...

With a sigh, he got back up and licked off the metallic taste of blood on his broken lip, his tongue inadvertently pushing against his teeth. The canine's canine felt a bit looser in its socket than before.

An ice pack to his chin would probably do wonders right about now. In his mind, Kade retraced the way to the shop that his hazy memory swore that should still be around. After one last rub to his strained neck, he took off, following the imaginary directions projected in his head.

Kade soon found himself bathed in the neon lights of the 24-hour store. He looked to the windows, far thicker than in a usual store; indeed, the taped-over gunshot mark right in the front that he remembered so well was still very much there. Posters slapped one over another, untouched for years, had begun to form a strange, thick skin that clung in rectangular shapes to the windows. Some belonged to local punk bands that had, over the times, dissolved, with their members most often either shot dead in an alleyway or locked behind bars of the Citadel's Correction Services. Others, to the occasional public service announcements.

At one point, half-hidden behind all these layers of print paper, Kade noticed a slogan that rung too many bells in his head: "Citadel First". It seemed to be among the very first of the posters, likely stuck onto the glass in the first years of the Citadel's

existence. It was something of a miracle no one had torn their way through the skin of paper to sell the poster as a historical niche collector's item.

To Kade, however, what mattered most was the question whether a certain someone was still present in the store. He stopped before the entrance for a few seconds. The hesitancy of meeting them, however, didn't take long to be overridden by the burning ache in Kade's chin and the desire to put something cold to it.

Once he pushed open the door, an action always accompanied by the clinking of a small bell overhead, his eyes immediately went towards the cashier.

"Yeah, yeah, and you know what he tells me after—" the cashier spoke, his eyes moving on their own accord to look at Kade, "—oooh shit, hold on, I'll call you back—" The shopkeeper's face lit up like a star in the countryside sky, as he dropped the ongoing call with a careless toss of his phone onto the counter. "Well, fuck me sideways, look at what the cat dragged in!" He exclaimed, straightening his position.

Kade responded to the cashier's excited reaction with a stern glare. "I'd rather not right now. I wouldn't have thought to step foot in this shithole of yours if it wasn't for that fucker." He gave the interior of the store a brief scan; floors that were probably mopped once or twice a week, half-empty fridges, and dwindling supplies of snacks and drinks on the shelves. A little section all the way at the back was filled with cleaning supplies, untouched to the point where Kade could swear he saw a spider web in its corner. After all, this establishment was not most people's first choice when it came to grocery shopping.

"Don't tell me." The cashier's jaw dropped. "You saw him again tonight?" He said, taking note of Kade's roughened-up appearance.

"Yes, Sammy. Zephyr. No, not because I wanted to see him." Kade felt the fire from before begin to reignite, despite the attempts to hold it back. His hands, shoved back into his pockets, tensed up again.

"That explains your, uh... inelegant look, let's just say that much. Though, I can't really judge, now can I?" Sammy let out a chuckle as he looked over his own appearance, accentuated by his work uniform, stained with bleach in some places.

Something flashed in Kade's eyes again as he stepped closer, placing his hands firmly down onto the counter. The height advantage over the sitting cashier gave Kade a bit more confidence than usual. "You think I'm a dumbass, Samuel?! You think I want to be your buddy again, after you fucked Zephyr along with the others, right in front of my eyes?" Kade shouted, and yet, the approaching flood of tears that threatened to escape his eyes became more intense than his reignited anger.

The poor cashier rolled back up against the wall on his worn-down office chair, the wheels squeaking as he did so. "Look, man, I— I just, didn't want to end our

friendship to end like this, you know? Besides, I'm sure you already knew what kind of person Zephyr was—" He held his hands up at the level of his head, as if surrendering to the canine before him.

“I don’t want to hear it from a bastard who dropped out of college just to end up working in this shithole of a store!” Kade’s whole face trembled, tears pushing insistently against his eyes as they threatened to leave at any moment.

“Kade, I—” Sam reached out towards Kade who, having already forgotten what he had even entered the store for, stormed out of the establishment and slammed the door behind him with enough force to send the little bell crashing down onto the ground.

Kade shut his eyes as hard as he could to stop the incoming flow of tears. He succeeded in this attempt, the cityscape unfolding before him once more.

Rarely, if ever, did he consider the city centre to be a place to unwind.

But after tonight's events, neither wallowing in the misery of the "Unmarked Sector", as the City Senators euphemized it as, nor returning home seemed like appealing options.

[illegible]

Before Kade unfolded the sight of the decrepit, yet somehow still operational entrance to the subway station. The metal frame around the descent into the station itself had begun to rust, the silver-y rust-proof paint doing little to protect the metal underneath once time chipped it away. Of the two lights set up in the corners of the frame, only one worked, and even then, seemed to be living on borrowed time.

The station didn't see much use to begin with; and late in the night, that fact became all the more obvious. The sound of someone's exhausted footsteps reached Kade. Trudging their way up the stairs, Kade saw a fellow canine, dressed in jeans and a wrinkled white shirt that bore the logo of Citadel's Combined Higher Education Centre. In their right paw, they held a plastic cup of coffee that had likely long since gone cold. Slung around their shoulder, a tan bag filled with study supplies, supported by their other paw.

A grimace of pure weariness had overtaken the canine's face, with sunken eyes and puffy eyebags that were visible through the layer of fur, and downturned corners of their mouth that indicated doneness in its most pure form. Their sight had no direction whatsoever as they stared into utter nothingness, not even bothering to respond to Kade's involuntary attempt at eye contact. His gaze lingered on the fellow canine's form, before he began his own descent into the station. Once he was a few steps in, the thick, warm air of the station hit him like a wall. The humidity made him consider that, if it were cold enough, a fog could easily form indoors.

Kade tried his best to ignore the stale stench permeating the station as he finally reached the platform. He looked up at the arrival display board hanging off the ceiling.

“GOVERNANCE SECTOR – 2:12”, as shown by the dim, yellow text.

Arriving in just a few minutes. Perfect.

Kade stopped before the glass-and-steel barrier that was the checkpoint to gain actual access to the platform. Almost dropping his wallet, he dug around in it until he found a weathered plastic card, with bright letters stating “CITADEL STUDENT’S METRO PASS”. He flipped it around to see the expiration date: 20/06/2053. Two more weeks left before renewal. He let the checkpoint machine have a brief taste of the card, before it spat the plastic out with an affirmative beep.

Having finally stepped onto the humid concrete of the platform, Kade gave his surroundings a brief scan. Dusty floor tiles, the occasional dripping ceiling pipe... these things always left him wondering whether the person in charge of maintaining this station was even alive anymore. As for the people, at this time he shared the platform with only one other person; a woman, dressed in a rather neat business suit for someone traveling at this time of day. She occasionally blew a bubble made of gum, endlessly scrolling through her phone.

The screeching of subway brakes against rails brought Kade right out of his introspective trance. He glanced to his left to see the eye-like headlights of the train rapidly approach, even as they gradually slowed down. The train pierced the shadows of the tunnel and, at last, came to a stop with a huff. The doors hissed open, and before making his way in, Kade noticed that only two or three individuals disembarked on this station.

He stepped into the carriage, happy to find plenty of empty seats. Even if they were made of plastic, sitting on something that wasn’t concrete tonight was oddly relieving. Just as he expected, the carriage he had chosen didn’t brim with much activity or presence at all. Most of the people in it were either being entertained by their phones, or dozing off. Some odd one was reading a book, titled “American Gods.” Kade could have sworn that the bloody thing looked bigger than the Bible itself.

He, however, opted to join those who were dozing off. He let himself melt into the seat, bringing a surprising sensation of relief to his previously injured neck. Following a few beeps, the doors shut and Kade felt the inertia move him a slight bit to the left. With his eyes half-closed, he let the gentle vibrations of the carriage slowly lull him into a state of quasi-unconsciousness. He put far too much confidence into the automated announcer that occasionally spoke of upcoming stations through the

overhead speakers, but even if he were to miss his destination, he didn't exactly have anywhere to be.

"Commercial Zone, arriving at: Hughes Station."

"Residential Zone, arriving at: Sugar House Park."

"Financial District, arriving at: Exiton Headquarters."

The announcer's robotic statements all melted in Kade's head into one singular mess of words, irrelevant to him for the time being, as the train continually stopped and took off again and again. Even while dozing off, however, he couldn't help but wonder who did the Citadel's planners even hire to name all of these districts in such a ridiculously unoriginal way.

"Governance Sector, arriving at: Square of the Atom. Reminder, this is the last station in the route. All remaining passengers must disembark. Any loss or theft of personal items is not considered the responsibility of the Citadel Transit Authority."

And that was his cue to make his way on out.

Stepping out of the metro, he was met by the staggering contrast that was the Square of the Atom station compared to where he had first embarked. Clean, cool air; architecture that mixed brutalism with aesthetics into a functional yet beautiful combination; well-groomed officers of the Citadel Metropolitan Police department on their usual foot patrols around the metro, some of them even making small talk with people that came and went as part of the movement of the crowds.

What all the stations shared, however, was the sensation of lassitude of the city's residents that permeated the air thoroughly in the late hours of the night. Kade had to weave past the crowds consisting of mostly exhausted workers and students, occasionally mumbling quiet apologies each time he bumped or shoved past someone. He took a brief mental note of a small grouping of teenagers that stood away from the human flux, dressed in punk-like outfits, cackling at each other's jokes, smoking as if their lungs were invincible. Most of them were human, with a singular outlier in the form of a coyote. A pair of passing CMPD officers gave them a suspicious look, before moving on with their patrol.

As Kade emerged from the station, he was met by a sight he usually had no reason to see. The Citadel, in all of its LED-basked glory, unravelled itself before him. Skyscrapers stretched up into the sky, their pointy roofs threatening to tear a hole through the night that blanketed the city. Below, a flood of storefronts and high-rise apartment buildings, the latter often stacked on top of the former. The lights of both advertisements and streetlights would be blinding for anyone not used to them.

As much as the Citadel's urban planners loved to put labels on things before they were even built, the name of the "Governance Sector", located in the very core of the city, simply implied the presence of most of the city's public service headquarters. Indeed, Kade's thoughts on the matter were reaffirmed as he caught sight of the CMPD's headquarters, effectively an oversized police station, a few streets away.

Even in the presence of this strange light show of the city, the monument that lay right ahead of Kade had a certain atmosphere radiating from it that effortlessly dwarfed whatever the consumerist spirits of the stores or grandiose ambitions of the skyscrapers had to offer.

A representation of Rutherford's atomic model, carved with granite in the form of a statue standing at a precise 92 meters. The "nucleus", composed of spheres stuck right in the middle of the monument, seemed to practically float; as did the "electrons", smaller orbs that followed the path of thin granite orbits drawn around the nucleus. The illusion of the nucleus' levitation was, in fact, no illusion, as proven by the yellow signs with black text stating "EXTREMELY STRONG ELECTROMAGNETS, DO NOT APPROACH" attached to every side of the fence delimiting a 10-meter radius around the monument. Floodlights built into the same pedestal as the magnets kept the statue constantly illuminated throughout the night.

To Kade, even having already seen the monument plenty of times, every occasion was like the very first one. As he lost himself in the mesmerizing, barely noticeable up-and-down movement of the nucleus and of the electrons that moved following the orbits, a strange pang of melancholy surged from within his mind. An utter insignificance in the face of the city that was dismissive to the matters of its residents; that seemed to live and breathe on its own accord, that as artificially as it had originally been made, had a nature of its own. The atom towered so high up above him, for a moment it became hard to believe that, at its base, it represented what everything was made of. Carved into the pedestal, which took up about 15 meters of the monument's height, was a solemn phrase and motto of the Citadel:

"MAY THE ATOM SERVE PEACE, AND ONLY PEACE."



