

Project Qimaera



Stanton Fink

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Foreword

Project Qimaera is an anthology of horror stories focused around people turning into and or revealed as monsters. This project grew from Stanton Fink's desire to read the best werewolf story ever written. Rooted in his love for Chimaera, these works of fiction honor the everyday horrors of scenarios barren and bustling.

- Leo Gonzales

Project Qimaera

vol. 1



Hōkō

Hōkō is a deity who lives inside of a camphor tree. Most legends and beastieries describe Hōkō as a monkey-like creature with the head of a man, and the body of a dog, who is assigned to care for this tree by another deity. All sources always mention that Hōkō's flesh is delicious, and that his blood is an elixir of immortality.

Most sources neglect to mention that Hōkō was once a mortal wood cutter who mocked a forest goddess after cutting down her favorite tree. The irate goddess curses the wood cutter to become an immortal monster trapped in her garden, that his spirit would never pass on until he could restore the tree he destroyed and unspeak the insults hurled.

Hōkō is immortal, but he is not invulnerable. What little respite Hōkō can be given is whenever he is slain and eaten. The cursed deity becomes whosoever slays and eats him, and receives a little respite from his punishment assuming his killer's human identity until his killer's body painfully assumes his divine form.

“Yoyoyoyo yo YOOOO, EL EX IZZZIN DA HOOOOOZ!!!!”

His grand entrance finished, the burly blonde in a loose tank top lithely dodged the various food, dishes and cups of apple juice the other diner patrons started throwing at him. “Don’t get strung out by the way that I look!” El Ex realized he’d have to get serious as he swatted away one, then two flying chairs. “Don’t judge a book by its cover; I’m not much of a man by the light of day....” A screaming man in a tweed suit charged at the former high school fullback, only for the little tweed-clad warrior to find himself effortlessly heaved across the diner counter. “But by night, I’m one-” El Ex promptly ceased his battle gyrations the moment he noticed a pistol poking into his chest.

“I thought we told you to never come back,” the pistol-wielding waitress stated. El Ex put his big hands up and smiled sheepishly.

“Easy, easy, sweet thing,” he bleated. “I’m just here to pick up my kid.”

The waitress snarled as she slowly cocked her pistol.

“What is going on out there?” Gus, the ogrish cook bellowed from within the kitchen. He stomped into the dining room and made murderous eye contact with El Ex. The cook stomped over to the waitress, snatched her pistol out of her petite hands and tapped the pistol onto El Ex’s nose bridge. “Why are you back here?”

“Easy, easy, Gus,” El Ex cooed. “Your good man El Ex is here to pick up his good boy and make things square.”

“Why should we believe you?” the waitress demanded.

El Ex dipped his big hand into his bermuda pocket to retrieve a small roll of bills.

“Cause my ten friends can vouch for me.” Then the handsome high school dropout flashed bright teeth. The ogreish cook plucked the roll out of El Ex’s hand, counted the money, and reluctantly pulled the pistol away. Gus frowned uncomfortably as he dug his thick fingers underneath his hairnet and through his steel-colored hair. He handed the pistol back to his coworker as he stomped back into the kitchen.

Gus slowly walked toward a whimpering, sniffing, eight-year-old boy in overalls washing dishes in the sink, the cook’s craggy scowl softening into a grimace of concern as he approached. Gus wagged his hands in agonized hesitation, then inhaled.

“Hey, kid, um, Roxy,” Gus hemmed. The boy stopped, still holding a platter as he turned to look at the cook with hot, tear-shimmering eyes. “Yer dad’s here.” The boy shuddered as he dropped the platter back into the sink with a splashing clank. “If ya don’t wanna go, y-you could stay with us.”

“No.” More hot tears raced down Roxy’s red cheeks. The boy pulled off his rubber gloves, then tossed them and his

paper toque into the dirty water. "I...have to go with him."

Gus tucked a little roll of bills into the boy's pocket, then patted the boy's dark brown hair. "Don't let your dad see this. If you need a place to stay, or hide, come back to us, please."

"Thank you." With that, Roxy shuffled out of the diner kitchen and into the dining room, as if the gallows, and not his Father, with open bronzed arms awaited him.

Rox, how's m'boy?" El Ex cheerily asked as he scrubbed his weeping son's face clean of tears, snot, and kitchen grime with a fistful of his tank top. "You bein' good, kid?"

Gus's face contracted back into an ogre's wrathful mask even as the waitress kept her eye on the wannabe beach-bum. "Your son worked off your tab, Goldie," Gus said. "You should be grateful that Roxy's hard work is the only thing stopping us from making him an orphan."

"Tha- that's m'boy," El Ex demurely stammered. He gathered his sniffling, sulking son up into his big arms, and skittered out the front door and through the diner's parking lot. El Ex hurried across the street to open the driver's side door of a creaky blue van. Firmly ensconced in the driver's seat, El Ex started his van's motor. Ten minutes down the street, El Ex finally opened his mouth again. "Sooo....Did ya get it, kiddo?"

"Here," Roxy said as he waved a crumpled piece of paper in his Father's youthful face. "I found it fifteen minutes after you left."

El Ex beamed as he tossed their wadded booty onto the front passenger seat.

“That’s m’boy, doin’ his daddy proud.” Roxy shoved his roll of pity blood money into his Father’s face next. “Thanks, kiddo.”

“You were supposed to come back for me after two hours.” Roxy snapped.

“Yeah, about that, sorry, kiddo. I...I had trouble...getting the money. Then I needed to get gas, too.”

“How does gas take six days to get?”

El Ex sighed angrily as he finally let himself frown. “Kid, you’re just like my Uncle Oguz. Stop it, okay? Mission’s complete - thanks to you, we’re safe. Dad’s proud of you and we are going to celebrate with the daimyo platter at Sushi Shogun once we cash in our prize. So please chill, please?” El Ex tapped a big finger into his son’s milk-chocolate-colored hair. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Roxy sighed.

“Only thing that went wrong was your old man fubarrin’ the time frame, but that’s fixed.” Roxy sighed again. “Y’know why I didn’t finish high school?”

“Cause you knocked Mommy up?”

“Besides that, Smarty Farty,” El Ex laughed. “Actually, before that.” When I was in school, I was the best, I was the smartest, I was in clubs, I was captain of the football team when I was a freshman. Heck, I was even your Ma’s tutor.” The large young man pressed his big right arm across his son’s tiny chest. “You’d think my family would be proud of the town’s first wrestling chess champ, but they were always tellin’ me ‘Aleksandr, sen gaty ýalta, iş tap!’” Roxy wrapped his arms around his Father’s triceps. “My dad was the worst. Even worse than my blabbermouth uncle, Oguz.” Roxy squirmed slightly, unaccustomed to his Father’s rueful tone.

“When he wasn’t punching me for being lippy, he was always tellin’ me ‘Bizi utandyrma. Meni utandyrma. Sen mydama meni utandyýarsyň, samsyk masgarabaz.’ Me embarrass him? Ha!”

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah, the day after I won the state championship, Dad got fired for picking another fight at work, then drank himself to death during dinner. After the funeral, yer Ma convinced me to skip the wake and leave town with her.”

“Daddy, what’s a wake?”

“It’s a party, a sad party you have at a funeral.”

“Doesn’t sound fun.”

El Ex smirked. “All you can do at a wake is cry, eat and gossip while pretending to cry.” El Ex tsked.

“Just like that daycare you stuck me in last month.”

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that, kid.”

The van turned into the parking lot of a strip mall, and parked in front of a laundromat. As Father and son got out of that creaky blue van, Father reached back in to retrieve their precious wad of crumpled paper Roxy went through so much trouble to get. El Ex straightened it out with a few sweeps of his big hand, and made a wickedly satisfied smirk as he confirmed its authenticity in the bright sunlight. That done, El Ex made sure he had the pity blood money back in his other pocket, Father and son entered the laundromat.

Fast-O-Mat was exactly as Roxy expected. A bunch of flickering fluorescent lights illuminating a bunch of bored, boring people either feeding washing machines money and dirty laundry, or sitting around, listening for the dull, rumbling cadenza of synchronized spin cycles. The boy faked a sneeze to stop himself from chiding himself.

“Ey, could I borrow this a bit?” El Ex asked as he snagged a grungy gray sweater out of some biker grampa’s laundry basket. Bike Grampa gave an inaudible shrug-grunt of obvious consenting approval. “Thanks, manly man.”

“Daddy!” Roxy whined as his Father swaddled him in

that filthy sweater reeking of menthol, cigar smoke and marijuana liniment. "It's seventy-five degrees!"

"I can't have the brains of Team El Ex catching a cold again." El Ex stood up straight, returned smirking Biker Grampa's thumb's up with one of his own, and gave his now-thoroughly armored son an affirming pat on the back. El Ex inhaled sharply, his generic grin straightening into a pained grimace. "The last time I was dumb enough to let people know I let you catch a cold on my watch, I thought yer Ma's parole officer was going to pistol whip me. Come on."

Father and sweater-swaddled son continued down the aisle of washing machines, rounded a corner into another aisle of washing machines, and made their winding way to the far corner of Fast-O-Mat. El Ex pulled out a plastic chair, parked his meaty derrière in it, parked his son on his expansive lap, and got their treasure wad of paper out of his bermuda shorts pocket. Then they waited. Roxy almost fell asleep by the time a quintet of Chinese businessmen with tattooed throats showed up. El Ex jiggled his son awake.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Nurnazarov," one businessman said. El Ex smiled wide.

"Here y'go, Mr. Zao," El Ex replied as he handed that first businessman the treasure paper. One of Mr. Zao's cohorts sneered incredulously, leading the other three cohorts to start a surly chatter of disbelief. El Ex rose from his plastic

chair, his big hand clenched around his son's little hand as Roxy slid off of his Father's lap. "It's the real deal, gentlemen. Junior here stole it out of Gus Anderton's wall safe without anyone but us knowin'." El Ex gave Roxy's little hand a knowing, comforting yank.

"How do we know this is genuine?" another businessman snapped, tapping at Roxy's pencil-scribbled notes.

El Ex brought the tip of his nose within a centimeter of the accusing businessman's cornea.

"Are you calling my son, Rock Hudson Nurnazarov the Third, a liar?" The businessman sputtered in indignant disgust. "Are you saying I'm some sort of bone brain dunce who'd raise a son to lie to his own Father?"

Roxy pulled his head inside of his new sweater. As much as his Father's saccharine surfer schtick sickened him, he was terrified of seeing his Father actually angry.

Mr. Zao placed a hand on El Ex's heaving chest, and another hand on his indignant associate's shoulder.

"Calm down, calm down," Mr. Zao urged. He turned toward the Nurnazarovs. "My deepest apologies, both on my part, and on behalf of my overly cautious coworkers. They are, unfortunately, unappreciative of the eccentricity of whimsical work ethics." Mr. Zao then turned back to glower at his scowling cohorts.

Mr. Zao elbowed his accusatory friend hard, forcing the man to reluctantly pull a full paper bag from his coat. “The rest of your retainer, as promised.”

Mollified, El Ex daintily accepted the bag, pretending it was a peace offering as he placed it into his sweater-hidden son’s waiting hands. The fifth businessman put a loose fist to his giggling mouth in an attempt to stifle a loud snigger.

The next thing the sniggering triad member knew, he was screaming as El Ex helped him fly over two rows of washing machines. Mr. Zao spread his arms to hold back his surviving, infuriated cohorts.

Mr. Zao frowned, then recomposed himself. “Good day, Mr. Nurnazarov, we’ll call you later when we need your services again.”

The deal completed, El Ex snatched their bag of money out of Roxy’s trembling hands, then shucked the boy of that filthy sweater.

“Hey, we’re going to Sushi Shogon, not Sweater Town.” El Ex took his son’s small hand and herded the boy out of Fast-O-Mat, but not before returning Biker Grampa his stinky sweater and shooting the struggling Mr. Zao a quick “Bye.”

Back at the creaky blue van, Roxy hopped into the front passenger seat, heedless of his Father’s sudden, momentary crest falling.



Indrik

Indrik is a deity of beasts who claims all animals, with the exception of some certain humans as his subjects. Indrik's abode is a mountain simply referred to as Holy Mountain. From Holy Mountain, Indrik holds court with deer and lions as his ministers, bears as his guards, tigers as his soldiers, horses and serpents as his messengers and birds as his spies.