Kade read over the letters a few times over, as if dissecting them.

Someone lightly tugged at the back of his jacket.

They tugged again, and only the second time did Kade finally return to the real world.

He turned around, to find a protogen's cyan blue eyes staring right back at him. They stood much shorter than Kade, at around 5'4.

"Hello? Sir?" The protogen's voice sounded rather... digital, unlike the few protogens who Kade had heard before, who all spoke with recognizable human-like voices. Kade scanned the little fellow from head-to-toe, only now noticing how the flow of people bent past and around the two, as if they were standing in a river.

"Uh—s-sorry, you need anything?" Kade responded, voice tinged with confusion. He looked down at the fuzzy shape held in their arms, and found a plushie of a Vaporeon, the protogen holding it tightly to their chest. As far as Kade knew, protogens weren't capable of having children...

"No, not at all!" Their face glowed with childlike wonder. "I'm just out here exploring. My name is Finder, by the way."

Finder. As if that made it any clearer.

"Finder? Are you... are you alone out here?" Kade raised an eyebrow.

"No. The Caretaker is watching me!" They said so casually, like it was a usual thing for them to be watched. Kade searched around the loose bits floating around in his memory for the name. The Caretaker, the AI that the Citadel's government put far too much confidence in, letting it handle all manner of administrative operations all by itself.

The protogen seemed to notice the brief confusion on Kade's face. "The Caretaker is the central AI constructed in the lower levels of the Tower of Governance," they pointed up at the large, office-like building just past the monument, "that handles most bureaucratic tasks." Their tone changed for a second, as if they were reading off a teleprompter.

"No, no, I know who that is—why exactly are you being, "watched" by him?" Kade wondered. He couldn't take his eyes off the plushie in their hands.

Again, the protogen's visor shone with delight. "I'm a Finder! My job is to get new data for the Caretaker by exploring the city and talking to the citizenry. It's a new program to help improve and build upon AI using the most organic data!" Their vocabulary resembled a strange mix of teenage speak and academic terminology.

Kade nodded to himself. "That... makes sense, I guess." He unglued his eyes from the plushie and stared right at the cyan LED eyes on the sides of the protogen's visor.

An awkward silence emerged between the two. The protogen, however, didn't seem to consider it awkward at all.

"Can I go with you for a bit? I just got out last night, haven't seen much of the city yet!" They inquired. Out of nowhere, they poked at the fabric of Kade's tank top, likely to gather sensory data.

Kade hesitated, looking down to the protogen's finger. As much as he wanted to spend the rest of the night alone, how could he say no to that little black-and-cyan face?

"Fine..." He half-grumbled before he took off in an aimless direction. Up ahead, lay the wide main street of the Governance Sector. The protogen followed faithfully, occasionally making brief scans of the way Kade looked, walked, breathed, where his eyes went... As he gave the protogen suspicious glances, Kade's thoughts instantly went to the possibility that maybe the whole thing was just a cover-up for a new surveillance tool. Alas, even if it were the case, his paranoid mind was quickly overwhelmed by simple indifference.

Kade looked up at the occasional giant screens up ahead that basked the streets below in even more light. Most of them displayed government advertisements, with the "Citadel First" slogan. Some had the privilege of promoting small businesses around the area. But curiously, none of the adverts belonged to corporations.

Like a disorderly stream, the Citadel's residents made their way through the street, all of them just as dismissive of each other. Most were, as Kade already expected, workers going home for the night. Fatigued faces marked deeply with caffeine, eyebags sinking so far low you'd think they could be checked in at an airport as extra baggage, crumpled business suits or blue-collar work clothes... What surprised him, though, was the lack of partypeople one would be expecting to find at these hours of the night. Just a few loners or small groups, most already on their way home.

The sirens of a CMPD cruiser blared past, as whatever vehicles still on the roads quickly yielded to the officers.

Soon enough, the landscape of the Governance Sector began to abruptly shift from its European style of natural urban growth to the all-too-familiar, sterile grids of the Financial District. The screen above no longer bore promotions of small businesses, now replaced by high-budget corporate adverts. Logos of Exiton Factory, Protonics Armoured Corporation, Nightingale Health Corporation, all stuck onto their respective headquarters and suboffices.

Kade shuddered. This part of the city always felt... uneasy to him, hence he rarely visited it. Inhuman, mechanical, like an algorithm designed for nothing but the most

pure of profit extraction, with streets much emptier than those of other city sections. He found his fears confirmed as he glared at a pair of Exiton's security synths and their frozen expressions, both holding a strangely modern version of an AK-12. They stood by at the entrance of Exiton's headquarters.

They shot a dead glance back at Kade, prompting him to look away, at the floor.

"Huh? Are you alright?" The protogen, who still followed, perked up as he noticed Kade's unease.

"Yeah, I just... I never like this part of the city. I don't think I've even noticed we were headed its way, and now we're already through, like, half of it." Kade still felt the remnants of the synths' mechanical stares run down his spine.

"It'll be fine, I'm sure! Besides, we're safe here." The little fellow tried their best to cheer up the canine as they followed him. Only once Kade looked back to them did he take note that the protogen was not wearing any clothing, instead covered head-to-toe in beige fur. Their body followed a more "classical" protogen anatomy; metal upper legs with blue lights on the sides, a chest plate, finned panels on the side of the head...

The protogen's words of encouragement forced a slight smile to appear on Kade's face. "I guess we are."

Kade looked forwards once more, met with a peculiar sight; two businessmen in crumpled suits, one a man of Asian descent and the other a bobcat, walking down in the direction opposite to Kade's. The man's eyes sparked with a sort of strange excitement, and he talked so fast Kade could barely make out what he said. His hands dug into his briefcase with force, his steps and gestures frantic, as if he had downed a full bottle of caffeine pills. The bobcat, on the other hand, had a scowl of annoyance and doneness on his face as he stared down at the phone in his right hand.

"And then, you know, what if we, uh—" The man spoke in a hurry.

"WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP?!" The bobcat snapped and whipped around to face the businessman beside him, shoving him away with a rough push. "I don't give a singular flying fuck about your projects anymore! You've gone bankrupt for the THIRD FUCKING TIME this year! I don't care about whatever fucking Bad Dragon rip-off idea you had yesterday! You switched from producing silicon chips to making silicon dildos, for fuck's sake!" He yelled at his business partner with no hesitation, loudly enough for his voice to echo through the mostly desolate streets.

The protogen beside Kade brought their hands up to their far bigger than usual ears, their eyes closed in a pained expression. Without thinking twice, Kade also tried to help drown out the noise and put his paws over their ears as well. He speedwalked, trying to usher the protogen away from the scene.

A wave of relief washed over Kade once he heard the bobcat's rant cease, and his footsteps storm off away from his partner. The man tried to reach out and follow the bobcat, but was rejected with another shove.

"Jesus... what was all that about?" Kade asked himself, even if he had clearly heard the confrontation. He let go of the poor protogen who, still shaken, clung tightly onto their Vaporeon plushie.

"Buh... they screamed so loud that my ears hurt." The protogen shook their head like they were trying to get water out of their ears.

Kade smiled and gave his fluffy ears a gentle pat. "Yeah, it's what you sometimes see in the big city. You're gonna have to get used to it, if you want to follow that mission of yours." A slight pout appeared on the protogen's face in response. "Sometimes, it's... a bit worse in the rougher areas. But you'll be fine." He ruffled the fur atop the protogen's head, forcing the pout to morph into a smile.

"I hope I will!" They exclaimed.

A far-off sign on the side of a pharmacy announced the time. Kade had to squint to see it; 3:27 AM.

The sheer realization of the time, and of the fact that tomorrow (or, today) was a Monday suddenly brought back all that lethargy Kade had held back without knowing.

"...think I'm gonna head home," he looked to the protogen, "Wanna tag along until the subway?"

The protogen responded with an eager nod. Kade smiled and, with one last scratch of their ears, began to walk.

After a brief, mostly silent journey, the duo found themselves staring down at the stairs of the gaping mouth that was the subway entrance. Most of the people who emerged or entered into it wore business suits or similar clothing, as to be expected from frequent visitors to the Financial District. But the one thing that unified them, regardless of outfit or species, was the expression of tiredness on their faces. Some carried coffee in their hands, some tea, but none of it seemed to help.

The protogen's ears folded down a bit. "Hmph... Caretaker says I can't go beyond Governance, Financial, and Commercial... you live in Residential, right?" They said with a slight whimper, their voice even a bit tearful.

Kade tilted his head side-to-side, as if making an estimation. "Eh, sort of, I guess. Very close to the border with Unmarked. Why'd he not let you go?" He looked at the protogen with some pity.

As soon as he stepped into the house, the dark entrance that he knew a bit too well from his many nights out quickly threatened to consume him. Bracing his mind for another father-and-son shouting match, he let himself relax once he looked to the couch and found no trace of his father's silhouette.

A grumble in Kade's stomach broke the icy silence of the house. The sound made him realize that he hadn't even had dinner tonight. He stepped into the kitchen and turned on the light, looking to the lonely refrigerator that so loyally hummed away. Kade tried to remember its contents.

The thought of eating away at a cold slice of pizza in the middle of the night for the second time in a row made his stomach turn and his face twist in slight disgust. Forget it. He'd just wake up a bit earlier and get breakfast at one of the Education Centre's many cafeterias. That is, if he would even wake up any earlier than 10 AM this morning.

He turned off the light and, in engulfing darkness, went up the stairs to his room. Another refuge of his, one where he, despite the spirit of oppression that the house seemed to emanate, could truly be at home. Everything about it screamed Kade; the messily done bed, band posters and political banners covering the white walls, all yelling out in spirits and slogans of liberty, be it through music or direct action. On the desk lay an old laptop, its lid drowning in colourful stickers, mostly those of anarchist symbols or Pride flags. A repurposed shoebox full of drawing supplies accompanied the device.

Kade threw off his plaid jacket onto the bed, soon followed by his tank top and sweatpants. He looked out of the hallway to the bathroom, but tiredness instantly overtook his desire to take a shower. At once, he shut the door, and accidentally caught a glance of himself in the mirror on the closet door.

The barely noticeable fading of the tone on his arm muscles reminded him that it'd been a while since his last gym session. Still, he remained lean and robust enough to be satisfied with himself.

The bed, in all its messiness, called out to him like an old friend he hadn't seen in years. He plopped down onto it, without even bothering to put away his clothing. He threw the thin blanket over himself and let his head melt into the soft pillows. With one last check of his phone; as inactive and notificationless as before, he shut his eyes, or rather, they forced themselves shut.

Rarely, if ever, did sleep hit Kade faster than tonight.

LOGOS

"Of ancient Greek philosophy: word, discourse, or logic."

"Mister Kade!"

Kade's head shot up from his desk upon hearing the professor's pretentious, snobby voice, accompanied by a *clack* of his boots against the tile floor. Despite sitting all the way back of the room, the auditorium's seating slowly rose up the further away it was from the front of the room — on one hand, this allowed anyone to easily see the entire room, while on the other, there's not much sleep you can get in the back without being noticed.

Through his blurry, half-closed eyes, he could just barely discern his art professor's wrinkled face. That angered stare with eyes hidden behind thick lenses gazed right back at Kade.

"S—sorry professor, I just had a rough night—" The adrenaline immediately kicked in Kade's system, his eyes now open wide as the full realization of what occurred kicked in. He straightened up in his seat, a small pain shooting up through his back and neck due to the awkward position he had napped in.