As typical an intelligent beast, Indrik's standing is of a schemer seeking to increase his influence. Most gossips assume he plans to sire an army of beast-people who carry his potent blood in their veins.

Amy felt his bigger brother grab with big, big hands to jostle him awake. Amy peeled his yellow eyes open to see his bigger brother's great, anxious, chestnut fur-trimmed face hovering less than an inch away from his own. "Hey, Amy! Please, please, please wake up! I need your help!"

"What is it now, Barbatos?" Amy grouchyly yawned. Something was obviously bad, as he started to gag on the foul notes of fearful anxiety in his big brother's musk.

"Those suit people from town are back! Help me make them go away again, please, Amy? Please, please, please?"

"Fine, fine, fine. I'll make the suit people go away again, buddy."

With that reluctant vow, Amy shucked himself of his cherished cotton comforter in order to begrudgingly sit up in his worn-out, creaking, springy bed. He scratched his thin, velvety plush chest with long, sharp, sharp nails, then raised his flagpole arms up high for his eldest brother Buddy to swiftly put a pumpkin-colored tee shirt over his disheveled head. That done, Buddy shoved his groggy younger sibling into a dusty pair of jeans. And with that done, Amy completed his human camp counselor disguise by sinking his needly talons into his wild mop of oil-dark hair to sculpt his do back into that sleek, obsidian duckbutt.

And with that done, Buddy promptly hooked his big, bear-paw hands underneath his littlest brother's armpits to carry

Amy out of bed, out of the camp staff dormitory, down a hall and into the camp's lobby to plop him into a chair behind the front desk. Amy put on a pair of horn-rimmed bifocals handed to him by Buddy, and then both counselors looked up to smile warmly at the trio of stony-faced, business-suited lawyers seated before the front desk in lawn chairs.

"Why, hello there again, good sirs!" Amy cheerfully inquired. "Have you nice guys finally come back to enroll your lovely children in Camp Meteora's July program after all?" Buddy's sincere smile crinkled as he found it hard to cringe or snarl at his little brother's blatantly sardonic tone of voice. One of the lawyers, a toupéed gargoyle named Dougan, answered the counselors' smiles with a tired frown.

"You wise guys know why we're back," Dougan loudly grumbled. Buddy snarled at that. "Our client still insists you accept the initial offer, as originally worded, to buy the land Camp Meteora is on."

Amy's smile contracted into a scrunched grimace, his expression becoming uncomfortably egg-like upon hearing Dougan's reply.

"And our client is adamant about how the only response he is willing to accept from you is yes," the second lawyer, a greasy haired gym rat in a tight suit, Enrique, harumphed. Buddy broke out in hot, freshly musky sweat in response, trembling as he tried to keep from sneering or screaming. Big, hairy, corncob fingers nervously scratched and smoothed damp,

smelly, chestnut arm fur.

“Furth-”

“Furthermore,” Amy interjected, interrupting the third lawyer, a sour-faced, milquetoast toad, Emil. “Please don’t insult my coworkers and I by arrogantly insisting we all live in some sort of cartoon show where your client rules as an omnipotently lawless bully who can browbeat taxpaying citizens by royal fiat into accepting devil’s bargains that even a desperate vagrant would find offensively insufficient.” Buddy’s not-smile stretched thin and taut, just like the fabric of his musk-soaked pumpkin colored tee shirt.

“How dare you!” Emil furiously ribbitted. “I’ll have you know Weyland Yatsude is a great, no, the greatest philanthropist of our time, of this century! A veritable Mother Teresa of the business world!”

Amy’s scrunched grimace scrunched a little harder for a moment. Buddy was almost afraid his littlest brother would implode again.

“First off, Emil, please don’t mention that lady’s name in the presence of actual childcare professionals who actually care about competently providing children with genuine care.” Amy then held out his outstretched hand just as Buddy placed a smartphone into it. “Secondly, your allegedly saintly employer’s incessant haranguing us into accepting his egregiously miserly offer not only marks you as a con-

fabulator, but also suggests you have several screws loose.” Amy activated the smartphone in his sharp, taloned hand. “So, unless you nice folks can either cough up a bunch of children in your care to enroll into Camp Meteora right now, or toddle over to the Camp Meteora gift shop next door to buy some souvenirs, please leave immediately, or we will summon the police to have the lot of you escorted off of Camp property.

“Police? Police? Police?” Buddy frantically whispered.

“Yes, police,” Amy hissed back. “Are we clear, gentlemen?”

The three lawyers shared a wordlessly angry murmur as they reluctantly rose from their lawn chairs.

“This isn’t the last you’ll see of us!” Enrique erupted.

“Unless the stipulations I just mentioned five seconds ago are met, actually, yes, this will be the last time we’ll see of you.” Amy’s egg-like countenance remained uncomfortably smooth and enigmatically shell-like. “I mean, I would hope you aren’t dumb cartoon antagonists, after all, right?”

Buddy happily jogged over to the front office front door to let the trio of habitually disgruntled lawyers out, big, chestnut hind paws leaving no footfalls. With a wide smile, the eight-foot-tall camp counselor slammed the front door and jogged back to the front desk to clap his squealing littlest brother on the back.

“That was fantastic, A-Bro Bear!” Buddy congratulated. “You really skewered those meanie beanie fofeanie shysters goody good this time!”

Amy plucked off his bifocals and plonked his head onto the desk face first. He dug his long, pointy fingers deep into his duck’s buttocks.

“This is the tenth time this week they were here, Bud,” Amy whined. “Why are they paid to be this annoying? What are we going to do when they come back again, and what if I have no more big words to club them with?”

“It’s Budd-ee, Amy”, Buddy family enunciated. “Budd-ee, Budd-ee, Budd-ee.” He wiggled his big fingers for emphasis. Amy raised his hand, motioned for his bigger brother to lean in closer, and, once in range, yanked on Buddy’s dangly goatee, then popped Buddy’s hazel contact lens from his vermilion left eye with a dangerously pointed fingertip. “Hey, hey, hey!”

“What do we do when they come back, Barbatos?”

Buddy growled and hummed, letting his immense, immensely long, forked tongue snake out and dangle from his tooth-barbed mouth as he fiddled mightily to reinsert his tiny contact lens with his boulder-like fingertips without crushing it or blinking.

That finally done, the bigger brother sighed before slapping

his enormous chest to momentarily quell the writhing muscles slithering underneath his tee shirt.

“Um...um, um, um. Maybe we could go with Plan D?”

Amy lifted his head up off the desk in shock. Buddy finally remembered to retract his tongue with a long slurp.

“Plan D? Christ on a piecrust! In front of the younglings?”

“Language, language, language!” Buddy chided. “We wouldn’t do it in front of the kiddies, obviously. After bedtime.”

“Oh,” Amy phewed. “After bedtime...okay”. Now mollified, Amy motioned at the tattered denim loincloth fig leafing his bigger brother’s great and wooly crotch. “Are you going to wear pants today, or are we going to try another au naturel day, again?”

Buddy looked down at his fluffy tree-trunk hind legs, and tsked as the wispy cotton remnants of his jean shorts continued disintegrating off of his wide, fur-upholstered hips.

“Cheap stuff, cheap stuff, cheap stuff,” Buddy self-scolded. “Don’t let me buy garbage off of the internet again.”

Amy got up and caught hold of his bigger brother’s big, swishy tail.

“Maybe if you tucked this in better?” He carefully wound

Buddy's tail around Buddy's big waist, and watched the appendage sink into chestnut belly fur. "Much better. Want me to fix your hair, too, while we're at it?"

"Nah, nah, nah." Buddy wiped his hair back with a smooth swipe of his bear-paw hand. "Besides, you're the counselor with the fancy hair." Amy smirked as he followed his bigger brother back to the counselor's dormitory.

Back in the dormitory, Amy puttered about inside the closet, searching for which of his many pairs of shoes to wear before hunting for the right pair of sweatpants Buddy wanted. And after handing Buddy his camouflage fatigues, Amy grunted loudly as he hauled out his eldest brother's right workboot. Fatigues on, Buddy's right monstrous hind paw shoed, laced, and disguised as a large human foot, Amy slogged back into the closet to retrieve the left boot. And once he finished tying bandannas around both of their necks, Amy clopped out of the dormitory, heading off toward the mess hall to help Jam with breakfast. Buddy silently skittered over to the dresser, took out the camp flags from a drawer, and grabbed his bugle off of the dresser top.

The walk from the counselors' dormitory to the camp flagpole was short but briskly exhilarating. The crunch of pine needles beneath his boots, the blended perfume of spruce, fir and lodgepole filling his big nose, and the songs of amorous, bickering birds. Just utterly magnificent.

A twig loudly snapped underneath the sole of his boot.

Buddy realized he had stepped into the noose of a snare. A rope stretched for a couple seconds before the branch it was tied to broke off. Familiar tittering giggles emanated from the bushes as Buddy's smile relaxed into a crookedly asymmetrical sneer of disappointment. He reached with his long, long, apish arms to pluck a towheaded boy and a cotton bale-haired girl out of the bushes. The head counselor glowered at his two would-be assassins.

"Camper Archimedes and camper Erzebet," Buddy tsked. "What what what did I tell you two troublemakers about building traps on campgrounds?"

Archimedes wiggled shamefully while Erzebet ummed for a minute.

"Um...um....When building a snare trap, um, always make sure it's sturdy 'nough to restrain the target," Erzebet finally said. Buddy smiled warmly.

"Good girl!" and then he plonked both children onto his broad shoulders even as he stooped down to retrieve his bugle and bundle of flags. Erzebet swayed back and forth while Archimedes hugged Buddy's head to keep himself from sliding off of his counselor's shoulder as Buddy stood before the camp flagpole.

"Counselor Buddy," Archimedes timidly asked. "What are we doing today?"

“Good good good question, camper Archimedes!” Buddy answered. “After breakfast and morning exercises, you guys and the rest of the Swan Cabin kids are coming with me for a run around Lake Kyutora.” Then he ran up the last of the five camp flags.

“That’s it?” Erzebet interjected.

“No,” Buddy replied as he tied the flagpole rope securely. “Counselor Amy’s having the Merganser Cabin kids make pinecone candles, and after lunch, Counselor Jam’s taking everyone on a nature walk to show you guys what leaves are edible and what leaves are poisonous.”

“That’s it?” Erzebet sighed. “You promised to teach us how to build a deadfall!”

“Aw, come on, campers!” Buddy pleaded. “It’ll be fun fun fun! We could have a s’mores toasting tonight, too! What’dya say to that?”

“Could we have gingersnaps instead of graham crackers?” Archimedes eagerly inquired. Erzebet smooshed her face against Buddy’s bushy sideburns.

“Oh, oh, or maybe chocolate chip?” Erzebet asked.

Buddy smiled as he twirled his bugle in his bearpaw hand.

“I can ask Jam and Amy to whip up a big big big batch of

cocoa shortbread, too.” The two campers stared greedily at each other.

Buddy inhaled as he put his bugle to his lips. Archimedes could swear his counselor’s chest swelled to four, maybe five times its size right before Buddy began playing *Revelry*. Erzebet gave her fellow camper a swift punch to the shoulder to remind him to cover his ears.

The buildings, the windows, the beds, the furniture, the trees, the campers, everyone and everything in Camp Meteora, and even in the Shakespeare Camp across the lake, vibrated to Buddy’s strains of *Revelry*. Thus duly summoned, the campers, aside from Archi and Ezra, woke up, got dressed, and filed out of Swan and Merganser Cabins to gather around the plaza of the flagpole to let Head Counselor Buddy lead them in morning exercises.

As much as Buddy would have dearly wished for his brothers to join him and the campers not riding on his shoulders to do jumping jacks, Jam and Amy needed to finish preparing breakfast for the camp.

Amy fitted between the kitchen and the cafeteria getting the jars of silverware, stacks of trays, and the buffet ready while Jam manned the stoves, simmering a thirty-gallon soup pot of multigrain millet porridge, scrambling eggs, sauteing breakfast sausages, and frying pancakes.



Satyrál

Satyrál is the foolish protégé of Lampago. Some say Satyrál was a boy whom the great, sagacious Lampago tried to teach the arts of power to. The gifts of either, perhaps of both, would then warp whatever Satyrál once was into the shapeshifting brute he is now.

Satyrál constantly strives to prove himself as his mentor's equal, whether through haphazardly enacting incomplete war stratagems, or reciting half-remembered poems through a mouth obstructed with tusk-like fangs. Even so, many are the corpses of hunters who foolishly thought a shaggy harlequin like Satyrál would make for easy prey despite having a dragon's claws, a lion's thews, a mouth full of hooked teeth, and horns and hooves sharper than swords.

He had returned. After all those pained wishes, and salvaged promises, he finally returned home, his home. Enzo stood proudly there in that forest, his forest, wearing only that awful, awfully breezy hospital gown. The teen-aged beanpole clutched that offensively diaphanous, polka-dotted fabric with a spidery, freckled hand, and finally husked himself of that hated gown. A deliciously frigid gust snatched the shredded robe out of the boy's pale, taloned fingers.

Enzo stood there proudly in that forest, his forest, not really naked as rust-colored fur bloomed across his once peach-skinned body in big, red, puffy patches. He dug his long, taloned fingers deep into his copper chest fur to dig out his Father's tiger-fang necklace. Tiger Boy took to his hairy heels, bolting through the forest, his forest. Emerald, lime, teal, jade, apple-green, Enzo let loose a whooping roar as he charged through the never-ending paint splash plants, the cool, humid undergrowth air beating wondrously against his freckled, exertion-pinked face. Chartreuse, azure, carmine, umber, fuchsia, the endless riot of color undergrowth came to an abrupt end at the abrupt edge of a perilously high cliff. Enzo leapt.

Bloody quills erupted from his great chest, his shaggy back, his furred loins. Ruby spines shot out from his mighty hero's arms, unfurling into scarlet feathers. In Enzo's forest, Tiger Boy could be anything he wanted, and Enzo wanted to be a phoenix. Enzo, the thousand-mile peng bird, soared high above his forest, his thousand-mile wings of vermilion

and copper lazily buoyed on a warm breeze of crayon dust. Enzo found himself roaring at the clouds again, wordlessly calling for that nameless friend he still needed. With his mighty eagle's eye of jade, Enzo pierced through the gloomy forest canopy below him to see Enzo, the pathetic teenaged loser, pacing around the bench of Transit Bus Stop Eighty-Two.

Enzo paced around the bench, the flopping clopping of his sneakers marking time's passage. Dad was late again. Again. Dad was supposed to pick him up from school, but knowing that noble, chivalrous paladin of punctuality, Dad was either passed out on the floor of yet another hooker's flat, or hungover inside a cage at the county animal shelter again. Again. Enzo pulled his big, hairy spidery hands out of his beige and purple letterman jacket pockets to play with his zip per again. It was his own fault for trusting his Father. Had he just walked home, the teen would have been home by now.

The burly boy with tarantula hands was engulfed in a lake of blinding light. There was an engine screaming, tires yelling, and suddenly Enzo was hurled into a familiar abyss of pain. And laughter. Over the cadenza of his bones breaking, and the calliope tooting of his organs rupturing, Enzo could hear his school teammates laughing at him again. Again.

The dark abyss brightened into a cornflower-blue haze. Enzo knew this color intimately, but from where? It was hard to think while wallowing in this aurora of morphine. Wait, he was in the county hospital again. Again. With that piece of

memory in place, the off-white and cornflower blue walls of his hospital room snapped back into focus. He could hear the monitors beeping in time with his heart. The pathetic loser tried clenching his hero's jaw and found himself weakly teething on plastic. Oh, this was from when he was intubated for two weeks. Fun times.

The fog of opiates drained from Enzo's big, tigery ears, clearing enough for him to let him hear more clearly the terrified screams of the hospital staff. Dad was coming to take him home. Enzo thought to move, to escape the impending flood of red fur and awesome death, but, as usual, his corpse-like body betrayed him.

Dad was coming.

Urgh.

The hospital room shook, the furniture shook, the monitors shook themselves to pieces, Enzo's bed shook, his big, hairy body convulsing and growing bigger. The sleeves and shoulders of his awful, awfully diaphanous hospital gown tore as that sheet of hate-filled, polka-dotted fabric unmoored itself from Enzo's spasming, mutating body. He raised a big tiger's paw high, then placed it on his great heaving chest, clasping Dad's fang necklace for dear life. Enzo remembered a big blurry wave of red and white fur bearing down on him like a tiger-striped snail demolishing a rotten strawberry. Enzo remembered choking on his breathing tube trying to shout. The big glob of tiger fur, his Father, was licking off his left

pectoralis muscle. Enzo summoned enough of his mighty power through that bleak fog of morphine and terror to make and raise a bony fist, only for a paw to pin his right arm back down hard enough to break it like a fleshy, moist twig. Enzo's fingers disappeared in a second single lick, along with the rest of his shattered arm in another lick. Enzo's pale freckled face vanished in a fourth, indolent rasp, and then the tiger-furred glob finished lapping up the broken boy, leaving nothing behind beyond bloody bedsheets and some stray wisps of cat hair.

And then that red and white mass of slimy tiger fur rose up on his shaggy hind legs, adjusting his old, black swim trunks. And then Enzo's cadaverous Father stood insufferably proud there in his swim trunks and his thick, copper and cream body hair, and his ridiculous muscle shirt that hung so loosely around his bony hips like some third-rate redneck mumu. That hairy bastard was exactly as Enzo remembered him; a towering scarecrow so shaggy, so woolly with chest hair slowly bleaching silver, and wearing that craggy, leering, jack-o'-lantern face haggard from decades of cancer. Enzo's Father smiled, flashing those awful, pointedly sharp, impossibly perfect, tobacco-yellowed teeth of his.

Enzo's Father spread his long, red and graying legs as he began to pose again. Again. That wretched, godawful goofball always loved to pose, like some big wire sculpture rusting over with mold. Then the withered, wizened, former wrestler's long, long, bony legs miraculously became meaty again. Again. Woolly thighs growing thunderously succulent,

calves violently swelling into rapid bulls, his ratty, tattered black swim trunks sloughing off of his no-longer bony hips. And then he flexed his fleshy arms, oh God how he loved to flex, and his thin arms grew and grew and grew and grew, growing and growing into mighty tree branches bleeding mossy, blood-red fur.

That monstrous, blood-furred scarecrow flexed his bloody-furred tree branch arms again, and spread his big, bloody-furred tree trunk hind legs. He inhaled so deeply, his fluffy, once rail-thin chest filled out so massively, stretching his precious muscle shirt taut like a yellow sail in a stiff, blood-red breeze. And then that precious favorite muscle shirt popped off of Enzo's monstrous, monstrously swelling torso! And there, Enzo proudly stood, wherever the hell *there* was, immured in a cyclopean wall of bloody fur and writhing, herculean muscles. The growing boy stretched his mouth wide to scream, but choked as a slobber-soaked, slobbering tiger's snout thrust past his lips. Enzo managed to place his big tiger's paw back onto his Father's tiger-fang necklace just as his mighty, shaggy chest started splitting open.



"Next stop, Pahayoke!"

A snoring, rust-haired teenaged boy asleep in a bus seat shuddered awake at that proclamation. As the teenage boy regained his bearings, Enzo Rudolfo Lancio Klamath Junior realized he was, for the second time in his miserable life,

sincerely glad to be back in the hellish podunk that was Pahayoke, if only this time to escape. Enzo put both of his big, spidery hands to his freckle-speckled face and rubbed vigorously.

“I’m Leo now,” he reminded himself. “No going back, okay?”

Leo looked down at his rail-thin chest and realized he was drooling on his beige and purple letterman jacket again. He rubbed his drowsy, jade green eyes with his jacket cuff, then fished out a dollar-store journal from his black canvas backpack. He rolled up his sleeve to peek at his wristwatch, and saw that his wrist, normally a peached lard with caramel freckles lightly dusted with peach fuzz, was now already thoroughly encrusted with a still-thickening layer of thick, downy, copper hair. Leo stared as that mat of copper hair crept down the backs of his hands, carpeting his knuckles as his fingers became bony, rust-haired caterpillars with sharp nails. He rolled down his jacket sleeve as he fought both the urge to just rip his suddenly unbearably suffocating clothes off before mauling everyone else onboard, and the urge to just sit there focusing on the hair already fast growing all over the hidden reaches of his lanky body.

“Urgh,” the rust-haired scarecrow muttered as he fished out a ballpoint pen. 9:26 am, he wrote in his journal. *Coming earlier this month, the rate of growth suggests it started at 8 am, maybe 7:30 am.* He dropped his journal and pen back into his backpack, then zipped his letterman jacket up to his suddenly very downy throat. He needed to buy another

journal soon. As much as he hated sweating, Leo preferred to dress snugly in the fiery warmth of summer than have to deal with judgmental people gawking at a sixteen-year-old runaway who can grow thirty, forty pounds of chest hair right in front of their disapprovingly incredulous eyes until they appear sixty.

Bad dreams aside, Leo hated, no, Leo loathed that podunk of Pahayoke with a sacred passion that made the glowing furnace inside of his thin chest underneath his Father's sweat-soaked tee shirt grow fierce and bright. A failed suburb with nothing to see or do beyond getting hassled by an inbred clan of rent-a-cops. No fun, no coffee, no candy, no singing, not even skipping, and run by that fun-hating cartoon villain, Marshal Stu Annal. Anyhow, Leo hoped he could reach Troia before he drowned in his own musky sweat.

"Pahayoke!" the bus driver bellowed.

A powder-blue wiggled quintet of bridge biddies in powder-pink sweater coats climbed aboard the bus. Leo collected his thoughts, and his backpack, graciously offering his seat to the quintet as he moved to the very back of the bus. Now alone again, Leo ran his red-hairy spider fingers through his floppy hair in the hopes of restoring it back into that neo-young Elvis pompadour crest he was so fond of. He puffed his freckled cheeks and pursed his lips in the reflection of the bus window. If there was one thing in the Pandora's junk drawer of weird and annoying traits he inherited from his incompetent, shaggy boob of a Father that he was proud of, besides being

strong as a water buffalo, having reflexes like a rottweiler, or the stamina of a senior frat boy, it was being able to grow the most luxurious set of sideburns one month after his eleventh birthday.

“Next stop,” the bus driver bellowed.

A sewer maintenance worker, by the stench of things, climbed aboard the bus. Leo paused his preening for a moment to zip up his backpack in his lap. The sewer maintenance worker stomped down the bus aisle to plop her sewage-defiled, coveralled self next to the boy in a letterman jacket. Leo ignored the worker; he had smelled far worse, like when his Father’s beloved tiger went fishing for dead raccoons in the Zafari’s septic tank. The maintenance worker pried off her egg-yolk yellow helmet, freeing her long, smoky black hair. She made a rasping chuckle as she studied the preening scarecrow sitting next to her.

“You’re a baby, and you already have five o’clock shadow,” the worker commented in a surprisingly sultry voice. Leo dug his pointed fingertips deep into his lovely sideburns, suddenly thinking of a forest witch in a gingerbread house. He turned to look at her work-worn face.

“I take after my Father and a childhood full of steroids, ma’am,” Leo joked. The maintenance worker cackled loudly, startling the quintet.

“You’re a funny little cupid, kid,” the worker commented.

“Such a kind face, you look exactly like my bouvier, Worcestershire, if she was a baby like you.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Leo looked out of the window to gawk at blighted apartment complexes up for rent no one wanted. The maintenance worker sighed thoughtfully now.

“Tell me, kid,” she asked. “What brings you to Pahayoke?”

Leo inhaled deeply. His tiger-fang necklace, hidden deep underneath his soggy tank top, audibly clacked as his sternum crackled. He stifled another urge to rip his clothes off again.

“I have business to attend to at Enzo Klamath’s Zafari,” the rusting-haired teen truthfully stated. The sewer maintenance worker exploded into a one-woman riot of screaming laughter, her long hair shaking vigorously like a smoky-black pom-pom as she waved her head up and down. Leo’s upper lip curled in a silent, toothy snarl even as he just barely caught the bus driver’s bellowing about the next stop somewhere just above the sewer witch’s hilarious din. The cackling maintenance worker almost stumbled over her own head as she laughingly chased after her clattering helmet bouncing down the aisle. The quintet all got up, too, joining the laughing sewer witch in exiting the bus.

Leo growling to himself, his ego smarting so badly. *It was his own fault*, he thought as an abandoned supermarket flew past his view in the bus window. Next time, he’d keep his big fat

mouth shut. There was that ruined, half-finished building from five years ago that would have become a movie theater or a duplex. Or, he'd at least remember to shut his mouth on the throat of the next buttinsky yenta.