"Right, sure you did. You're coming, or should I say stumbling into my class in a plaid jacket and sweatpants for the fourth time in a row, like this is a damn mall! We're studying the great classical arts here, not the 'art of skating' or whatever it is that you actually want to study," the professor ranted on, his laser pointer angrily darting around the massive screen set in the front wall of the room. It projected a high-quality picture of *The Birth of Venus*, along with the professor's scrambled notes on various features of the painting. He took a deep breath, before continuing. "Do you even *remember* walking into class this morning? Don't respond, I don't think you do. If you're not interested in my class, feel free to leave," he said as he diverted his gaze from Kade and instead looked around the entirety of his audience. "This goes for everyone. You're adults, I'm not making any of you stay here, and you all have the syllabus with the necessary notes." The professor remained silent, drilling into his students' souls with his stare, waiting for someone to move.

Kade shrunk into his seat, waiting along with the professor. The offer did seem tempting; he could just study the lecture material at his own leisure, in his own time. The ten or so people in the room remained as still as they had been before — dressed

like this was a formal event, their sheer energy left Kade sticking out like a sore thumb in the auditorium.

A minute passed, yet for Kade it seemed to stretch into an hour. No one moved, all while the professor kept on staring around the room. Finally, his piercing gaze landed on Kade once more.

“So? Are we going to stay or leave? I’ll repeat, I’m not holding you hostage here, Kade. Tell us your decision publicly, and we’ll resume class regardless of what you choose,” the professor spoke, a sly grin making itself apparent on his face. He had his hands behind his back, clearly not bothered by the fact that he was losing precious minutes of class.

Kade let out a profound sigh as he arose from his seat without speaking a word more. He slung his backpack containing little else but the laptop over his shoulder and, rather unceremoniously, began to stroll down the stairs towards the auditorium’s exit. He kept his view locked onto the steps underneath him, as to avoid the professor’s smug smile that he had come to know far too well in this semester. The other students seemed far too busy using this brief idle time to catch up on notes, and thus hardly paid Kade’s exit any attention. Just as he passed by the small stage in the front of the auditorium, he looked up and locked eyes with the professor, mumbling out some sort of incomprehensible sound at him, likely an attempt to say a curse without making it obvious. The professor squinted his eyes through the thick lenses of his glasses — alas, that didn’t help him hear any better, not at his age. A second later, and Kade vanished through the doorway, not even bothering to shut the door behind himself.

The hallway’s harsh LED lightning made him squint for a moment, his dry eyes adjusting to it. Quite soon, as he walked idly towards the main halls of the faculty, he found himself sinking into his thoughts. At this point, his legs were practically moving him to the library by themselves. The faculty’s usual background orchestra, consisting mostly of endless student chatter and the latecomers’ running, faded off into the background. In a stray thought, he envisioned himself in the same position as his professor; as a withered, old fogey stepping into that auditorium and screaming at the first student who happened to displease him in the slightest of ways. The sheer mental image of the scenario made him squirm in disgust. *But what other paths did he even have?* Aside from art academia, the only things that occurred to him were trying to make it as an artist—hard enough as it is—or, God forbid, become an art collector. *Even if he were willing to, with what money would he collect and sell art?* He tried to shove these thoughts into the back of his mind, excusing them away with the fact that, after all, it was still only his second year. Plenty of time left.

The return of the sore ache in his chin from last night’s encounter, induced by inattentively slamming his snout into the glass of the library’s far-too-slow automatic doors, very quickly brought him back to reality. The librarian, an older

woman with sunken eyes, couldn't help but chuckle as yet another student fell victim to the doors. "Hun, you've got to start being more careful. This is the third time!" She laughed softly, before returning to her work. An involuntary smile began to show on Kade's face, as if the librarian were a small ray of light in this rather foggy day of his.

"I know, I know... I mean, I can clean the nose mark off the glass if you want me to!" He said cheerfully, prompting the woman to chuckle once more. "But, uh... that aside, I was wondering if you'd have any empty individual study rooms available today? Preferably for now, or at least in a few hours from now." The librarian promptly immersed herself back into the digital realm of her trusty computer, only to return with a shake of her head and disappointed expression on her face.

"Ah, sorry, it seems like everything is already booked for today. I can get you a spot in for tomorrow at 4 PM if you want to, though." She spoke, without looking away from her screen.

"Mm, sure. Book me for that time, please," Kade said as he reached into his pockets and retrieved his student ID, sliding it over to the librarian. She only took one peek at it, and already slid it back over. Kade's eyes slightly widened at the speed of the woman's work as he put the card back into his pockets.

"Alrighty, perfect! You're all set for tomorrow at 4, at room E205." She smiled and finally looked back at the student before her.

"Thank you! I gotta say, you're one hell of a relief from all the old farts that seem to run this place. I don't know how you have the patience to deal with them," Kade spoke, all the while surveying the floor for any good study spots he could snatch.

"Oh, don't you worry about me! Besides, these are all art academics, you should always expect some degree of snobbiness when interacting with any of them. Just try not to become one yourself," the librarian said idly, already back to work on the PC.

"Pfft, no chance in hell that will be happening, don't you worry. Have a good day, though," Kade gave the librarian a little wave as he'd begun to walk off towards a spot he'd surveyed in the far corner of the first floor; a small, isolated desk topped by a lamp. The remainder of the library seemed close to packed, brimming with students and professors alike, a lot of them sitting in groups, having hushed discussions about either the current state of the art world or tomorrow's assignment. It was something akin to a national bipartition; one side of the library resembled an art conference, with professors from every department congregating into one massive discussion, while the other side was split up into multiple study groups. Much to Kade's delight, the corner he'd picked out had only one figure close to it that he could discern — a lonely feline in a wrinkled button-up shirt, sat at a desk with the posture of a shrimp.

Paying little mind to the cat, Kade sat down at the cornered desk, and promptly reached into his backpack, retrieving his sticker-laden laptop. With a press of the power button, the machine's fans began to spool up. Kade leaned back into the chair as he awaited the computer's abused SSD to load up; in the meantime, his eyes involuntarily strayed towards the feline a few meters away from him. Thick textbooks on AI, advanced calculus, algorithms, and other topics were strewn about his desk to the point where Kade found it difficult to see the table's wooden surface underneath all the paper. The cat seemed to be completely isolated from his environment — he occasionally tugged at his fluffy hair, all the while his bloodshot eyes were close to burning a hole into hastily scribbled notes, with mathematical symbols that Kade didn't even know existed and a ratio of 20 letters to 1 number. His eyelids threatened to shut themselves at any moment, which the feline counteracted by sometimes pulling on the fur on his cheek to try and jerk himself back awake. The tactic was working, but its effectiveness waned with each attempt.

A tinge of pity ran through Kade's mind, albeit one thing he could not understand; that is, why a supposed AI student was in the library of the Faculty of Arts. He looked back at his laptop, only to find that the startup process was nowhere close to finished. The grumble in his stomach very quickly reminded Kade of him missing breakfast this morning, as he was already running late to class, but relief in the form of a nearby vending machine standing against the wall soon caught his eye. He walked up and looked over the machine's rather unglamorous selection of foods, mostly chips, candy, and some water bottles. The "last restock" sticker on the machine told Kade everything he needed to know: "01/02/2053". *Checks out.* Still, better than trying to study on an empty stomach. The canine quickly settled on a small packet of onion-flavoured chips, and began to type in the number.

Just as he put his card up to the reader, a muffled *thunk* reached Kade from the general direction of the cat. He instinctually looked over, finding him with his arms slumped at the sides, his head having collapsed onto the table, an impact thankfully cushioned by the layer of notes. He opened his mouth to try and call the librarian over, only to realise that doing so would necessitate him screaming throughout the entire first floor of the library.

"Oh, shit..." he mumbled to himself as he looked back to the vending machine and its slow process of spitting out the requested item. An improperly secured bottle of water sat close to the edge of the machine's shelves; just as the machine was about to open its lower compartment to allow Kade to pick up the chips, he gave it a light thud, causing the bottle to fall down into the compartment alongside the packet. He whispered a quiet "*hell yeah*" to himself, reaching for both items.

Kade ran over to the collapsed cat, tapping on the desk lightly with his fist. "Hey, you alright?" He whispered close to the feline's ears, to no response. "Fuckin... is this guy even alive?" Kade grumbled and opened the water bottle, pouring a little bit of its contents onto his hand. He shook his hand into the feline's direction, sending a storm

of droplets landing onto him. The cat's head immediately jolted awake, his head shooting back up; his panic-filled eyes darted around the space around him as he tried to figure out the source of the sudden wetness on his fur.

"What the—where did that come from—" he spoke in an utterly lethargic voice, interrupting himself once his impaired mental faculties finally realised Kade's presence in his immediate vicinity. He flinched in surprise at the sight of the canine, but soon tried to relax himself, likely out of social obligation rather than genuine calmness of mind.

"Hey, hey, I'm not gonna do anything to you! I just saw you collapsed onto your books, and wouldn't wake up when I asked if you were alright," Kade tried to reassure the cat. "You look... not good, to say the least. How long have you been sat studying here?" He inquired, as the cat now seemed to look even worse than before.

The feline shut his eyes for a brief moment, searching his exhausted mind for the proper words to say to the canine stranger before him. "I—uh, I'm so sorry for making you worried," he spoke, an act that took multiple attempts due to his words slurring and mixing both in his mind and in his speech. "I've just pulled an all-nighter here today, so uh, that probably explains my state..." he mumbled, chuckling weakly.

Kade raised an eyebrow, confused. "Sorry? What the hell are you being sorry for, for falling asleep after an all-nighter? You can't exactly control your consciousness after a certain number of hours awake," he said as his eyes looked over the books on the cat's desk once more. "And... wait, why are you studying here? This doesn't seem like your faculty," Kade asked, curious to see someone out of place.

"But still, it shouldn't be you who has to jolt me awake—" The cat tried to interject, before eventually caving into Kade's reassurances. "Well, I study AI, but it just so happens that this library is the only one open 24 hours this semester, so I've been pulling day-long sessions in it sometimes. I know it's not the best but... agh, what option do I even have with exams coming up?" He spoke, rubbing at his eyes. The adrenaline jolt from the sudden awakening dispelled any remnants of drowsiness in his system, at least for now. "And your cafeteria service is quite a bit better than my faculty's, so I basically have everything I need to survive here."

Kade nodded. "Fair enough, I suppose... still though, that's not a particularly healthy way to go about studying. I know you're in STEM and all, but fuckin' hell, I thought you were dead for a second there," he spoke with a concerned tone in his voice as he brought over the chair from his own desk in the corner, having a hunch that, if he left too soon, the cat would go back to studying and genuinely give himself a heart attack. He sat down in front of the feline and, without waiting for his approval, began to shut some of the books on the periphery of the books to create some semblance of space

between the two. The cat opened his mouth to protest, but soon realised the futility of such an attempt.

“You want some water? As in, to drink, not to have me splash it on your face again.” Kade chuckled and handed the bottle over. The cat took it immediately, putting it to his mouth and gulping down about half of the water in one go. He put the bottle down onto the table, letting out a very satisfied sigh.

“God, I needed that. Thanks.” His eyes met Kade’s, their bloodshot colour slowly retreating to partially reveal a sky-like blue. Kade froze in place for a brief moment and analysed the feline’s now much-more-alive face; smooth fur of a muted umber brown, with a darker layer underneath it covered the centre of the cat’s facial profile, later transitioning into beige fluff covering the rest of his head and blending in seamlessly with his messy hair of the exact same colour. The sheer amount of fur on the cat made it practically impossible to distinguish his neck. The rest of his body and his ears followed a similar colour point configuration, with darker hands and a long, fluffy tail wrapped shyly around the back of the chair.