"End of the line!" the bus driver hollered as he shut off the engine. The other passengers stood up and casually filed out of the bus doors. "Hey, mister comedian! End of the line!"

"I thought the Calostoma Three Twenty-Seven goes to Troia." Leo scratched his stubble-darkening chin.

"Not anymore, mister comedian. Nowya gotta transfer."

"When's the next one?" Leo asked. The bus driver held up his bare, tanned, overly well-fed wrist to look at his brass watch.

"In five minutes."

Blast it all.

The six-foot-tall, rust-maned teenager threw on his backpack and flounced off the bus in an aggravated huff. Leo pumped his red tarantula fists as he jogged down the street. So he was marooned in the Oregonhellhole of Pahayoke for four minutes and eighteen seconds, so what?

"It's easy to survive in this cesspool," Leo lied to himself. "All I have to do is keep my fluffy head down, not eat any chocolate, not consume any coffee, and most importantly, don't-."

“Hey you! Punk!” It was Deputy Annal’s son, Beau Annal.

Great. One minute, a new world record.

“Get over here! I’m talking to you, punk scum!” Leo sarcastically froze in place.

“Heya, Deputy Beau Annal, how’ya doin’?” He could hear the youthful deputy’s jowls flushing.

“Don’t disrespect me, scumpunk!”

Leo’s stubbly face soured with exasperation.

“Listen, Beau, I’m just passing though. I don’t want any trouble,” Leo calmly pleaded. “I even said hello.”

“Don’t disrespect me, scumpunk!” Leo sniffed the air as he remembered Beau was on a script. The deputy clamped his pudgy hand onto Leo’s bony, jacketed shoulder. “You’re a stranger here, scumpunk. What’ya doin’ in *my* town?”

Ol’ Beau, poor ol’ Beau Annal clearly forgot about our last dance and rumble from three years ago.

Fine, then. Leo was going to follow his Father’s orders about giving querulous people like the kind deputy the courtesy of a count to fifteen before he’d allow himself the pleasure of beating that middle-school drop out like a Christmas drum kit. Leo reshaped his expression into a diplomatically

stern scowl.

“I am only walking to the Bus Stop, Deputy Annal. I said I don’t want trouble.”

Four.

“I don’t even want lunch.”

Six.

“I just want to get onto the Panus Transit Number Nine Twenty-Three Bus to Troia Metro Station.”

Nine.

“Then y’won’t mind if I check yer scumpunk backp-”

Fifteen.

Rusty-haired fingers wrapped themselves around Deputy Beau Annal’s wrists, and for a good, blissfully long one second, Ol’ Beau remembered what it was like to fly. Leo scowled as he heard a bus, the Panus Nine Twenty-Three arriving one minute early. Leo walked past the prone, unconscious deputy. On second thought, he would have lunch here after all.

Fantastic.

On a street corner stood a white stucco building, the Happy

Owl Diner, one of Pahayoke's two surviving restaurants. Or three restaurants if one counted Uncle Oglethorpe's Possum Hibachi, but Leo wasn't in the mood for possum. The rust-maned boy scratched his damp and scruffy neck with his stout, almond-shaped nails. He figured that that ridiculous, three-story cartoon owl out in front must use half of the town's power whenever it was allowed to light up.

Whatever.

Scruffy Leo ambled into the crummy diner, silently hoping no one would notice his red, minute-old goatee bleaching white.

The inside of the Happy Owl was exactly as Leo remembered since the last hilarious time his goonish Father brought him here for lunch four years ago. Perpetually freshly repainted off-white walls, there were plastic owl lamps on every table. Even the exact same swarm of inebriated barflies clustered around the grill. And under the cash register's counter, the exact same, untouched display of archaic tablet chewing gum candies made by a now-forgotten candy company that apparently went out of business before Leo's mysterious grandfather Vale was born.

There was a lonely, empty corner table by the front window. Leo parked himself and his backpack there. With much sincere trepidation, Leo picked up the laminated menu laying at his table's owl's feet. Same tempting garbage since nineteen eighty-two, but with twenty-first century repricing. The fear-

some boy was startled by the sudden setting of a glass of ice water onto his table. The moment Leo set his menu back down, the owlish brush-mustached owner popped into his view like a leprechaun. Beakish nose sniffled, smiling lips pulsing, then parting to reveal beakish teeth.

“Why,” Otus said. “Hello there, Mr. Klamath!” The owner of the Happy Owl Diner radiated. “It’s so grand seeing you again! How have you been doing these days? Don’t tell me it’s true that you have to shutter your Zafari for good? I mean, we don’t want to confirm backbiting gossip, after all.” Leo looked away, focusing instead, on the owl lamp’s sightless gaze as he began fiddling with his spoon. “Would you like your usual, Mr. Klamath? Salami sandwich?”

“I, um...” Leo took an anxious breath before taking a dainty swig from his waterglass. “My Dad passed away last year.” The owner’s cheer visibly dimmed as he placed his petite, owl’s claw hand on Leo’s big red paw. “He was taken, was taken by The Sick really bad,” Leo half-lied.

“Oh, my deepest, deepest apologies, sir.”

“I, um, I would like my Dad’s usual, though,” Leo said as he began piecing his stoicism back together.

“Absolutely, sir!” the owner said, nodding eagerly. “On the house!” The owlish man beamed, his cheer obviously renewed.

Just fantastic.

“Well, well, well, if it ain’t the town freak,” lawman Stu rumbled. Bloody-faced Beau had gone off to summon the cavalry; Daddy Sheriff, Marshal Stu Annal, and Beau’s thuggish elder sisters Lu Ann and Drew Ann. Leo stayed calm even as his glittering brow continued dripping. Lawman Stu continued aiming his pistol on Leo’s nose bridge, making his caterpillar mustache wriggle as his pistol’s hammer clicked ominously. “I’m surprised y’d be coming ba-”

“Git your scumpunker hands up, punky punk!” Beau shouted. Stu slowly turned his pockmarked head toward his paunchy, bloody-faced son, lowered his prescription sunglasses. That done, the Marshal returned his withering focus back onto Leo, who had just started putting his red-haired hands slowly up.

“So, freak, since I’m feelin’ sentimental, I’ll give you exactly one minute to explain yourself before I lock you up for assaulting an officer,” Marshal Stu said. Drew Ann and Lu Ann both glowered sternly in earnest imitation as they both slowly cocked their pistols.

Leo inhaled. The owner then snatched the menu out of Leo’s red-haired hands and scurried back into the kitchen. Leo smiled. He finally did it, he finally talked about his Father out loud for the first time in a year without retching or yelling. Or crying. He raised his plastic waterglass high in a proud, but silent toast. As Leo took a congratulatory gulp,

the swarm of barflies at the grill all got off their barstools to scamper out the door. Leo suddenly found himself sweating bullets. His pounding heart caught on fire as his hunger pangs flared up again stronger. Leo began tinkering with his jacket zipper but stopped when he realized that there were four gun barrels lined on his shiny forehead.

“Marshal Stu, I-”

“You lying piece of rancid scumpunk. I’ll kill you dead.” Beau squealed as he emptied an entire clip of bullets into the wall behind his hated nemesis. Stu and his daughters lined their pistols on Beau’s plump chest, calming his angry hysteria with a healthy dose of fear.

“Beau,” Marshal Stu coldly ordered, “buddy, please wait outside.”

“But, Dad! He-”

“Beau, wait outside. You don’t have a gun. Do as I ask, or I’ll shoot you dead like I shot your Mother and your idiot brother, Lou.” Thus tamed, Beau obediently, dejectedly shuffled over to the other side of the diner’s entrance to pout. “I never should’a popped Lou. At least that moron was never loud ’bout his sass.” The Marshal and his competent children returned their deadly focus on Beau’s assailant. “Now, freak, y’were sayin’?”

“Your son,” Leo finally matter-of-factly stated, “over there,

tried to mug me, and I defended myself.” The lawman’s caterpillar made a frenetic spasm upon hearing this.

“Stu Annal!” the diner owner screeched from behind his now-deserted grill. “What the heck are you doing back in my diner? What did you do to all of my customers?”

“This doesn’t concern you, Otus,” Drew Ann hissed. Otus skittered over to the unwanted drama currently unfolding at the far corner table.

“Yes, this does concern me, you stupid gun bunny! You two dumb goons and your tin-star Dad are back, shootin’ up my diner again, and screwin’ up my insurance premiums in the process again!”

“Otus, please don’t talk to m’girls like that.”

“Shove it, Annal! I am sick to death of you always lording over everyone in town as this insufferable tin-star tyrant, always terrorizing my customers without so much as a sorry out of your dumb mouth!”

“Donchu talk to m’daddy like that!” Lu Ann ordered, carelessly bringing her pistol’s muzzle perilously closer to Leo’s sweating temple.

“I’ll talk to Marshal Annal however I please, ya’dumb cluck!” Otus snapped. Stu’s angry caterpillar sagged with his scowling frown.

“Now listen here, Otus-”

“No, you listen, Annal!” the owlsh little man shrieked. “You and your pet gun bunnies leave this fine boy alone, and you never darken my diner’s doorstep-”

“Calm down, Otus-”

“Never! Leave, or I’ll leave town for good this time! For good, y’hear me? And then you can tell your precious Mayor Mom-my how you made me drive a stake through Pahayoke’s fiscal heart!”

Enzo tapped the sharpening point of his teardrop-shaped fingernail on Lu Ann’s gun barrel.

“Can I make a suggestion?” Leo asked. Leo’s hidden tank top soaked further as eight angry eyes returned focus on him. He inhaled. “How about you nice folks pay me back the two hundred smackers taken out of my bag, and then I can leave town to never darken anyone’s delightful doorstep ever again?” He hoped and silently prayed to God almost, that no one here noticed his voice beginning to break and deepen ever so slightly. “Hm?”

“That’s so stupid, I ought to shoot-”

“Pay him!” the owlshly furious leprechaun yodeled at the finally humbled Marshal. The humbled Annals obediently whipped out their wallets, reluctantly offering up one portrait

of Benjamin Franklin, twenty-three crumpled portraits of Abraham Lincoln, and eleven portraits of George Washington. Leo gleefully accepted this partial sacrifice.

“Hey, Beau!” Stu called. “Git yer butt back over here!” The prodigal paunch came bouncing back into the diner’s dining room, already wallowing in what he imagined was a big, heaping helping of hot salami, forgiveness and praise.

“Yessir, Daddy?” Beau piped, so eager to receive his praise.

“How much cash y’got on ya?”

“Um....” Beau stammered as he pulled out his pink vinyl wallet from his pants pocket. Before the middle-school dropout could begin his given task of counting his cash, Leo’s rust-furred hand deftly snatched the entire unknown sum of bills out of Beau’s pink vinyl wallet.

“Hey!” Stu grimaced at his surviving son, who then immediately blanched into shivering silence.

The exonerated assault suspect happily shoveled his ill-gotten money into his black canvas backpack as the defeated Annals holstered their pistols and exited the diner in quiet shame.

“Thanks a bunch, guys! I will not be-” Leo stopped mid-taunt when he realized Otus was now trembling ferociously at him.

“You are going nowhere until you get your lunch, boy!” the

raging leprechaun howled.

“Um....To go?”

“You are going nowhere until you get your lunch to go!”

Leo's sandwich barely lasted him more than two bites as he sprinted across the street. According to the schedule on the sign, the next bus to Troia wouldn't come until 3:45 pm.

Dammit.

At this rate, Leo would never make it to the Zafari without arousing suspicion or panic. Leo plopped himself and his backpack down onto the hot metal Bus Stop bench and slipped off his letterman jacket. The boy peeled off his Father's lucky tee shirt, wringing two, maybe three cups of warm sweat out of it. Leo gasped just as his shaggy, bleaching-furred barrel chest began to painfully thrust out a little more again. He took his watch off his slick, wet, fur-carpeted wrist, holding his trust timepiece in his tingling, inflating forepaw.

It was only 11:16 am.

Absolutely fantastically fantastic.

The growing, exasperated boy groaned as he tossed his watch, his jacket, his still sopping wet tee shirt back into his backpack. He shucked his lengthening hind paws of his sneakers,

then struggled for a second as he pulled off his socks. Leo wiggled his taloned toes, noting that his hind paws' pads had already blackened. He found himself groaning again as he dug his taloned fingers deep into the striped, rust and cream fur of his increasingly muscular sides, trying to worry out some fresh knots. He didn't want his now finger-length fur to mat from that morning's sweat-a-thon. Leo then took care to untangle his Father's tiger-fang necklace from his now-entirely-cream-colored chest fur. He began taking inventory of the necklace's various fangs; there was that fat, long one, the broken one, the cracked one with a hole drilled in it, the little bitty fang, the gold ring with a heart-shaped ruby.

Leo held the ring up to the brilliant, almost-noon light, studying how the band was woven into threads of hemp. He remembered asking Dad about this ring once when he was a kid. Rather than yell or say anything, the hoary old bastard just wordlessly moped around the Zafari for a week. Leo let his necklace fall back onto his big, cream-furred chest. He began fumbling with the zipper of his sweat-soggy jeans.

"I'd know that debauched joie de vivre anywhere! Good afternoon, Mr. Enzo!"

Leo nervously looked to his shaggy side to see a short, bottled-eyed old woman in a straw sunbonnet and a purple plumeria mumu smiling at him. "Oh, Mrs. Stasso, I didn't see you there...pardon...." The increasingly hoary boy

suddenly stuttered in his Father's gravelly baritone.

"Mr. Enzo," Mrs. Stasso said. "Where have you been?" She took Leo's sweating paws into her pleasantly gnarled hands. "Oh, it's been so long, let me look at you! I still can't thank you enough for moving my refrigerator into my kitchen." The old woman squinted her feeble eyes as she petted Leo's auburn sideburns.

"I, um, I hope things are well with you, Mrs. Stasso."

"Things could be better," Mrs. Stasso grouched. "My store just closed down, and my bursitis is acting up again."

"I, um, I'm sorry to hear that, Mrs. Stasso."

"Oh, enough about li'l old me. How have you been, Mr. Enzo? Don't tell me it's true that your Zafari is closing? Where will you and your two cherub sons go?"

"Fraid it's true," Leo reluctantly confirmed. "Business was really bad," he lied. He frowned. "But we still have a good place to stay."

"Come, Mr. Enzo," Mrs. Stasso said as she pulled on Leo's paws. "Have lunch with me. I'll let you take some of my apples home to your boys."

Leo downed his carton of salami barley mushroom soup in one gulp, then stood up to his full current height of seven and

something feet.

“Those apples?”

“Of course. I might have some old tee shirts for you, too. It’s not safe to wear such a woolly sweater on such a hot sunny day y’know.”

The two toddled down the street, good ol’ Grandma holding onto the hand of a young, ginger wolf with a poofy white beard. Imposter Enzo’s stomach bellowed loudly from its fortress of flesh, cream belly fur, and ever-tightening, sweat-drenched denim.

“Goodness!”

Think, Leo! Idiot! What are you thinking? You’re changing! You’ll eat Mrs. Stasso! And her dumb dog! And her neighbors! All for what? Apples? Oh, God, Mrs. Stasso’s apple cookies are the best! I’d go through hell to have her apples! Wait, no....

The Impostor Enzo stopped in his tracks, letting his forepaw drop out of Mrs. Stasso’s hand as his hind paws scorched on the sizzling pavement.

The grandmotherly widow asked, “Is there something wrong, dear?” She turned to look back like a bottle-eyed Orpheus.

The Impostor Enzo buried his still kind of human nose into the copper and auburn fur of his wrist and faked a snuffling sneeze before retaking Mrs. Stasso's re-offered hand.

Mrs. Stasso's apartment building, was exactly as Impostor Enzo remembered from the last time he'd been there two years ago, from the same bums nesting around the grungy, burnished yellow guardian lions at the front entrance, to the same, fluttering, dusty cobwebs festooning the trash-littered stairwells.

Apples.

The Impostor Enzo focused on apples. He focused on apples even as Mrs. Stasso jimmied her key into her door keyhole, focusing on apples even as he ignored the lightning flashes of pain within his cracking pelvis shifting shape underneath his hairy flesh.

Mrs. Stasso's apartment was exactly as Impostor Enzo remembered, from the lilac-print wallpaper and fake mahogany furniture to that shrieking Pomeranian, Chloe. Mrs. Stasso dropped her sunbonnet onto her slip-covered couch while Impostor Enzo began quietly panting. Chloe's shrill barking was gently pulling him out of his candy trance. Mrs. Stasso squatted down to scoop the furious, yapping lint ball into her bandy arms as her guest set his backpack onto her couch.

"Chloe, Chloe," she cooed. "Mind your manners, sweetie. It's just Mr. Enzo; he's not going to eat you."

Impostor Enzo giggled guiltily as he scratched his left nipple. “She’s just jealous that I got a better sweater than her.”

Mrs. Stasso stood there, seemingly confused as she clutched her squirming, yapping dog, then erupted in volcanic cackling once she finished processing her guest’s little sweater joke. The Impostor Enzo sidled into the dinette set in the kitchen as Mrs. Stasso took Chloe into the bedroom. The tigerish boy plunked himself into a steel and artificial leather chair.

Oh my God, Leo, what are you thinking? What are you doing? Apples? All for apples?

Impostor Enzo inhaled, the ribs of his massive, still barreling chest cracking, crackling as he filled his beast’s lungs with aromas of lunchmeat. Mrs. Stasso returned, chuckling as she held out a shirt that read “I ♥ Pahayoke”.

“Oh,” Impostor Enzo demurred. “Mrs. Stasso, y’didn’t need to.” The grandmotherly widow inserted the folded shirt into his backpack. She chuckled.

“Nonsense!” she replied. “I know how much Duncan loves novelty tee shirts. This one was George’s favorite.”

“Thanks kindly, ma’am,” Impostor Enzo said. “Duncan will love it,” he ad libbed. He got up as Mrs. Stasso pulled out lunchmeat out of her ancient refrigerator.

“Sit, Mr. Enzo, you’re my guest, and I wouldn’t dare let one of my guests work on my watch.” Mrs. Stasso paused again, her expression turning stucco while her kitchen knife of Damocles dangled low over an apple. “Unless I need you to move another refrigerator for me.” Then she laughed again. Impostor Enzo tried to force out a laugh of courtesy but stopped when Chloe started barking again from the bedroom.

Mrs. Stasso carried a plate stacked with salami sandwiches onto the table. She giggled as her guest’s share of the sandwiches disappeared almost the moment she set that plate onto the table. She laughed again as she brought another plate, this time, stacked with apples.

“Oh, wow,” Leo the Impostor eagerly rumbled.

“I’ll let you take some sandwiches and apples home for your boys, too.” Mrs. Stasso said as she packed some lunch bags into Leo’s backpack. “Be sure they eat the goodies before you do, please.”

Impostor Enzo found himself growling. Mrs. Stasso plunked down two bottles of chilled pilsners as she sat herself down into another metal and artificial leather chair. Impostor Enzo ummed eagerly as they clinked their bottles in a toast.

“Oh, apple cider beer! Thanks!”

“I know you always liked a nice, hoppy beer.”

“Yeah, Dad hated apple cider...which...is why he taught me to, um, hate...it....”

Mrs. Stasso flattened her smile, then pursed her lips.

“That’s not a good thing to do, teach a child to hate.”

The Impostor Enzo suckled his bottle empty as he felt the seams in his wet jeans begin to give out.

“Yeah, that’s why I let my sons drink whatever nonalcoholic drinks they want....Oh, and Mrs. S, can I use your bathroom?”

“Please, Mr. Enzo, don’t need to ask.”

The eight-foot-tall boy stood up and darted by the couch to snatch up his backpack as he galloped to the bathroom. The same old miasma of artificial jasmine scent and talcum powder greeted Leo’s nostrils as he locked the bathroom door behind him. He groaned loudly as his hips shifted again harder, squeezing his furry jewels of might against taut denim. He unbuckled his belt, and tore his jeans’ fly open, letting a torrent of wet, white fur pour out. Leo’s nascent primordial pouch now free, he needed to get out of this flower-printed oubliette. He slung his backpack over his painfully broadening shoulder, and popped out the windowpane and screen with one gentle shove from his forepaw.

From that emptied three-story window, Leo leapt, landing on the roof of a condemned two-story condominium unit across the street. He darted to the rotten ledge, propelling himself off the crumbling edge with such force that he sailed over the neighboring unit, landing in the empty street as his jeans tore apart into a useless kilt of tattered, denim streamers. After gathering the ruins of his jeans into his backpack, the tigerish boy stayed down on all fours, sprinting down the street to the Pahayoke city limits like some lumpy cheetah in a hurry.

???

Leo had been running on four and two legs through Calostoma County's oak and bramble forest for almost an hour before his mighty limbs finally rebelled, their sudden, cramp-induced paralysis thrusting the tigerish boy headfirst into a desiccated bush. The tigerish boy crawled out, sloughing off his backpack as he did so. Then the Tiger Boy opened his bleeding, fanged mouth wide in an uncomfortably shrill, howling roar.

"Agh!" He collapsed face first back into a prickly leaf litter, already exhausted from the morning. Even so, it was still coming, it hadn't even started. *All that for sandwiches. All that for beer and apples, Leo. All for apples.*

It was coming earlier. It was coming stronger, and it was coming faster. Obviously, there was going to be lots of trouble coming too.

The tiger boy's hipbones continued shifting, grinding, widening, his pitifully shrill roaring climbing up octaves and falling down octaves until he finally slumped back into the leaf litter with a resounding, bird-startling fart. As the crows scattered from Leo's passing gas, the quarter-tiger impotently dug his hind paws deep into the loam. He shivered as his throbbing muscles struggled to throb in sync. He hesitantly raised his inflating neck.

"Help me, Daddy! Help me, please! Please!" the sixteen-year-old monster wailed. His tail was getting ready to sprout again and Leo was afraid. He stupidly raised his forepaw as a fist and toppled over onto his ballooning side. Leo grimaced a great and terrible grimace full of sharp and bloody teeth as his blue-hot clavicles started moving his crunching, bloating shoulders. "Agh! Oh, Daddy, Daddy, I'm so sorry! Please! Please help me! I, um, I'll be a good boy! Ngh!"

Leo the still-growing tigerish boy scrubbed his itching, hairy, still sort of kind of human face with his forepaws as his untamed greaser-hero sideburns became ferociously wild mutttonchops that continued growing and growing into monstrous tufts of red and white fur. Leo gripped his red and white cheek fur in his swollen, swelling forepaws, feebly tugging at his cheek fur as they merged with his poofy white goat beard and flowed down his great, shaggy, increasingly bullish bullneck as a simmering tiger's mane. Leo whimpered as he tried to ready himself to yell again. Whimpering became growling as Leo's mountainous back

began erupting through his ever-thickening hackles. The half-tiger found himself snarling again.

Gettin' there.

The gangly, stretchy limbed, half-formed monster boy trembled as he achingly struggled back onto his wobbly, pulsating hind legs. Once he could teeter back up to his full, ten-foot height, Leo the half a tiger bolted through the thorny underbrush as though he was a man, as though he was still the high school track star he should have been. He ran and ran as far as his monster hind legs could carry his changing monster body. Maybe this would be the day Leo could finally run away from this thing pursuing him that he otherwise became. Then again, maybe not, as the half a tiger boy found himself crashing back into the underbrush again.

The way the dazzling afternoon sun shone through the drought-shriveled forest canopy easily showed that it was maybe six, probably seven hours until moonrise. But poor Leo was in no position to enjoy the sunshine. The four hundred, soon to be five hundred pound, three-fifth a tiger thrashed about in the loam, screaming and weeping as he finally began pooping out his tiger's tail. The still growing boy-monster shrieked, he pleaded, he cursed, he coughed, and he pleaded again. The agony of having to poop out a two, no, a three, no, a four-foot length of spinal cord over the course of an hour was tortuously bad enough. It made the normally defiant Leo pound his big, shaggy fists on the ground, and kick his hind paws deep into the loam. Ah!

But the itching! The tickling itching of all that unholy fur growing on his five-foot and growing tail. That, that was a torture that made the great and proud and mighty Enzo Rudolfo Lancio Klamath Junior (now Leo) cry, made him beg, made him moan, made him weep, made him low and moo like some piteously pitiful milk cow being milked to death with cold, chapped hands.