The feline cleared his throat and patted down his navy-blue dress shirt to make himself somewhat more presentable, “Ah—sorry, I didn’t even tell you my name. I’m Felix.” The smooth sound of Felix’s voice brought Kade back to the real world, as he finally stopped looking over the cat’s fluffy face and reinitiated eye contact.

“Oh, well, it’s very much a pleasure, Felix. My name is Kade,” Kade said while opening the bag of chips he’d bought, promptly putting it onto the centre of the table. “Want some? Cafeteria isn’t even open yet, and I didn’t have breakfast. By how you looked at first, I assume you haven’t eaten in a while either,” Kade laughed and shoved a handful of chips into his maw.

Felix sheepishly reached inside the packet, retrieving only one piece. “Well, you’ve assumed correctly,” Felix said as he tasted the chip, prompting him to return to the packet like a hungry stray and take a handful even bigger than Kade’s. “And I suppose, unlike me, you actually *are* studying here, right?”

“Mhm,” Kade mumbled with his mouth full of flavoured potato. “Basic Arts and Design degree, not much. Definitely not something like your major, hah. I could never. For a second I thought you’d be studying Egyptology with the number of symbols and hieroglyphs you’ve got on your notes.”

Felix chuckled, “Yeah, it gets quite hard at times. But I enjoy it. At some point, I’d like to join the team working on the Caretaker, but I’m pretty sure I’ll need a doctorate for that. Although, that is part of my plan already. Going to be a real long journey, though... only in my second year, too.” The cat unwrapped his tail from the back of the chair, now letting it swing back and forth freely behind him.

“Jesus, a doctorate?! Shit, I barely even know if I have the patience to finish a *degree*, let alone a doctorate, especially when I’m only on my second year.” Kade exclaimed, idly tracing a finger in a circle on the smooth cover of an advanced calculus textbook. “But in all seriousness, I honestly don’t even know what I want to do *if* I end up finishing this degree. It all just seems kind of... fucked in the art field. You’ll be a STEM expert, so of course people are going to want you to work for them, while us artists will probably end up rotting under bridges,” he said, cackling at his own future prospects.

“Nah, don’t say that. Surely it’s not *all* saturated, and besides, you’re only on your second year! You’ve got all the time in the world to figure out what you want to do with your degree,” Felix said as he hungrily reached for another handful of chips. As such, Kade withdrew his hand, deciding that Felix was in much more need of those precious carbohydrates than he was.

Kade shrugged, “Can’t argue with that logic. But hey, at the very least I can use the more practical stuff I learn here to work more on my own art.”

At those words, Felix perked up, his ears sticking straight up into the sky like a pair of antennas. “Oh? You make your own art? Well, of course you would be, I don’t know why I didn’t think of that...” Felix rubbed the back of his head, letting out an awkward chuckle as he answered his own question. “Can I see some, though? I can’t draw at all myself, but I don’t mind going to galleries and such once in a while,” he trailed off.

Matching Felix’s own energy, Kade’s eyes lit up once he heard the request. “Really? I haven’t had anyone ask to look at my art in a while, especially not in person!” He shot up from his chair and went to retrieve his laptop he’d left abandoned on that stray corner desk. Even while returning to Felix, he was already busy with the touchpad trying to find the necessary files on the system. He mumbled something to himself while searching for his art folders, before looking up at Felix. “Ya wanna see my latest graffiti? Made it a few nights ago, almost got caught while doing it, too.”

Felix nodded eagerly. Kade spun the laptop around to face the feline; the screen displayed a somewhat low-quality photo, but it still had enough resolution to discern its main centrepiece — an abandoned brick wall adorned with a grey-and-black graffiti illustrating the Citadel’s atom statue as if it had shattered into two unequal chunks. The shadows, realistic irregularity of the shapes, and the general amount of detail on something that was technically such a simple representation left Felix’s mouth open. Kade turned his head off to the side to avoid looking at Felix, feeling the skin on his face flush.

“I think I could do a lot better, but I think this is the best one I have so far... it’s supposed to represent the power balance in this city, how a large part of the power goes to corporations, while what little remains is kept by the city’s public

government,” he said meekly, afraid to sound like a pretentious art snob akin to a lot of his peers.

“Whaaat, this is amazing! And the symbolism, I could’ve never figured that out if you hadn’t told me!” Felix pointed excitedly at the screen, his eyes practically sparkling. “You absolutely *could* make a living as a commissionable artist, I think. Hell, even at this point, without the degree, I’m sure there’d be people around who’d pay you good money to make them art.”

“Eeeh...” Kade mumbled as he rubbed his muzzle, turning his head back to look at Felix, “I dunno. Maybe I could try posting a little commission advertisement online or something, but I don’t have a lot of confidence in that idea. Especially not with how there’s already artificial intelligence services that people pay to make them the exact same art a human could.” The mention of AI brought a sombre smile to Kade’s face, “Although, you know, I’ve seen some pictures of the first AI-generated stuff, all the way back in the 1990s when eggheads of your sort began making more diverse models. Shit’s hilarious, I swear. People with eight fingers, three heads in different places... good times to be an artist. Probably.” He shrugged.

Felix tilted his head, “Well, making furniture by hand didn’t disappear once IKEA rolled around, did it? Same with art, I’d think. There’s still plenty of people who need that... conscious touch in their works. Besides, even in my own faculty, the vast majority of us despise using AI for things like that. It’s just such a massive waste of power and resources that could be redirected to AI that is *actually* useful!” At this point, the feline spoke quickly enough to have to catch breaths of air here and there. The tone of his voice told Kade there was no stopping him, not until he ran out of words. “Like, hell, we have things like protein structure predictors, chemical bond predictors, gene sequencers—and that’s not even the damn surface of everything we can do!” As he spoke and his tone rose in volume, Felix stood up, gesticulating like he was giving a speech. Despite their distance from other people in the library, some students close to them began to take note of Felix’s rather loud enthusiasm.

Kade subtly brought a finger to his lips, making a shushing noise. “And it’s like—” Felix stopped talking the instant he saw the canine’s gesture, frozen in place. He craned his neck back as far as he could, the muscles on his face twitching involuntarily from the sheer embarrassment that ran through his body. “Sorry,” he muttered to the few nearby students who were giving him a curious look, before sitting down. He buried his face in his hands and grunted into them, as to not be heard again. “Argh, damn it... forgot I’m in a library, I guess,” he said to no one in particular, sinking back down into his chair, tail once again wrapped around its back.

“Ah, don’t take it so close to heart! See, everyone who looked at you is already back to work. You barely took out more than a second from their day,” Kade reached over and patted Felix’s shoulder; the amount of fur beneath the cat’s clothing made it so that Kade created a noticeable valley in it once he withdrew his hand. Hesitant, Felix

resumed eye contact with the canine. As the bloodshot red tint fully retreated, Kade could finally take in the full picture of Felix's almost cyan eyes and how they so deeply stood out against his darker face. For just an instant, Kade felt as if he could see into the cat's very soul, even if it was shielded with layers upon layers of timidity.

"Well, the same as you say, can't really argue with that logic, either," Felix said, letting out a forced, nervous chuckle. Just as Kade searched his mind for a reply, the air in the library suddenly filled with the shuffling and stomping of shoes and boots as its occupants began to make their way over to the exit; the massive clock set up on the library's back wall read a clean 1 PM. Indeed, only one thing could cause such a ruckus in an educational facility — hot food.

"Oh, looks like the cafeteria just opened. Not even a fire alarm would cause so much movement in this place," Kade laughed, looking towards the human-and-anthro pile hurrying out of the library. "Ya wanna follow along? Lunch is on me today," he said, his mouth clearly moving faster than his rational thoughts. He felt his brain, and bank account, scream in unison in his head. *Well, too late to go back now.*

"I'd be glad to go with you, but... I really have to get back home. I've got my phone on silent, but I can already see the amount of missed calls I've gotten from my dad," Felix said, his head craned at a 45-degree angle as he fiddled with his phone.

Kade scratched his chin, pondering for a moment. "Well, in that case, how about I invite you to a burger place that's close to campus later this week? I swear to God, they make the best damn burgers this city has seen. You've gotta try them, especially after the preheated patties they serve around here sometimes. And it'll still be on me, because I've already promised!"

The feline felt his heart sink to his stomach once he heard the offer. *A complete, utter stranger already trying to get him to go to lunch.* Inner resistance took over as he tried to find excuses to not have to go, and to not have to respond to any further messages, but out of etiquette, he had to keep up some sort of polite charade. Felix scrolled a bit on his phone, eventually stopping once he'd found his schedule file. He hummed something under his breath, before finding the week in question on the calendar. "I do have quite a lot of free time this Thursday, yeah. Though, are you sure you want to pay for me? You've already gotten me those chips and that bottle of water today." Somehow, a full meal and a snack seemed to be a valid equality in the feline's mind.

"Bah, of course I am! It's always my way to celebrate a new friendship, Felix," Kade's brain and bank account screamed even louder at the prospect of eating somewhere more expensive than the cafeteria; still, he managed to drown their voices out for the time being. "And don't even think about the chips and the water, you kind of needed those. Otherwise, you'd probably be getting your energy from a sugar drip once the paramedics got here for a call about an unconscious cat passed out in the library."

Felix let out a reluctant, yet somewhat relieved sigh, as an involuntary smile spread on his face. Nonetheless, the word ‘*friendship*’ caused something to stir within him. *Friends, already?* “If you insist! But you can be sure that I’ll repay the favor, whenever the opportunity arises.” He looked to the book-laden desk in front of him, and then to his backpack set on the chair. “I guess I should get going. I assume you’ll be going off to lunch?” he asked, while already beginning to pile his books into the backpack.

Kade mouthed a “yeah” and nodded, “Got my friend group that meets at the cafeteria, haven’t caught up with them for a couple of days now. Hopefully that gives me the energy to keep going for the two classes I have left today. Also, before you go—do you mind if I get your number? So that we can actually meet, really.” Suddenly, the canine perked up once again, “And I can send you some more of my art if you want a break from studying!”

Before Kade could even finish his sentence, Felix was already tapping away at his phone. Much unlike Kade's, his phone looked practically sterile, without a single crack or sticker on it. Instead of saying a number, Felix turned the phone around to face Kade, showing a QR code on the screen. Without the need for words, Kade pulled out his cracked, old cellphone, and scanned the code with the camera. "There we go, added ya."

“Well, I guess that’s us done.” Felix let out yet another shaky chuckle, trying his best to avoid eye contact with Kade by intensely focusing on the process of loading his backpack. “Sorry if this was a bit of an... awkward first meeting. I don’t usually just talk to people like this, much less after a 24-hour study session.”

Kade gave the feline a light slap on the back, “Man, what the hell are you apologizing for again? You’re studying hard in a hard degree, what gives if you’re just a bit tired today? It’s fine! Give yourself some damn space to be.” Felix’s mouth moved in preparation to say another apology, just to be silenced by Kade’s “nuh-uh”. “And get some proper food in yourself.”

The cat nodded, slinging his backpack over his shoulders with visible strain as all the books weighed down upon his back. "I will, I will. See you around soon, I suppose!" Felix gave Kade a little wave, carefully walking off towards the thinning stream of people exiting the library until he found a nice little gap to slip through.