The three-fourth tiger continued bleating and thrashing in another one of his bramble refuges, his growing, might-mutating tiger's limbs spasming as they continued growing mightier and tigerisher still. Tiger Boy lowed as his still half-mighty chest thrust out again even further, now with a chorus of crackling ribs. Leo bowed his back, grinding his cream-furred belly into the crunchy, prickly leaf litter as though he were a twelve-foot-long nag' going swayback from being mounted by the heaviest rider in the world. The three-fourth Tiger Boy whined as he tried and failed to remember exactly how his moron Father could make this power of metamorphosis of theirs seem so fun.

Leo's change spurts and growth spasms slowed, then paused, almost as though to let him catch his already tired breath with his great tiger's lungs. He sniffed at the stultifying summer air with his still kind of human nose, then rolled his not-so-human head to try and crack his stiff, tiger mane. Leo knew he had eclipsed his brother, Big Brat, in size and mass over eight moons ago. But before Leo could ponder how big he'd eventually become, the tensing muscles at the base of his mutating skull tightened, squeezing out a roaring scream and

Leo's last semi-rational thought. The eye of his personal storm was passing. Storm clouds of white fur bloomed inside of his now-feline ears, his cheekbones springing forward with a thunderclap of crunching. His big, once-human nose flattened as his bleeding, bloody jaws evolved, elongated into a feline snout. He slumped back into the churned, leafy earth as spear-like whiskers sprouted across his freshly resurfaced snout.

Leo the tired, almost a tiger, dragged his aching, cramping, pulsating, palsied, shaggy, fifteen-foot-long bulk out of the ruined brambles in the hopes of finding some place less thorny to thrash uncontrollably in.

???

"Daddy, Daddy!" Enzo yelled as he toddled down the stony path past the Hyena Hut. The six-year-old boy wanted to show everyone his new cape he made, his stuffed tiger. The Spotted Hyena leapt out from her hut to snap at Enzo's shorts.

"Hey! Quit it, ha ha!" Enzo shouted. The she-hyena pulled the boy down to the dusty flagstones as she insisted on stealing his shorts. It was how she showed her boundless love, after all.

"Hey!"

"Hey."

Big, red, hairy tree-branch hands clutched Enzo, helping the little boy back onto his little bare feet. The boy looked up to see a big, woolly, tiger skeleton man, no, Daddy. He was wearing fur again. Daddy tore off his white tee shirt to tie around his son's waist as a makeshift loincloth. Big, knotty-boned fingers with long, curved talons hooked underneath Enzo's armpits, then his Father hoisted him high into the air.

"Behold!" Enzo's Father hollered. "Tiger Boy!"



Full moonrise. Leo spat out the very last shards of his puny human teeth just as his fist-sized carnassials finished their steady emergence from his monster gums. Saber fangs as big as parsnips finally erupted from Leo's snout, glistening with bloody slobber and reflected moonlight. A twenty-three-foot-long tiger, twenty-nine counting his gloriously swishing tail, began skulking about the still-warm, polluted oak forest undergrowth. Leo was reborn, and back in his old stomping grounds.

Deep down, he obviously remembered he was still Leo the boy. But he was Enzo the man now. And Enzo was hungry now, and he needed to hunt now.

Elsewhere, a young buck, almost two years old, and freshly stripped of his velvet, waded into a thicket of dehydrated brambles to feed on blackberries and brittle leaves. A little

after three minutes into his modest feast, the buck collapsed, his left lung flooding with blood from where a hunter's arrow pierced him. A gurgling grunt, and the buck was gone.

A ghillie-suited bow hunter emerged from her hunting blind. The bow hunter was proud; she had just bagged her first buck of the season, a largely tined buck at that. The nocturnal bow hunter readjusted her night vision goggles, her pretty little head bursting with venison recipes and decisions of just exactly where to hang that prize-winning rack in her studio apartment. Then her pretty little head emptied itself of every thought beyond a sudden blast of pain when a fast-moving paw, the size of an ottoman, struck her.

Enzo was hungry that night, oh so very hungry as he made short, snarling work of those two corpses. The unnatural tiger lounged in the crispy, prickly leaf litter, licking his luxurious fur clean of his preys' deliciously messy bodily fluids, taking special care to clean his fang necklace hidden deep within his mane.

Distant roaring perked up the Tiger Boy's fluffy ears mid-lick.

A new rival to eat? No....He rummaged through Leo's memory. Traffic....A, um a bus.... More prey!

The excited Tiger Boy eagerly loped through the oak and bramble forest until he stopped at the dry, dusty shores of a river made of dirty, dark stone. By the side of a forest street, Enzo witnessed a strange, shiny, log-shaped animal on circ-

ular legs flee an orchard of narrow, metal trees bearing glowing fruit. Transit Three Twenty-Two dropping off an other passenger. Easy peasy pickings.

Leo the Tiger Boy craned his mighty, bullish neck upward, his steaming nostrils flaring as he studied that lone, lonely little child in a hoodie with bunny ears who was pensively pacing around the Bus Stop. The nameless boy, who couldn't be more than eight years old, carried a familiar-looking stuffed animal in his petite arms.

Hey, he has a stuffed tiger toy, just like mine!

The hungry tiger thundered toward the Bus Stop just as the nervous little boy turned around to face his impending, rumbling doom.



Lampago

Lampago is an enormous beast who lives in the sweltering jungles of Qin. Lampago resembles a tiger who is twenty-hands tall at his shaggy withers. Lampago's lustrous fur is a dozen different shimmering hues of red, crimson, carmine, scarlet, ruby, vermilion. Many mistake the monster for a bloody-maned lion; gossips slander that his fur is red to hide the bloodstains of his many, many, many victims. Gossips and deadly mistakes aside, Lampago uses his red fur to hide in grass and forest undergrowth.

Because Lampago has the handsome face of a strong man, he fancies himself an erudite junzi, a kind and wise master of etiquette and hospitality. Those among his friends, wards, and lovers agree he is, but care to remember that a ferocious cat's heart beats within his warm, bountiful chest.

I

In a spartan, yet squalid living room of a spartan, yet squalid apartment, a cat poked its head through a gap in the cardboard-sealed window. The cat skittered onto the filthy yet barren floor, silently moved toward a duct-tape upholstered couch, and leapt up onto it. The animal seeped in between duct-taped cushions and disappeared. Behind that miserable, tape-mummified couch in that miserable living room was a door leading to a miserable, small bedroom.

Dominating that miserably cramped bedroom was a dilapidated mattress. Beside that dingy mattress was a lamp-adorned fruit crate its owner pretended was a nightstand. A beat up vanity dresser with a cracked mirror sat on the far side of the bedroom (if the room could be called that) as though to distance itself from that farce of a decorative afterthought.

A mountainously large, redheaded man in pajamas, lay asleep on that miserable mattress. On the crescendo of snoring, a button popped off of his pajama shirt, allowing a meadow of thick, white hair to blossom across his vast chest. A thin, little boy, too petite to be called bony, lay nestled deep in a valley formed in the crook of his brother's massive arm.

The mountain instinctively pressed the boy close to him in a hug. He then placed his shaggy, paw-like hand over the boy's maimed right hand. With his swollen thumb, the

With his swollen thumb, the mountain gingerly stroked his brother's scar-puckered knuckles near where the boy's fingers once were. Rudy Kaplan yawned a mighty, rumbling yawn as another button popped off, turning his meadow of white into a hairy avalanche of snow that flowed up his blowing neck to pummel against his craggy chin.

Clutching his whimpering brother to his vast, shaggy chest, the mountain sat up. He pivoted toward his pretend night stand, and planted his big, shaggy, bedroom slippers squarely on the floor. The mountain let his brother lie in his lap as he switched on the lamp, their Mother's lamp. He fumbled for, then fumbled with a plastic phial with his shaggy paw-like hands before finally prying that infernal, childproof lid off with a horn-colored talon that slid cleanly out of the broad tip of his finger.

"Hey Dunc, Duncan," the mountain cooed. "You need your pills."

He stroked Duncan's sand-colored hair. Duncan pried his mouth open a crack to let his brother put his pills in.

The mountain then put a water bottle to his brother's lips for the obligatory swig. The mountain slurped down the rest of the water to wash his own pills down. He let Duncan lie back down onto the mattress. The mountain, in turn, got up out of bed, and shambled toward the door. He shot a brief, venomous glare at the beastly reflection in his cracked vanity mirror.

“Get a life, ugly,” he snarled.

In his short death march to the bathroom, the mountain didn’t notice, or rather didn’t care, that a thin tail was successfully fighting its way out of a tear in the seat of his pajama pants. He was too busy remembering a time when he still looked human, no, a time when he still was human. Back in the glory days as a globetrotting photojournalist, just after his glory days as an all-star college athlete. He remembered that glorious day when he was called into his editor’s office to receive his greatest assignment ever.

“Rudy, my son,” Rudy remembered his editor saying. “You’re heading an expedition to Yunnan, China to document the Maohu People.”

Rudy remembered laughing upon accepting that assignment. No reason really: he was a big laugher in those days. The mountain scowled as he banished that awful memory from his shaggy head.

Rudy stood before his bathroom sink, reluctantly facing down his reflection again. Once upon a time, long, long ago, he adored primping and preening and posing in front of his reflection wherever he met it. Those glorious days were so long ago now (but not long enough ago in the mountain’s personal opinion). He stared at that mirror, studying how his scruffy beard and fluffy mutton chops were smothering his once-handsome, once-human face. He never was pleased how his luxuriosu facial fur made every-

one think he was some sort of elderly hipster-yeti either.

Rudy gently traced the thick tip of his sausage finger around the outline of the reflection of his face, hoping to numb his urge to thrust his ham-like paw-hand through the mirror. He watched his hairy, hair-filled ears growing bigger, steadily emerging from his fluffy sideburns.

It was coming! he realized.

With that realization, the rest of Rudy's pajama buttons popped off as his mighty chest barreled out. A great, seething sea of thickening white fur flowed uninterrupted from his chin down across his mighty chest to his groin.

Rudy's tail began slapping against the linoleum of the bath room floor as he tabulated how much time he had left. When he arrived at a figure of thirteen hours, the shoulder seams of his pajama shirt gave out, finally releasing his forest-like mane of red fur.

Rudy's scowl softened into a sly smirk. If there was one benefit to it, even if it was the only benefit, it was the soul-boiling exhilaration he got from being filled to literal bursting with overflowing power. He had to. He needed to, for Duncan's sake.

The mountain focused his surging power, and felt his mighty, might-deformed body swell up ever so slightly. He grinned a fangy grin as the bulging muscles of his monster's arm tear

through the thin fabric of his sleeves. The seams of his pajama pants split open in response to his shifting thighs, vomiting forth fountains of more red fur as they tore apart. As he finally sloughed off the last tatters of his ruined pajamas, he stood there in his bathroom, balancing on his tiptoes, no, standing on his hind legs.

There, leaning on that miserable sink, in front of that miserable bathroom mirror, was an odd-looking, broad-shouldered, rat-tailed big cat, cloaked in a cape-like mane of red fur and a snow-colored belly, wearing a grinning man's face. Duncan, half-asleep, shambled into the bathroom, and wedged himself comfortably between his brother's belly fur and the rim of the sink. As Duncan armed himself with his toothbrush, Rudy delicately squeezed out a drop of toothpaste for him. The mountain tussled his brother's sandy hair with his great paw.

"Morning, Sparky," Rudy greeted. Duncan grumbled in response. The mountain reached for his electric razor, putting it to his fur-hidden chin. After all, it was time for the mountain to don his human disguise.

On the far side of that squalid living room, Rudy fussed over an electric stove while Duncan sat half awake at a card table, their Father's card table, waiting with a paper plate. Rudy looked passably human now that he shaved off his beard and mutton chops, had put on his green Wigman's Grocery shirt and apron, hid his paw-like hands inside cheap gloves, hid his tail inside his black slacks, and

squeezed his hindpaws into shoes. Duncan, meanwhile, dressed in his school uniform, a blue vest over a black polo shirt and khaki slacks.

“What’s for breakfast?” Duncan yawned.

“Scrambled eggs, Sparky,” the mountain cheerfully replied. He beamed as he doled out his brother’s share of the eggs, silently boastful over how human he made himself look. Rudy then sat down at his Father’s card table, and began eating his share of the eggs out of his frying pan, his Mother’s frying pan, face first. Duncan examined his brother’s tigerine ear. He fished out a bandana, and tied it around the mountain’s head to hide the mountain’s tiger ears and shaggy hair. The mountain’s human disguise now complete, he paused to give a quick hug and a snort of thanks.

Once breakfast was over, their Mother’s frying pan was stashed in the bathroom sink where it would be washed in the evening, and Duncan’s plate was placed in a trash bag mostly filled with red hair. The brothers were then out of their door, carrying between them the trash bag, a duffel bag and a backpack.

The pair started their largely uneventful trek to the subway station by ramming the trash bag full of red hair into the trash can in the lobby of their apartment building. Next, Rudy held Duncan’s good hand as they raced together for three blocks before laughing all the way down the escalator at the subway station. The subway platform was crowded that

was crowded that morning, as it was every morning. Rudy wrapped both of his big arms around Duncan, not so much to protect his brother, but more to keep his good luck charm closer.

Ever since Rudy fled Yunnan, he loathed crowds with a wordless passion. So much meat crowding together, grinding together, wallowing in a delightful miasma of seductively rancid sweat. The subway cars were, as they always were since Yunnan, an unbreathable swamp of human pheromones ignored by everyone but Rudy. All those aromas of fear, anxiety and irritation made his eyes water.

“Hey, Sparky,” Rudy said as he tried to swallow the suffocating lump forming in his throat.

“Yeah?” his good luck charm replied. The boy shifted in his big brother’s embrace, instinctively aware of the mountain’s smoldering unease.

“We got rid of the trash, right?” He held his little brother tight.

“We tossed it right when we left, remember?” Duncan pulled his arm free to better hug Rudy’s bulging, throbbing triceps.

“Yeah, thanks.” Of course Rudy remembered, such was how the first half of his distraction ritual went. He began the second part of his ritual by stroking his brother’s sandy

hair.

“Hey, look! It’s Harry the Hugger and his boy toy!”

The mountain noticed the crowd parting around him and his brother. He felt a slide rise up and shift underneath his Wigman’s Grocery shirt. A smelly, filthily dressed man, maybe in his late thirties, was circling Rudy and his little brother like a lone jackal closing in on a cow mired in mud. The smelly man’s matted beard reeked, that odious bouquet made Rudy snort as he scoured his weepy eyes of tears with the back of his shaggy wrist.

“What’s the matter?” the smelly jackal yapped. “Mad I discovered you with your little friendly friend?”

Rudy blinked the last tears out of his eyes, then glowered.

“Please shut up and leave us alone,” Rudy declared. The smelly jackal’s laughter turned shrill. Other passengers began to gawk at his glowering expression. A tired old woman sitting behind the brothers shuffled the three shopping bags on her lap.

“What are you going to do if I don’t? Kill me? Molest me?” The smelly jackal continued tittering.

“Just do as he says, and go home, you stinking lush,” the old woman growled.

The smelly jackal leaned perilously close to the brothers in order to better leer at the old woman. The mountain reached out with his gloved paw, and snagged that smelly, laughing lush by the filthy neck, hauling him in close. The lush met Rudy's snarling gaze, the bum's titting laugh changing to squealing puffs upon realizing that behind that hairy face was an ancient predator, hungry, angry and not at all human. Rudy let his prey go as the shrieking lush flooded the subway car with salty fear and red wailing. Duncan grimaced in disgust and relief.

Rudy wiped his gloved paw on his slacks, hugged his Sparky a little tighter as he drank up the delicious terror, the frantic pounding on the sealed subway door a soothing victory cadenza.

"This morning," Rudy said. "I was afraid no one would build anything."

One of Rudy's coworkers at Wigman's, a nosy, gossippy manager, would pester him about why, if he detested the subway so much, didn't he just drive a car for his commute. Besides the obvious hints dropped about the problems of a car, car insurance, and fuel on a box boy salary in the twenty-first century, the main reason why Rudy loathed driving a car even more than riding the subway was rather a sentimental reason.

Norstrand Street Station. Their stop. Two brothers hurried out of the subway car and into the Norstrand Street Station

They were behind schedule so Rudy hoisted his Sparky, or Duncan, onto his shoulders. He ran up the escalator and ran down the street for two blocks, only slowing down when he finally approached Duncan's eighth-grade place of learning. He set Duncan down and rubbed his Sparky's hair one last time.

"You be good, today, Sparky."

"Yes, big bro." He started to cry. "You promise you won't eat anyone?"

"Not on my shift. But we're gonna have a fun day tomorrow; wine, women, and drugs! And we'll order for lunch!"

The two shared one last laugh before Duncan headed through the school gates. Rudy stood there at the entrance, waving to his brother for a minute even after the boy disappeared into the school entrance.

"I'm taking good care of him, Ma," he muttered. "I'm taking good care of him like I promised."

The mountain stared at his gloved paw, watching a patch of crimson fur fight its way out of a seam. He remembered the first time he ate a man. It was an exhilarating experience, addictive, yet exhausting.

Rudy remembered being told he was "...chosen to have received a great gift..." and he remembered being told he

needed “...to earn the right to keep it.” At the time he was too delirious from pain, and magic herbs, and being alive again to refuse offers.

He readjusted his duffel bag, and went on his way to Wigman’s, the laughter of a child and her accompanying grand mother echoing in his hidden ears.

II

When Rudy arrived at Wigman's Grocery, the store was already open and teeming with customers. Not that it mattered to Rudy, as he hadn't been assigned to help in months. He made an unobtrusive beeline to the back of the store, then clocked in. Pulling out his Wigman's Grocery baseball cap, he shoved his duffel bag into his locker. His cap on, he hurried to the loading dock of the stockroom. Rudy was needed for his special talents after all.

Despite having been an athlete and a photojournalist, Rudy got his current job as a box boy by calling on a favor owed to him by the store's founder, Bernard Wigman Senior. Bernard Senior felt he owed Rudy dearly as Rudy was one of the few people who took the loving time to teach a beloved grandson how to be and stay a just and upstanding team player. In Rudy's mind, he systematically beat the teenage pomposity out of Bernard III in high school wrestling and high school football. Six years ago, upon hearing the tragic situation of Rudy and his family, Senior and III were both eager to offer condolences and assistance. Thus, over the overridden protests of the staunchly anti-sentimentalist Bernard Junior, Rudy "The Mountain" was made Wigman's Grocery's Number One Box Boy, a title he held with such happiness, and one ever since.

In the crowded stockroom, Bernard III, the morning supervisor, warmly shook his hand.

“Let’s get bananas on these apples!” the supervisor laughed. If Rudy wasn’t dead positive of an imminent murder, he would have punted Bernard for using that stale, old chest nut again. And again and again. But the mountain was too polite, and the morning’s truckload of fruit wasn’t going to unload itself, especially since the store’s only working forklift had been out of purpose and out of gas for the past six years.

The other workers swarmed and milled about, lending Rudy half-hearted assistance in the warm form of unpacking and carrying away unloaded pallets while shooing away perverts. The other staff always marveled over their number one box boy’s strength, despite witnessing semidaily demonstrations for the past six years.

In the loading of his eighth pallet of apples, Rudy stopped by the bakery department, and half-knelt down as he set the pallet onto the floor.

“What’s he doing?” a baker asked as she watched Rudy arch his back while reaching backward.

“He’s stretching,” another baker explained. Neither baker noticed him staring longingly at a big display freshly stacked with bags of bright apple pie macarons.

Most of the staff with Junior, blatant balking over a shameless display of nepotism. But, after witnessing Rudy Kaplan at work, coupled with fingering all of the money he saved

them from spending on heavy machinery maintenance, they promptly welcomed their number one box boy.

Now that Rudy finished surveying the bakery, he picked up his pallet and returned to his route to the fresh produce department. After unloading his eleventh pallet, he felt III slap him on his muscle-pumped back.

“Be careful there,” Bernard III said as he patted his own, jiggling belly. “Why don’t you go on break now?”

“See you after lunch?” Rudy smiled as he started back toward the lockers. Bernard III didn’t answer. As far as he was concerned, III clocked out a long, long time ago when he stupidly hired his high school rival in the stupid hope of finally one-upping said rival. In fact, III secretly, even, figured that Rudy could do everyone’s job, from his own to Bert’s in accounting to Angie’s in the floral department, and would still come out looking like he was on steroids.

Wigman’s number one box boy decided that he’d spend his break catching up on mop duty. After he pulled on a pair of elbow-length rubber gloves, he wheeled his haphazard cleaning cart around the store, swabbing the floor here and there with his mop, trusting people not to notice that his mop bucket was empty of water full of hidden goodies. He made a wide and leisurely arc in the bakery, then walked to the ladies’ restroom. Rudy set a plastic caution cone in front of the door. Now alone, Rudy dumped his mop bucket full of hidden goodies onto the restroom counter. He never visited the

He never visited the employee lounge, let alone ate there. While the other staff appreciated his work at the store, they made sure he understood that they wouldn't be caught dead socializing with him. Of those staff who could be bothered to remember Rudy's past, the only reason they could think over why Rudy would come crawling back to this urban podunk of a hometown just to beg his high school rival for a sub-menial job was a future-eating rumor. And the staff didn't want to taint themselves by mingling with him. Other employees not in the know simply avoided mingling with a man who looked, smelled, and shed like a Siberian in summertime.

Rudy surveyed his goodies; an apple, a carton of apple juice, a box of apple crisps, an apple turnover and his prize of prizes: a really fatty cut of salami that the store butcher thought she threw out. He clutched some salami with both gloved hands and rammed it into his mouth. Rudy knew the real reason why the other employees shunned him. He never joined them in their gossip. After all, he felt it was a fair trade if he let them believe whatever they wanted to believe about him if they never bothered him about discretely using the store as his personal pantry as revenge for being paid less than minimum wage. He gobbled up his apple, tore into his turnover, slurped on his apple juice, and wolfed down a big handful of apple crisps. He looked up from the sink to meet the shocked gaze of an elderly lady in a mumu. Her mouth hung open in apparent horror upon the sight of a man in the ladies' restroom. Rudy hurriedly tossed his uneaten treasures into the trash can.

“It’s not what you think ma’am!” he apologetically sputtered. “I was just examining produce!” And then sideburns miraculously bloomed into mighty, snow-colored mutton chops at his periphery right before the elderly lady’s eyes. He quickly realized that the old woman was now officially beyond calming or reasoning, what with how she inhaled. Rudy clutched his uniform as the silver-haired banshee began to mock an air raid siren.

Wigman’s Grocery’s ladies’ restroom filled up with managers, looky-loo clerks, and the balding, mustachioed supervisor, Bernard Wigman Junior. Now that she was safe, the banshee leaned into the scrawny arms of Dougal Bixby, Wigman’s Grocery’s number two box boy.

“Oh, my stars! This pervert monster was doing some satanic onanism ritual right before my very eyes!” Dougal pulled out a handkerchief for her while some of the managers began shooting Rudy and each other asking glares. “He was using apples and blood! See? Look at him! Look! He’s turning into a monster right before our very eyes!”

Managers and clerks, even Dougal, all started to share a laugh. Rudy felt his hackles crackle through the thick of his own spine, creeping up out from the back of his shirt collar to graze the back of his shaggy scalp. Everyone went respectfully mute the moment Junior gave everyone his fish-eyed glower of doom.

“Ma’am,” Supervisor Junior began. “Wigman’s Grocery has no rules or policies barring employees from performing their

work-related duties in restrooms of opposite genders.” Supervisor Junior sighed, and all of the assembled employees stiffed into more appropriately somber and solemn expressions.

“But, but he’s, he’s...!” the old lady continued protesting.

“Mr. Bixby, please escort the nice lady to the customer service lobby and give her a fifteen-dollar gift card.” The supervisor sighed again, and everyone promptly took their cue to follow Dougal and the old lady out of the ladies’ restroom. Junior tugged on his mustache as he turned to Rudy. “Mr. Kaplan, you know you’re late for your shift at the coffee bar, right?”

“I...I can explain, Mr. Wigman!” box boy number one stammered. “I...I can pay for the gift card, too! Oh and yes sir!” Rudy anxiously wheeled his cart out.

“And Mr. Kaplan,” the afternoon supervisor continued.

“Yes, sir?” The mountain paused.

“The time you enjoy your bonus on company time, please remember to take the time to lock the door so we hopefully won’t get another PR disaster like we did today, okay?”

“Understood, sir! No one ever watches me do this.”

If it were up to him, he would have fired the hairball, Bixby,

If it were up to him, he would have fired the hairball, Bixby, his own miserable son, and everyone else, everyone else, a long time ago. But that would require defying the wishes of the store's Executive Director, and defying the Executive Director would, in turn, require defying his Father's dying plea that Junior never defy the Executive Director. If Bernard Wigman Junior never found it within his heart to defy his Father during the years he knew him, he wasn't going to bother trying now, either.