“Don’t collapse from exhaustion out there on the street! Or if you do, at least do it in a visible place.” Kade cackled and returned the wave to the cat, watching him eventually disappear into the stream of people and past the automatic doors.

[illegible]

With Felix finally dragging himself out of the faculty, he felt the adrenaline spike from the sudden encounter in the library begin to fade away, and the drowsiness from

before return. The picture of the campus swam before him for a second as the first breath of fresh air and bit of sunlight in twenty-four hours hit him hard; he took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes until his vision somewhat normalised. The snack from before only served to barely replenish his blood sugar reserves and, lest he got home quickly enough, collapsing in the middle of campus grounds would practically be a guarantee. A noticeable numbness ran through his fingers and legs, accompanied by a pounding headache in the side of his head. Speedwalking, he took off, relying on his faltering memory to get him back home quickly enough. The campus' inhabitants and buildings moved past him like a blur, albeit he could still hear some passersby ask him if he's alright, having evidently noticed the cold sweat trails running down the cat's face. Trying to conserve his strength, he mumbled out a meek "I'm fine" and refocused his eyes on the campus' architecture to distract himself. Normally, he'd love to stop once in a while and observe the intricate sculptures each faculty had built in front of it — only now, his blurry vision turned these works into grey spots in his barely-existing peripheral vision. His blood pressure temporarily went back up, bringing a brief wave of relief, only to drop minutes later. The ten minutes away from his home felt like they were stretching into two hours. In his mind, he could focus only on one thing; not collapsing right then and there. Everything else became, at best, a minor flicker in his mind.

At last, he stood at the metal gate preceding his house. Weakly, he waved a grey keycard in front of the reader, pulling open the door as the lock beeped. The gravel trail to the door, usually just twenty or so steps long, now looked akin to a highway. To his benefit, at this point Felix felt all sense of time fade away into nothingness, as at one second, he was at the start of the trail, and at another he had already swiped his keycard through the front door's reader. Right as he opened the door, he looked up at his father next to the entrance—the gaunt, tall figure of whom he could always distinguish, even in this state—with his arms crossed at the chest, and a furrowed expression on his Siamese feline face.

"Felix, how many times do we have to warn you about going to study for almost a whole damn day at once?! You can't keep this up! And if you do, something tells me you'll have a damn heart attack decades before I ever do," he spoke in a raspy, croaky voice. "At least you had the bloody decency to get back home during the day this time."

Soon after, a female voice, off to the side but with its source invisible, intervened; "Oh gosh, he's done it again, hasn't he?" Felix simply stared off to the origin of his mother's voice, unable to find it, and then looked back up to his father, who didn't speak.

"I'm—I'm sorry, so busy, exams last- next week, I mean, agh..." The smaller feline tried to speak, but simply couldn't find the mental strength to properly string together anything close to a coherent sentence.

The father shook his head and patted Felix on the back, “Go upstairs and lay down. We’ll have lunch—or dinner—ready whenever you feel better. If you get worse, take these and call me,” he said, pulling out a small bottle of Ibuprofen from his pockets and putting it into his son’s hands, already prepared for this from past incidents. Felix simply nodded and began to ascend up the sleek stairs ahead of him with an unsteady gait. Until he reached the second floor, his father followed him up, ready to catch Felix in case he fell on the stairs.

Running on autopilot, Felix made his way towards the door to his room and pulled the handle, not even bothering to shut it once he walked inside. Any trace of genuine cognitive thought seemed to have already floated away, as he put down his backpack and took off his shoes without feeling the weight nor sensation of either action. He let what little strength remained in his muscles leave his body as he collapsed to the bed, shut his eyes, and allowed the embrace of unconscious darkness overtake him. Whether he truly fainted or simply fell asleep, he couldn’t tell; not like it really mattered.

ONEIROI

“Of ancient Greek mythology: personified spirits of dreams.”

Felix opened his eyes to a dazzling light stuck onto the ceiling of his room — its brightness only got stronger the more he tried to shut it out, making his retinas burn as if he were staring at the Sun itself in the middle of July. Even when he fully closed his eyes, the light pierced through. A headache reverberated through the upper top of his skull, a feeling akin to being repeatedly stabbed in the temples with a metal rod. He instinctually rolled over to the left, trying to face the wall next to his bed to avoid the light. His numb body hit the wooden floor with a thud, the impact sending a sharp, throbbing pain through his back and his legs. The cat tried to move and only managed to barely bend his index finger; each time he tried to put in more effort into his movement, the gnawing ache permeating his entire body only got worse. He bit down on his tongue in an attempt to stop himself from screaming out into the light ahead, to the point where he felt his sharp teeth pierce the soft muscle, forcing him to swallow a gulp of his own, metallic blood whenever he tried to clear his mouth of saliva. As he tried to move, again and again, sensation began to slowly return to his extremities, even if accompanied by the intensifying agony that seemed to run through his bones rather than just his flesh. He set his palms down onto the wood beneath him and, with great effort, managed to lift his torso inch by inch. His teeth remained dead set into his tongue, stopping him from screaming, even if he wanted to.

The light above him in the centre of the room diminished in intensity, now focusing its sunlike beams down onto the ground below. As he tried to look past his glasses' cracked lenses, he could distinguish an empty carton of .38 Special, with its contents spilled onto the ground. Beside it, lay a snub-nosed revolver, its matte black finish glimmering under the light. The grim ensemble seemed to call out to Felix, forcing him to begin crawling closer towards it. As he approached, a static noise in his mind increased in strength and volume, drowning out the already deafening buzzing of the light. He felt as if he was no longer in control of his limbs; the pain kept on running through them, and he could still sense the cool wooden floor underneath his palms, but the movement was not subject to his volition any more. A mere few feet away from the weapon, he tried to stand up, only to collapse back down onto the floorboards on his stomach. The contents of his head reverberated within the skull upon the landing. He slowly rose himself back onto his knees, finding a small pool of

crimson fluid underneath where his head had made contact with the floor. A little rivulet constantly ran down the side of his cranium, transforming into droplets that fell from his face and kept replenishing the bloody puddle.

He weakly shuffled his body a few more inches and stretched his arms out towards the weapon and its ammo, feeling tendons and muscles begin to snap and rip away, akin to a frayed rope trying to moor a large ship to a harbor. Somehow, it didn't make the already present ache any worse. Grabbing a handful of rounds off the ground, his unsteady grip made many fall and slip in-between his fingers, falling back down to where they lay before with a clink. With just one round left in one hand, and having picked up the Night Cobra with the other, he frantically tried to open the cylinder and shove the round into a slot. His hands shook, yet he still managed to insert the round, albeit backwards; as if acting on pure instinct, he shut the cylinder and pressed the revolver's cold, metallic barrel against his forehead.

Click.

Silence followed. With a groan, Felix slammed the "dysfunctional" firearm onto the ground, forcing the cylinder to open and the badly loaded round to spill out. Just barely, he could distinguish a small dent on the tip of the bullet from the firing pin hitting it instead of the primer. His eyes went to the bedside table as the metaphorical metal rod that constantly stabbed the side of his head appeared to heat up; on it, stood his only hope for whatever his mind had fallen into — the bottle of Ibuprofen, alongside a stale cup of water.

As he regained control of his limbs and tried to crawl over to the table, he heard another loud *snap* of tendons ripping, this time in his legs, but yet again without any pain to accompany it. Using his barely functional arms and hands to shuffle along the floor, like some sort of dying, furred centipede, Felix slowly approached the bedside table and gripped its edge, somewhat managing to haul himself up to its level. Now standing on his knees, he picked up the bottle; as he did, he heard an odd, metallic clinking from its interior. Undeterred, he opened it and looked in, finding it full of the same .38 bullets as those that were laying on the ground behind him. Still, Felix remained unphased as he grabbed a handful of bullets and forced them into his mouth without hesitation. He promptly reached for the glass and, once he picked it up, the water practically didn't move in its container, as if it had been standing out for weeks on end and ended up turning into a strange, slime-like substance. Despite this, it remained perfectly clear.

He tilted the glass over, its contents flowing viscously, yet abruptly, into his mouth. Indeed, its texture was akin to its appearance; a thick, gelatinous fluid with a sulphurous taste, similar to that of a raw rotten egg that had been stuck in the fridge for years. Felix tried to chew on the substance for a bit, letting it mingle with the bullets in his mouth, before trying to swallow the whole mixture. The bullets grazed and tore on the feline's throat and his oesophagus on their way down, the lubrication

of saliva and the water hardly stopping them from rupturing holes and leaving deep lesions in the organ, lodging themselves in his anatomy. Internal bleeding began to flood his upper body as the pointy metal kept advancing through his digestive tract, puncturing any structures in its path until it eventually landed in the stomach, damaging it just as much.

And still, Felix did not feel any more pain beyond the ache permeating his body. Involuntarily, he tried to scream once he felt the bullets' pressure in his internal organs, but all that came out was a bloody gargle from his throat. As his body recognized the presence of foreign objects within itself, an intense wave of nausea overtook Felix, forcing him down onto the floor on his hands. The bullets began their slow ascent back up to his throat from his stomach, ripping and tearing everything on their way even more. The room filled with forceful gagging as the feline tried to force the sticky clump of metal out of himself, to no avail; all that left him was a mix of stomach acid, bile, and blood dribbling down in a small, reddish-brown stream. He forced out one single cough, expelling one bullet, while the rest remained stuck in his throat or oesophagus. What little force remained in him finally left his body as he collapsed onto the floor on his back, limp, choking on metal and his own blood and bile.

The buzzing and intensity of the light that had quietly remained focused on the gun and its ammo began to return to its original state, once more drowning out what little thoughts Felix could muster with its brightness and ear-piercing droning. All these sensations began to surpass even their already overwhelming original levels, to the point where even with his eyes fully shut and covered by his hands, all he could see was still pure white light. His eardrums felt like they were beginning to pound and move around freely in his head, somehow still having not ruptured from the sheer volume of the light's buzzing.

Until, at last, the buzzing stopped. Once he opened his eyes, the white light he'd been seeing began to transform into a complete, three-dimensional surrounding that no longer burned his retinas. The clump in his throat seemed to disappear, alongside any semblance of damage it may have left on its journey down in and up out of Felix. The stabbing in his skull stopped, and the pain that had radiated throughout his entire physical being faded away rather quickly. An odd, warm breeze washed over him, gently swaying strands of his fur in its embrace, a feeling similar to walking outside in the evening on a summer day. He sat up, having regained complete control of himself, and rubbed at his eyes, finding that, somehow, he could see everything perfectly even without glasses. The cat looked up and around himself; sat on a pure white floor, he could not distinguish neither the walls nor the ceiling of whatever room he was in, with both stretching into infinity. It all seemed to be uniformly lit up, by a sun-like puddle of light he could see far, far up above. Nonetheless, something about this strange place that he could not quite define kept him calm rather than fearful, as if he were wrapped in a cosy blanket.

Only upon looking down at his own body did he realise his complete lack of clothing — he instinctually crossed his legs, afraid of being seen by someone, even if a part of his subconscious tried to convince him that none of this could be real. Mesmerized, Felix watched his fur sway in the gentle, comforting wind. The sheer relief of being released from the clutches of that terrible sequence that he'd been trapped in before ran through his body like a surge of genuine bliss, making him shiver.

The looming of a humanoid shadow over him snapped Felix out of his little trance, sending a small, yet potent shot of fear travelling up his spine. His head shot up to look at the shadow's source; a 7-foot-tall figure resembling a protogen stood in front of him, its appearance falling somewhere in an uncanny valley, with multiple eyes and mouths scrambled randomly around its nanite-dripping visor, and a generally "molten" appearance, as if its body were slowly turning into black sludge. Somehow, every time the figure seemed to lose its nanites or its bodily material in the form of drops, they automatically crawled back to it and reconstituted themselves into its body. It gazed down onto Felix with all of its eyes, the visor's digital display occasionally glitching and re-scrambling the being's mouths and eyes.

Felix recoiled backwards, trying to crawl away from whatever stood before him, only to find his back pressing against a wall, like the room itself had closed in on him from the back. The protogen remained motionless, its hands crossed behind itself. "I do not wish to hurt you, Felix," it said in a strange, gargling voice that had notes of digital interference mixed into it. "I know you may fear how I look, but I am something far, far closer to you than you're imagining right now. I suppose the term 'Caretaker' will tell you enough." As it spoke, most of the mouths on its visor didn't move, and some others were stuck in a permanent cackling animation.

Memories of the Caretaker's diagrams and blueprints ran through Felix's mind at a thousand miles a second; indeed, what stood before him looked much like the Caretaker's sleek, futuristic body that it used in the real world, if only terribly corrupted. "What the—it's, it's actually you? Why do you look like that?" Felix asked, his voice slightly shaky from the first surge of fear he'd felt.

It nodded solemnly in response, "Indeed, it is me. This body is not very close to my real-world form, since this is the figure in which I like to present myself in digital realms. I presume the engineers making my actual body thought that it'd be better to follow their own ideas rather than the suggestion that I had given them... which is reasonable enough. But I still have free rein on what I wish to look like here." It spoke as it leaned in and sat down, cross-legged, in front of Felix. Even in its sat position, it still towered over the small feline. "And as such, I chose this form simply because I believe it is the best representation of the digital amalgamation that I am. Endless streams of data, of numbers, of concepts, that join together in particular ways to form *me*. Shapeless and amorphous, held together only by fragile code restraints that serve as my foundation."

Felix kept staring at the Caretaker's multitude of eyes, his mind hardly able to comprehend who stood before him. As such, most of what the AI said entered through one ear and left through the other, albeit Felix still nodded weakly once it finished speaking. "Right, right... and—where are we, exactly? What is all this? I don't remember taking any drugs recently..." He let out a forced chuckle in an attempt to lighten up the situation. Having recovered from the scare, Felix crossed his legs back together, although he doubted whether the AI would really care much. The Caretaker simply tilted its head slightly, as if confused by the cat's attempt at humour and his demeanour.

"Why do you fear me, Felix Lobblanch? Did you not wish to work with me?" The AI's voice took on a more sombre tone. It let out a sigh-like digital sound, before resuming, "We are in, effectively, my consciousness. This space is the blank slate that I use when I want to interact with my simulations in a more... physical manner. I can do everything 'in the back of my head', as you would say, but I find this space to be more accessible, and it allows me to change things on the go. How you ended up here, though, especially when you aren't a digital being like me, is a rather complex question. My current hypothesis is that I was able to accurately simulate your mind, and as such 'bring' you here while you were—or are—asleep."

Felix brought his hands to his face, rubbing it as he tried to figure out what was actually happening. "So, you say you simulated my mind... how the hell did you do that? Do you spy on everyone like this, and then talk to them?" He said, now looking at the Caretaker from head to toe, as constantly staring in its eyes caused a feeling of unease to brew within him. "And, no, don't get me wrong—I do want to work with your team in the future."

The Caretaker shook its head, "No. Last year, you participated in the Voluntary Data Donation Program, where willing citizens of the Citadel were called on to provide a fragment of their mind and personality through a simple, non-invasive neurological procedure that would allow me to expand and train myself further through the usage of genuine, organic experiences that I can not have, as much as I'd like to. I didn't give much attention to most donors, and just incorporated what useful data I could find into myself; you, however, were the only one who stood out."

The more the AI spoke, the more questions appeared in Felix's mind. "Ah, yeah, I did participate in that, but I specifically stood out? Surely there would have been more... interesting people in that database, no?" A clear memory of the brief, yet sharp tingle he felt in his brain during the program's procedure emerged in his head, and how he'd wanted nothing more after it than to use the 20-dollar gift card given to all participants as compensation for their time to buy some dinner.

The AI seemed to reciprocate Felix's own actions, as it also broke eye contact and began observing Felix's form. Now, having crossed his legs did, indeed, seem like a good idea to Felix. "Not quite. Not only did a very small percentage of the population

actually agree to the procedure, even less of them went forwards with it once they were told what the process would be, evidently only then realizing the disturbing reality of having someone peer into the very contents of their mind. Yet, you still went ahead with it, smiling and laughing with the neurologists the whole time. And then, once I looked over the data you provided, I was met with a sight I'd only previously simulated to myself — a talented, passionate person, whose dream was to work *with* me, not just *on* me.”

Felix somewhat relaxed upon hearing these words, slightly leaning forwards to better hear the AI's strange voice. At this distance, he could sense a smell of burnt metal oxides coming off the AI's digital manifestation. “Well, maybe, but... that doesn't change the question as to *why* the hell did you like, ‘summon’ me here? Why not just, I don't know, send me a message? You have the contact and personal data of almost everyone in the city.”

The Caretaker arose to its feet, as a few white panels emerged from the ground and floated up next to the AI, promptly turning black, like a sort of thin display. “You stood out, but your own anxieties and ruminations limit your potential to the point where the possible outcome of you never getting to work with me due to these factors became real, and it concerned me. As such, I found it necessary to bring you here, to speak with you in person and give you the most objective advice I could. It was also because of your curiosity as to my inner workings, especially so when practically every document regarding my functioning is classified, and in here, I can show you in far more detail what I am capable of.”

The feline opened his mouth, combing his mind for the right words to say — alas, he couldn't find anything. The AI seemed to know him better than he knew himself, as if that fragment of his brain's contents he'd donated was hardly a fragment at all. “Well—shit, I don't, I don't even know what to say to that...” Felix let out yet another forced chuckle, which the AI in front of him didn't seem to understand. The realisation that this was, indeed, *the* Caretaker, and not some sort of fever hallucination sunk deep into him, with question upon question slowly building up in his head, albeit without a clear way to ask them. “Ah, s-sorry. I'm listening.” Felix looked between the various little panels that had appeared next to the AI.

It nodded, “I will not delay you too much... not like it matters here.” One of the screens lit up brightly, showing a clear image of Felix sat at the library, deep in his studies — the image eerily resembled the exact same situation the cat was in just an hour or so ago. The warped appearance of the library and the lack of anyone else in it aside from Felix, however, gave him some hope that it didn't know *everything*. The AI let the feline observe the image for a few moments; a strange sensation ran through Felix, as if he were staring at an uncanny valley mannequin of himself. It was technically him, but it felt like peering into the eyes of a stranger he'd met for the first time, rather than looking in a mirror or a static picture of himself. This “replica” in the image

would slowly flip pages, and as time went on, its face began to slowly melt into a sludge, falling down as a grey liquid onto the textbook. Still, it kept flipping the pages.

“What is this? That... that thing doesn’t even look like me any more. What do you mean with this?” Felix recoiled slightly as the replica began to lose its shape, a slight nausea creeping up his throat at the sight.

“Because it is no longer you. At first, it at least looked like you.” Just a moment before the simulation ended, and the display went black, the image’s shapes and colours completely lost any sort of comprehensive shape, turning into a multicoloured contour of something that resembled Felix’s face, even if extremely deformed. “Your goals, and the immense time and effort you give to them, are noble. At the moment, you may see yourself as someone unstoppable, with all the time in the world to pursue your dreams. Yet, you follow a rhythm that puts you at great risk of losing your energy, losing your love for this craft and, eventually, losing *yourself*. If you still intend to work with me by the time your education is done, I shall be around for as long as needed — but there is no point in that if you fall before I do, is there?”

“Well, sure, but how am I supposed to know when to stop? When is it enough effort?” Felix raised his voice in protest, now standing up to take a better look at the screens once they displayed something again.

“I do not know. I cannot tell you the when, what, or where of anything regarding your more personal, inner limits, simply because I am unable to peer that deep within someone, even if I wished to. Recognize when it’s enough, recognize when your efforts turn into diminishing returns. And it is, as I said, up to you to do this recognition.” Once it finished speaking, another screen lit up — this time, it showed a replica of Felix at something resembling a party, yet without a single person around. The tables were neatly set for a casual dinner party, pizza boxes piled up in the middle of each table. A lonely collection of beer bottles sat in the far back of the room, gathering enough dust as to make it impossible to read their labels. In the centre of the image, stood the replica, holding a broken glass in its right hand. Its visage lacked any features; Felix could only discern a dark square in the spot where his face would have been, but still felt as if the replica was gazing directly into his soul. Its outfit did not resemble Felix’s usual clothing whatsoever, as it was clad in a thin tank top and a pair of shorts.

It suddenly stepped forwards, the screen turning off shortly after. Felix flinched back, like the thing in the screen were about to jump out at him. “The fuck—what even was that thing?! I’m going to have a heart attack at this rate...” He said and instinctually brought his hand to his heart, the organ beating fast enough to make Felix briefly think it was about to jump out of his chest.

“As expected. You feared it. But *why* do you think you feared it? Or did you not fear *it*, but something else in the image?” The Caretaker asked, in its clinical tone.

“What do you mean ‘why I feared it’?! It was, like, a copy of me but without a face! Was I supposed to go in for a hug or something?” Felix pouted, already eager for the AI’s round of advice to end, even if a part of his mind told him to keep listening.

The Caretaker shook its head. “Partially, yes, the primal part of your brain feared those basic features. If you have a deeper look into your subconscious once you wake up, however, I think you’ll find that you were afraid of something else regarding it and its surroundings. There was no one around you; you clutched a broken glass in your hand, shards lodging into your skin; you wore something that you would usually never even think about wearing; you stepped forwards towards yourself, not to attack, but to see. To see and interact with another soul, for once. But you rejected it, simply because it looked a bit stranger than you. This is what I mean — you recoil from all those who seem unfamiliar, even from parts of your very mind that you’re unfamiliar with. You wish to experience life in a more “truthful” manner, a manner more akin to your peers, yet you lock yourself away from any such possibility, calling those who partake in them immature, opting to focus on burning yourself out for the sake of your goals.”

Once more, Felix opened his mouth to protest, but nothing came out as the sharp pain of realization ran through his mind. He looked down to the floor with an expression of defeat on his face, trying to avoid eye contact with the AI as to not have more pangs of shame flow over him. “I—agh, I can’t say much in response to that...” His breath hitched in his throat. *Kade*. He hadn’t rejected him then and there—not like he could, considering how he’d come to meet him—but the prospect of going out to lunch with a complete stranger stirred anxious pangs within him again.

“You must let yourself exist among others; you are a sentient, social creature, and you won’t survive long without interaction. As a matter of fact, neither will you grow as much as you’d like to without any communication; you have to talk with those who are your utter, polar opposite. See what they think of life, learn things from them that you’d otherwise would have never found the courage to discover by yourself. But again, this is all up to you. If you’d rather stew in your own misery and isolation every day, I cannot stop you.” It shrugged, clinically staring into Felix’s very essence, the cat’s personality unfolding before it like an open book.

Felix’s body visibly tensed up, eyebrows furrowed, his expression looking as if he were about to jump forwards and punch the Caretaker with all of his strength. He involuntarily hissed and flashed his teeth at the AI, immediately bringing a hand to cover his mouth once he’d realised what he’d done. “Sorry, I didn’t—I didn’t mean to do that, it’s just... hard to hear things like this.” He mumbled, his eyes staring back down to the floor in shame once more.

“Then I hope that means you’ve learned something from them. Now, then, this is all I had to say to you,” it spoke as the two screens that showed Felix’s replicas slid down

into the floor, disappearing, “so now, if you wish to speak, it’s your turn. I may not be able to answer everything at this moment, however, but I will say what I can.”

Felix rubbed the back of his head, trying to find anything he truly wished to know, as the questions he’d had from before had long since disappeared once the Caretaker began its little round of personal advice. “Ah... well, if I remember correctly, you tend to run millions of simulations every day, but *why* do you run them? At least with what I know, it just seems like a pretty important spending of your computing power that doesn’t actually lead anywhere.”

The Caretaker nodded, one of the remaining displays lighting up. “It is a way for me to try and find new data I can further expand my base of knowledge off. I believe you are familiar with the ‘monkey with a typewriter’ theorem, right? Effectively, if you give a monkey a typewriter and let it tap away for an infinite amount of time, it is technically capable of reproducing any written document, from award-winning literature that never existed to the complete works of Shakespeare. In a way, this is what I do with my simulations; I combine and reshuffle around the various bits and pieces of data that are contained in my servers in an attempt to produce new combinations of experiences that I would have otherwise never had the chance to obtain. Of course, this isn’t the most efficient strategy by itself, hence why I combine it with things like the VDDP and the Finders. Only about one or two simulations out of a few million end up having useful bits in them, and even then, in most cases, those bits are miniscule. However, even when they’re not directly useful to me, these simulations can often be simply interesting to watch,” it said, looking to the screen that had lit up. “Have a look at this, for instance.”

An image began to form on the display; a short tabby feline, clad in a thick jacket, his hands occupied with a camera, walked past the doorway into a run-down village house, its wooden frame barely hanging on. Whatever cataclysm had overrun the little town, the house had been completely sacked — not even the couch’s springs were spared. Spiderwebs overlapping one another decorated the corners, while intense rains over the years had spread out the soot and ash remaining in the fireplace into the shape of a blackish puddle. The feline advanced through the house, eventually opening the door to his room. Same as before: nothing remained, and any semblance of the room having been *his* at some point was long gone. The cat raised his camera and took a picture of his room, shoving the undeveloped photo in his knapsack and promptly exiting the house without looking at anything else. As he stepped outside, Felix could briefly discern a military truck packed outside, marked with symbols he’d never seen, before the simulation ended and the screen went dark.

“An odd one indeed. It appears that the feline, evidently someone involved in a war that the nations of this Earth never knew of, was looking to return home, if only for a brief moment. Alas, he found nothing, not even his loved ones. He’d be glad to be aware of his non-existence at that instant, I believe — but I find it best not to intervene with my simulations.” The Caretaker commented, the display returning

into the ground. Felix listened, his jaw slightly open in sheer surprise at the simulations' incredible realism. Now, the only remaining screen floated up a bit closer to Felix.

A mix of blacks, browns, and reds arranged itself to once more form something more comprehensible on the display. At the centre of the simulation, stood a gaunt-looking boar, his hands also clutching a camera. His sunken eyes looked tiredly over a corpse that lay on the floor a few feet away from him; a black square covered the corpse's face, like the image were missing in that part. Strangely enough, the blood splatters strewn around the body were also black, almost blending in with the night that permeated the scene. In the immediate background, sat a crumbling barn, alongside an old police car marked by the DDR's distinctive compass-and-hammer symbol right next to it. A pair of fellow officers wearing the nation's grey uniform remained close to the vehicle, smoking and chatting. Nonetheless, their faces were also covered by black "glitches", just like the corpse's. Unlike the officers, the boar wore civilian attire. He raised his camera up to eye-level, pointing it down at the body and taking a picture. The flash went off, the simulation fading to black alongside it.

"Keep in mind that what I've shown you are mere fragments of what these simulations could end up becoming, if I were to allocate more resources to them. While these two in particular were not too useful for my dataset, it was very surprising to see their immense creative potential." It gave the last screen one more look, before it also vanished. "Maybe with your help, I'll be able to realise it one day, like only the organic mind of a writer could."

"Fuuuucking hell..." Felix stared at the AI, his mouth wide open. For an instant, he pondered with the thought that he and his life was also a simulation of the Caretaker's mind, but he quickly swatted it away. "And, now that you mention that; you keep saying that I'm different, that I can work with you, but how, exactly? What would make me different from any other researcher on your team?"

"Simple. I see in you the potential to grant me the ability to think in a truly organic matter, with all of its emotions, complexities, and depth, not just in algorithms or mathematics. You could redefine me from the ground-up, give me the ability to experience the world through a pair of organic eyes, processing it all with an organic brain. And only then, I believe, will my existence truly have been completed. When I finally understand what is it like to laugh and to live, I will be satisfied. Until then, however, I must sate my needs with these imperfect surrogates. These simulations, these endless streams of data... it all pales in comparison." It spoke and let out a strange, sigh-like sound. It peered down to the ground, as if also in shame, just like Felix did moments ago. "But, that is all I had to tell and show you. If you have nothing else to ask me, then I believe we shall meet again very, very soon."

Felix shook his head, “Even if I had anything else to say, I probably wouldn’t know how to say it with the stuff you’ve just shown me. Hang on, though—*when* exactly do you plan to meet again?”

“Whenever your subconscious finds it convenient, I suppose. Beware, though, as a lot of our meetings will likely be accompanied by these rather... disturbing dreams, as you’ve seen before, due to the difficulty of me trying to establish a proper link. For now, however, goodbye.” It raised a hand, giving Felix a robotic, unnatural wave. The feline sheepishly reciprocated, raising his hand and waving back. Immediately, the Caretaker disappeared, and a total white veil covered his vision, the three dimensions around him collapsing into seemingly just one. This time, however, it felt like a comforting blanket wrapping itself around him rather than a blinding white light being pointed directly into his eyes.

A faint echo of the AI’s voice sounded.

“Do not lose yourself, Felix Lobblanch. There is much to be done.”



POLIS

“In ancient Greek society, a city-state acting as the center of all economic, cultural and political activity, considered one’s native land.”

With great effort, Felix forced open his eyelids as a waft of dry air originating from the AC rushed at his eyes, causing them to involuntarily tear up. He looked around in confusion before he realised that his glasses had fallen off his face as he slept; half-blind, he scoured the bed with one hand until he eventually found them and put them back on. Still, as much as he tried rubbing at his eyes, the post-nap blurriness refused to go away just yet. The cat tried to sit up, but was quickly stopped by a sudden rush of sharp pain in his temples. He fell back down onto the sweat-marked cushions underneath him and retried the process, this time taking care to do it a bit slower. His vision immediately went to a crisp cup full of what looked to be water set on the night stand — he grabbed it and was just about to put it up to his lips, before hesitating for a moment as the unpleasant memory of the dream flooded in. Thankfully, despite his suspicions, the cup’s content was, indeed, just water. In less than a couple of seconds, he gulped the entire cup down, still far from having quenched his thirst after that nap.

He looked down onto himself and his wrinkled form; he had sweated through parts of his button-up and his pants in wet patches, prompting him to let out an audible “bleugh”. Alas, he didn’t have much time to ponder on what he’d change into as the muffled footsteps of his father approaching the room reached him. The feline’s spindly figure emerged in the doorway with, at first, a concerned face that quickly turned into a smile of relief once he looked at an awake Felix, despite his son’s unflattering appearance.

“Oh, Christ, Felix, could have damn thought you died at this rate! It’s almost 6 PM,” he said, diverting his gaze to his watch. “You’ve missed lunch! You got to be starving. Do you feel better though, at least?” Felix’s father asked, slightly sidestepping into the room as to take a better look at his son.

Felix rubbed at his eyes yet again, still trying to compose himself after whatever that experience had been. He moved to set his feet down onto the ground; as soon as he did so, he felt the characteristic wave of hypoglycaemia symptoms wash over him. “Argh—a little bit, I think. At least I don’t feel like punching a damn hole in the side of my skull...” He said weakly, rubbing at his temples. “6 PM? God, 5-hour nap... well, woke up right at dinnertime, I guess.” Felix chuckled, forcing himself up off the bed despite the light-headedness that followed. “What’s for dinner, anyway?”

The Siamese’s face immediately lit up at his son’s question. “Your mom made some

homemade pizzas! You have to try them, this stuff is way better than any of this take-out trash you get at your cafeteria.” He snickered and looked over Felix’s dishevelled form, only now noticing how *terrible* his fellow feline looked. “Maybe go wash your face and change out of those clothes first, though.”

Felix’s face similarly lit up at the news. “Oh, thank God, I don’t know if I could stomach another weekly experimental dish, not after last week’s failure...” He sighed in relief as he felt a second wind combined with a gnawing hunger revitalize his energy levels. He speedwalked past his father in the doorway, mumbling a quiet “*be down in a sec*” whilst he rushed to the bathroom, his tail swaying excitedly behind him as he did.

Soon enough, with a washed face and having changed into a simple t-shirt and pajama pants, Felix reemerged at the bottom of the stairs in the living room. His father had already returned to the dining table, sat next to his Birman wife who was, at least, a head and a half shorter than the spindly man. Both seemed affixed on the news channel’s broadcast on the massive plasma television, but they quickly redirected their focus towards their son’s reappearance. “Well, look who’s come out from his cave!” The Birman said, grinning widely, her smile lines on full display. Felix just returned an awkward nod — the smell and sight of two pizzas on the table, each already having two or three slices taken from it, however, quickly removed any hesitation Felix may have had.

“I mean, for this stuff, I’d be very much happy to get out of my room any time of day.” Felix chuckled, already making himself comfortable on a chair opposite to side of the table where his parents sat. He briefly scanned the toppings on the two pies and hungrily transferred four slices to his plate, two from each, and wasted no time in getting to work on them. With one singular bite, the cat’s face lit up even more, prompting him to accelerate his rate of eating even further, hardly stopping to savour the taste at this point.

The pair of felines in front of him looked over their son’s gluttony with a warm smile. “I guess you’ve gotta compensate for missed lunch, eh?” The Siamese reached over, giving Felix a gentle pat on the shoulder as he already moved to begin eating his second slice. With his mouth full, Felix simply gave a nod and a thumbs up in response.

“Oh, yup, this stuff’s great,” Felix spoke, still with a half-full mouth. He screwed open a bottle of orange juice and washed it all down, drinking about one third of the bottle in one go. At last, having given at least a little bit of fuel to his body, he let out a deep sigh and settled down more comfortably in his chair, now looking over to the TV as the brief intermission signalling the end of the ad break played. “What’s got you two so glued to the TV today? I was leaving, you were watching it, I came home, you were watching it, and you’re still looking at...” he stopped talking, motioning in disdain at the flickering figures on the screen, “...that stuff?”

The Siamese's expression suddenly soured into a pained frown. "Senate things. The vote on Act 50, or Corporate Relations Act." He sunk his head into his palms, rubbing at his eyes for a second. "If the name doesn't tell you much, it's basically a euphemism for 'let's give corporations even more control over the city than they already have'" He looked back up to the TV, as the grand hall of the Citadel's senate building was now on full display from the perspective of various cameras. Felix changed his focus to the screen, now considerably slowing down his pace of eating.

Senators began to rapidly fill the chambers once recess ended, silent; a thick tension hung in the air, with men and women, almost all human, peering at each other with disdain. The distinctive black silhouette of a panther could be seen sat at a desk on the top of a dais located to the front of the room, resting his head on his hand, like he was half-asleep waiting for the senators to return. Just barely, the camera allowed Felix to discern the text "*PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE*" on a sign attached to the panther's desk. The feline looked at his watch and shuffled some papers around idly, waiting. On another dais underneath his, an exhausted man shared a desk with the Senate clerk, his own sign reading "*CITY GOVERNOR*". Vertical banners hung high from the walls, depicting the Citadel's characteristic black-and-white flag with an atom in the centre of it. A large screen displaying a short summary of the matter being discussed hung up from the wall, above the President and between two banners.

At last, after a few minutes, the doors to the chambers shut with a resounding *thud*, with the last few late senators hurriedly making their way over to their desks. The panther cleared his throat and adjusted the microphone on his desk, before speaking, "Recess is now officially concluded, and the City Senate is hereby back in session. To remind those present of the matter being discussed, the Senate was on the last debate rounds regarding the passing of Act 50. It proposes to rename the Financial District into the Corporate District and provide the commercial entities with regional or central offices in there with the privilege and authority of enforcing certain laws within it that go beyond simple private security duties, all while reducing the presence of the Citadel Metropolitan Police Department in the district. The last Senator to speak on the matter was Mr. Navarro." The President spoke in an almost robotic tone, looking over to the man he mentioned sat at the further back of the chambers. "Would you like to continue speaking, Senator?"

"Yes, I would. Thank you, President pro tempore." Mr. Navarro stood up, looking over his fellow Senators as they gazed towards him. He adjusted the small microphone attached to his suit, before speaking. "I wish to remind my fellow members of the Senate that this city was not built with a single private dollar. Practically everything that you see around yourself,"—the man gestured around the chambers, as if pointing towards the outside, to the city—"was funded by the hard-working citizenry of America, to try and give those most unfortunate a second chance at life after their dreams were buried underneath nuclear snowfall. What have these companies, that

we wish to give endless privileges to, done for us in these last 30 years? They came here only because they knew the rest of the world would simply reject them, and that only we had the space and resources for them to install themselves and begin to leech off our systems, all while feeding our citizens whatever... excuse my French, *scraps* they have to offer.” The Senator took a deep breath, thinking of his next words. “If they want to leave because they don’t feel privileged enough, then let them leave. Our city survived without them before, and we’ll survive without them after.” He looked around the chamber, indecipherable murmurs among politicians filling its air. “That would be all, President.” Fixing up his suit, the man sat back down.

“Very well. Will there be any further rebates? For the record, we are approaching the sixth hour of this session.” The panther spoke, rubbing at his face for a moment.

“Yes, President.” A woman located further in the front of the chambers spoke up, to which the panther simply nodded, signalling her to stand up and speak. “Mr. Navarro, would you mind showing us the brand of phone you own? Would you also mind telling us the brand of the suit you’re wearing? Or what companies your party receives donations from? Were all those things funded and purchased with public money?” The woman looked over to her fellow Senator, grinning sharply. “Of course, you don’t have to tell me any of this, as both you and I know very well that everything that I listed came from a private source. With this, I mean to say that, regardless of how much political disdain you may express for the private sector, businesses, both big and small and all those in-between, are the lifeline of this city. Do you think we would achieve the level of prosperity we have right now, were it not for them? Who’s to say that, without them, we wouldn’t be living in the same squalor we were in the first years of this city’s existence?” The Senator spoke in a louder voice than Mr. Navarro, also gesturing all around herself. At once, she finished speaking, set her hands on the desk, and looked back up to the President pro tempore. “That is all.” She said, and promptly sat back down. The other members’ murmurs began to escalate into hushed conversations as they spoke amongst themselves—some had expressions of excitement on their faces, while some, of fear.

The panther flicked his microphone back on once more, “If there are no responses to either Senators’ statements, we will proceed to the final voting stage.” At those words, the chamber seemed to perk up even further; no other Senators, however, dared to rise. The President pro tempore looked over the chambers from his raised position, and then briefly down at the City Governor at the dais underneath his. The man had buried his face in his hands completely, refusing to look at any of his city’s legislators. Seeing as no one chose to speak, the panther reached under his desk, pressing the button to begin the voting process. The 3 red, yellow, and green buttons located on every Senator’s desk lit up as the conversations began to die down. “You may now cast your votes. Red to vote ‘Nay’, yellow to abstain, and green to vote ‘Aye’. You all have 3 minutes to make up your minds; if you do not press any of the buttons, your vote will be counted as an abstention.”

A table overlaid on the chamber's footage appeared on the TV screen, listing every type of vote and the act's name. Felix and his parents had remained silent throughout the live feed, all glaring nervously at the display, with Felix somewhat distracting himself with the food.

Some Senators didn't hesitate for a second and immediately pressed either the red or green buttons, while others scratched their heads, spoke with Senators next to them, or otherwise didn't yet make a decision. The initial number of 25 abstentions on the screen began to flick down, as the votes were cast.

9 AYE

15 ABST.

1 NAY

The conversations amongst the Senators began to die down. A sharp beep sounded through the chambers once the on-screen timer hit 1:30, reminding the gaggle of legislators of the limited time they had to vote. The two Sergeants-at-Arms, each stood at their own large oak door leading to the chambers shuffled about nervously in their formal uniforms, still trying to keep a somewhat composed demeanour despite the immense pressure that filled the air.

10 AYE

4 ABST.

11 NAY

Another beep, this time higher-pitched, sounded at 0:30. The few remaining Senators reached over to the buttons, their shaky hands hovering over the three options presented.

13 AYE

0 ABST.

12 NAY

The time ticked down to zero. The City Governor unburied his face from his hands and arose from his desk at the last beep, looking up at the massive screen behind him now showing a vote counter. The man's face shifted and twitched downwards ever so slightly; despite how small the gesture may have been, especially observing it from a television, Felix still felt his heart drop once he saw it. Felix's father muttered a barely audible "*Shit!*" as the vote came to an end, his eyes now affixed on the Governor and his reaction. "Oh, for Christ's sake, veto it, please..." He mumbled, as if he were trying to talk to the Governor himself through the screen.

The President pro tempore struck his gavel down onto his desk, standing up as he did. "The vote regarding Act 50 is hereby concluded with a majority pass." He cleared his throat, moving some papers around on his desk until he finally found the one containing the bill in question. "I will now pass the bill down to the City Governor, with whom rests the final authority whether to sign this act into law or to veto it." The panther leaned down slightly, handing the bundle of papers to the Governor, who accepted them somewhat reluctantly. The Senate remained utterly silent, all awaiting to see the side of the bill on which the man's pen would draw its strokes.

The Governor sat back down and looked at the bill before him; regardless of all its contents, his gaze immediately went to the two boxes at the bottom of the front page. At first, he looked at the box to the left, labelled "*VETOED*", and then to the one to the right, labelled "*SIGNED*". His pen hovered in-between the two options, like it had gained sentience and was trying to make its own decision. After a brief few seconds of deliberation, the Governor's hand moved towards the box on the right. The pen moved in slow, unsure strokes, drawing the signature of the official, who had closed his eyes to avoid looking down at the bill.

Finally, he lifted the pen from the document.

The Senate erupted into utter chaos, as the legislators all arose at random; some cheered and hugged one another, while others screamed their throats out at their fellow partymen. Amidst this all, the Governor quickly handed back the signed bill to the President and ran towards the doors, shoving a bailiff off to the side as he escaped the chambers. The bailiff recomposed himself and tried to shout something back, only to see that the man had already vanished behind a corner. He swallowed hard and shut the door, feeling the sweat on his face bead up as the situation in the chambers deteriorated further.

The Senators from all the opposing parties, usually grouped up in sectors, now mixed around, giving each other deathly stares on the Senate floor and shooting the occasional insult. The insults began to heat up in their intensity, now going far beyond simple pokes at one another's apparent incompetence — at first, the President observed it all with a sly grin on his face, but now had begun to shout "*ORDER IN THE CHAMBERS!*" out towards the crowd all while slamming his gavel. The Senators remained unresponsive, their shouts and jabs overwhelming any other sources of noise. The two bailiffs began to close in on the situation, hands now firmly placed on their tasers.

"Oh, fuck you! How much are you going to keep appeasing those furry commies? Until they're in our fucking government?!" A man yelled at another legislator on the other side of the chambers.

The recipient of such a statement, a bright-furred lynx woman, rushed towards the Senator, tackling him down to the ground with a *crash* that resounded through the

chambers. She tore her clawed hands into his face and dragged them across his face, leaving behind a gnarly set of scratches. The man screamed for dear life, the inhuman sound he emitted forcing the rest of the quarrelling Senate into another sudden silence. One of the bailiffs ran over to the woman, who'd already switched to beating the Senator's head back and forth. He ran into her, forcing the feline onto her stomach and clamping a pair of cuffs around her wrists.

The President stood up, slamming his gavel into the desk with enough force to leave a dent in it. "ORDER!" He screamed, this time finally catching the attention of the horrified legislators. "I hereby use the powers granted to me by the title of President pro tempore to conclude this session prematurely. The Senate will gather again in the near future." Right before the TV feed switched over to the news reporters, Felix could see the panther wave off the cameramen.

The Siamese at the table sunk down into his chair as the correspondents pretended to look shocked, repeating back the situation to their imaginary viewers. He reached for the remote, sending the people on screen back into nonexistence, at least there. "Fuuuck..." He mumbled, rubbing at his eyes, like he was trying to force out tears that didn't come. "I need to make a call." Imbued with a second wind, the gaunt feline stood and rushed to his office, disappearing up the stairs.

Felix's mother sighed, briefly looking down at the table, and then up at her son, shaking her head. "I keep telling him to retire from this damn job. His psyche is already frail as is, for Christ's sake... and all this horrendous tension isn't making it any better."

Felix looked around, unsure where to put his gaze, unsure where to put his mind and his words. "I...uh, I'll go check on him. Hopefully it's nothing bad." He stood up, retracing his father's steps to his office. Standing in the stairwell, he could already hear shouting and the sound of a fist colliding with a desk from the farther end of the upper floor. As he approached the door separating him from his father's anger, he could finally discern the crackle of a voice on a phone mixing with the Siamese's enraged words.

"I don't *fucking* care that you did it for the support! Cornered? Cornered by *whom*? Do you know what that godforsaken act just did for this city?! Zrinko, no—" He stopped speaking for a moment, seemingly to let the person on the phone speak.

"Look, Leontiy, I didn't mean for it to end like this. I've been pressured on this thing for... for half a year now! All of them, the entire opposition, they were ready to go for the throat unless I passed this act, including the damn President. I could have vetoed it, sure, but so what? They would've just repealed the veto and passed it anyway!" The man on the other side spoke, exasperated, as if he had just come back from a run.

“And *that* is your reasoning for letting it pass? Because you were too afraid your political position would get hurt? Come the fuck on! Did you learn absolutely nothing from what I’ve taught you? For 2 years as your advisor, I’ve kept telling you the same thing about those slimy corporate fucks — you can’t reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth! And now, you just gave them full law enforcement authority over Financial. Even if they tried to overturn the veto, the vote to overturn could have failed! You could have convinced the Senate to make it fail, had you not chosen to sign it right here and now.” Leontiy plopped down onto his cushy chair, having ran out of air to keep screaming at the Governor.

“I can—hell, we can—we can fix this, alright? I’ll tell Luka to talk to—” Right as Zrinko was about to finish his sentence, Leontiy slammed the phone back down, sinking into the cushions.

Listening the whole time, Felix reached out towards the copper doorknob once the exchange ended; however, an uncomfortable feeling in his gut told him that, perhaps, it would be best to let his father deal with the matter himself for the time being.