"That's the lamest hand turkey I've ever seen." Duncan's classmate Percy declared. Duncan rolled his eyes. He could feel the larger boy's breath in his hair as Percy hovered over him.

"So are you going to help me, like, improve by...?" Duncan asked.

"Your lame hand turkey is the lamest hand turkey in the whole world." Percy mocked. "You deserve an F forever, lame-o."

Duncan sighed. *So much for the lie about art class being some sort of sanctuary.* "If you're not going to help, Percival, could you do everyone a favor by going back to hell?"

Percival's veneer of childishness flaked away as he grabbed a double fistful of Duncan's vest, hoisting the smaller boy out of his chair.

“What did you just say?” the bully demanded.

“Percival Schloss,” Mrs. Currant shouted. “Unhand him!” Percival fearfully hesitated at the art teacher’s command and continued holding Duncan up. “Immediately.” Percy let him drop to the floor. The art teacher, angry, arose from her desk to the two miscreants. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Duncan told Percy to go to hell,” a third student gleefully volunteered. Mrs. Currant readjusted her spectacles.

“Mr. Kaplan, is this true?”

“I’m very sorry,” Duncan apologized. “I didn’t realize Percival was teaching art class instead of Mrs. Currant. I’ll remember next time.”

Percival’s cheeks flushed pink as Mrs. Currant’s jowls quaked carmine.

“I will tolerate neither violence, nor insolence in my classroom,” the priggish woman shouted. “To the principal’s office with the both of you.”

The two insolent students obediently filed out of her classroom as per their teacher’s orders. By the time the two were out of earshot, Percival jabbed his nose into Duncan’s ear.

“You’re goign to die for this, you know that?” the bully

hissed.

Duncan ignored his tormentor as he continued his death march to the principal's office. The principal, stern-faced, opened the door of his office in anticipation. So began, no, so continued, this face of school justice.

All throughout his latest trip to the principal's office, Duncan pretended to contritely take to heart the principal's gentle chidings for being disrespectfully facetious, and pretended to listen intently to the principal threaten Percy with expulsion for the thirty-eighth time that school year. Internally, Duncan remembered the first time he saw his brother kill a man. He tried, he tried, and failed to picture that revenant of memory with Percy's face. He tried to replay that phantasmagorium again and again, Mrs. Currant as his brother's victim, then the principal. But, he didn't matter. That bloody tableau remained immutable, every gory detail pristine. Not that it mattered.

This farce of justice was almost over, as Percival was winding up his inane melodrama of false remorse and crocodile tears. The three o'clock bell rang, and the principal pardoned the two little criminals. Duncan politely fake-smiled, nodding in false obeisance. Percy wiped his face clean of crocodile tears and crocodile snot, and both insolent students promptly walked out of the principal's office.

Percy followed Duncan, vengefully intent on making the smaller boy suffer as payment for not being a victim who

didn't humiliate his bullies. Duncan, in turn, weaved and bobbed out of Percy's way, ignoring the bully in order to focus, instead, on retrieving his backpack.

"You're going to die," Percy taunted. "You're going to die, and I'll even kill your goofy giant brother."

Duncan stood still and let his facade crack.

"Just go away," he said as Percy finally snagged hold of his collar shirt.

Having fallen into this trap, the smaller boy clamped his good hand onto Percy's forearm. With a swoosh of Duncan's maimed hand, the bully suddenly found himself sitting painfully on the ground. Percy grew crimson-faced as he hauled himself back onto his feet, preparing himself to pummel his victim. But then he saw Duncan's maimed hand was actually a sandy-furred paw tipped with four talons. Percy then realized his vest and his polo shirt were torn open, the pallid peach-skinned flesh of his skinny chest exposed to the world as he fell to the ground.

The bully blushed, then shrank away from the smaller, paw-handed boy as he watched a fifth talon erupt from Duncan's thumb. "Just please go away, Percy. Okay?" The bully responded with a squeal of fright, galloping away. Duncan stuffed his now-regenerated hand-paw into his pocket a moment before Jackie, the Executive Director, approached him.

“What’s his problem?” Jackie wondered, handing Duncan his hand. Duncan made a noncommittal shrug as he accepted Jackie’s gesture.

“I think I broke his heart.”

Jackie shrugged.

“You’re *weird*.”

The two’s journey to Wigman’s Grocery was uneventful, marred only by Jackie’s rambling lecture uselessly advising Duncan about how to best deal with bullies. They entered the store, and discreetly fought their way through the afternoon crowd toward the coffee bar. Duncan and Jackie got in line behind a raven-haired young woman. When Jackie realized the barista was a large, grizzly-faced man with snow-colored mutton chops and a big, fluffy, snow-colored goatee, he nervously excused himself from the line. An improvement for Duncan, one less pair of eyes for when he broke the embarrassingly bad news to his brother. Brothers made eye contact, Duncan mouthed “It’s happening again,” cautiously waving his healing paw. Rudy went blank faced.

“Hey, Yeti!” shouted a surly, espresso-starved teen. “Quit stalling with my almond milk foam cocoa latte!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Rudy apologized, composing himself for a moment before grabbing the wrong handle to spray his rubber-gloved hand-paw with steam. Other espresso-starved

patrons whipped out their phones to assault the mountain with a volley of blinding, silent lightning in the giddy hopes of capturing the clumsy barista's expressions of hilarious agony for meme-tastic posterity. "Mr. Kaplan," Junior's voice dully thundered over the store speakers. Rudy rolled his eyes and shuddered. The raven-haired woman cocked her head as though remembering something.

"Mr. Kaplan, please report to the manager's office."

He darkly muttered. "Ma'am, I will be right with you."

"What about my latte?"

"He will be right with you," the raven-haired woman repeated as both Kaplans left.

Rudy entered the office to find Junior arguing with his grandson, Vice Executive Director Jackie.

"Grandpa, I don't understand: why did you let the monster run the coffee bar?" Jackie demanded.

"I told him to so he can expand his-"

"No, Grandpa, the monster is expanding enough already! Don't you remember that he's not allowed in any food prep departments?" Jackie plucked a generous tuft of red and white fur out of Rudy's throat. "He sheds!" he showed. "The last time Daddy let him work in the deli, we then had to

“The last time Daddy let him work in the deli, we then had to throw out so much worth of ruined salami, and we had to pay fines because people complained to the health department about getting his hair in their sandwiches, too!”

Junior gave Rudy a fear-filled glance of sincerest regret.

“Um, you can clock out early, hairball, I mena Kaplan,” Junior verbally stumbled.

“Yes,” Jackie agreed. Junior escorted his underling to the door.

As penance, Junior gave the Kaplan Brothers two bottles of soda before going back to face the growing throng of restless, disgruntled coffee bar patrons. Having clocked out, and his duffel bag over his shoulder, Rudy ushered himself and his brother out through the store’s loading bay.

Sodas and each other in hand, Rudy and Duncan walked down a crummy-looking street. As the two put more distance between themselves and the loading bay of Wigman’s Grocery, the neighborhood gradually evolved from dingy and dilapidated to grime-caked and vermin-infested.

“So,” Rudy finally said after a second swig of root beer. A bloodcurling scream howled. “How’d you get your paw? Did you....”

“Percy was hassling me again,” Duncan confessed. “And, I, um, got mad.”

The mountain pulled his paw out of his brother's so he could wrap his big arm around Duncan's shoulder. Rudy emptied his root beer with a third swig.

"Did you hurt him?"

"I, um, I don't think so."

"Good, 'cause I would've killed him." Duncan responded to his brother sullenly nursing his root beer. Time for round two. "Want me? I'll give you a discount!" Rudy threw his bottle into the air, and punched it across the street.

"No."

"Then what's buggin' my Sparky?" Rudy hugged his Sparky tighter as they approached a seedy, run-down gym with an illegibly faded sign: Quinn's Gym.

"Is, um, is my paw gonna stay like this?" Duncan finally asked. "Or is it um-"

"Gonna fall off?" Rudy finished. He rubbed his Sparky's arm as they walked into the gym. "I don't know. I really don't know. I'm sorry."

The other patrons, poor, grungy, and health-conscious, ignored the entrance of the mountain and his brother, as they always did. After all, everyone in Quinn's Gym was there to use the machines or lift weights, not to socialize

or snoot at other patrons.

Rudy and Duncan mercifully found themselves alone in the locker room, which was great, as Rudy's condition mandated privacy whenever he needed to change disguises. And trying to use the gym's restroom, let alone having his brother come in there with him to help change into his workout clothes, was like trying to do the turkey trot in a sarcophagus. Duncan instantly swapped his school uniform for his track suit, then as Rudy sat down on the locker room bench, helped the mountain off with his shoes. Hind paws now too big for sneakers. Forepaws swelled up and burst out of Rudy's gloves. It was coming. Soon! Rudy grabbed one pawful of his tee shirt, then two, then husked himself of it, exposing his great and massive, striped, sweat-spiked torso. He smiled a fanged, yet sort of reassuring smile as he scratched Sparky's head.

"Don't worry, Sparky. I've got more at home."

Rudy slithered out of his slacks, then stared at his shaggy lap. Duncan fished out his brother's workout disguise of a hoodie and sweatpants while Rudy sat there, like a morose tiger wearing a mask. Duncan carefully laid his brother's clothes on Rudy's lap. The mountain drew his Sparky close, grinding his shaggy chin along his brother's hair.

It would be here, maybe two hours if he could relax.

Duncan grabbed his brother's tail, five feet long now, and stroked it.

Hood on, tail discreetly tucked into his sweatpants, now Rudy and Duncan were ready to work out. The brothers began by taking turns, delicately unloading their day's collective aggravations on the gym's only punching bag. Duncan wore adorable little boxing gloves, and he filled the gym with a humming tat-tat-tatting that hovered just above the clankings and gruntings. Rudy pretended he was wearing big, furry boxing gloves. When it was the monster's turn, he gently hammered away at the bag, filling the gym with a wall-shivering sound. He thought of a mezzanine. The other patrons slowly halted their clankings, and courteously ceased their own beastly gruntings in respectful deference to the monster's own godlike exhalations. And then silence.

"Woah, easy there, big buddy!" Quinn, the owner, playfully cautioned, his leathery hand on Rudy's shoulder. "Let some of my other customers have some punches before you wear another bag out."

Rudy shared a laugh with his friend as he and his brother switched places. As Rudy guided his brother's rhythm, three of Quinn's newest clients strolled into the gym. Something about this trio of swollen gym rats was reminiscent of Rudy, or rather, reminiscent of both the person Rudy used to be, and of the person Rudy should have been, that is, had either person pompous and incapable of shoving his ego through a door.

The muscular trio haughtily surveyed their new rent-a-playpen, searching for suitable, new vict-, er, workout

partners. A burly old man at the leg press. Too deaf, maybe too surly to be safe. An overeager food-stamp warrior whizzing away on the gym's only working treadmill. Too sweaty, too smelly. Another old man in a hoodie at the punching bag. With a jailbait grandkid. Perfect.

"Yo!" one gym rat bellowed. He shared a snarl of disappointment with his swollen cohorts when Rudy deliberately failed to acknowledge the taunt.

Quinn pointed at the trio angrily. "Don't go hasslin' my good customers!" the owner warned.

"Hey, Grandpa!" the second gym rat taunted. "Where ya taking Jailb-"

Rudy's paw-fist connected with that second gym rat's sternum, granting that bloated bully the power to fly, occipitus-first, into the gym's only stationary bicycle.

"What did you do that for?" the third gym rat shouted. His fallen comrade twitched and gurgled blood from inside the wreckage of the bicycle.

"I'm just mad my man Kaplan did not kill the lot of you!" Quinn roared. The first gym rat placed his hand on Rudy's shoulder in a gesture of fake friendship.

"We're only horseplaying, man," the first gym rat lied. Rudy placed his paw on the gym rat's offending hand, oh so

easily sinking his unsheathed talons deep in between metacarpal bones.

“Don’t touch me,” the mountain rasped. The weeping gym rat withdrew his bleeding hand to his chest, unsure whether his pierced hand or impaled ego hurt worse. Quinn grabbed hold of one of the gym rats’ tank top straps.

“Listen, garbage: take your garbage friends and never come back here!”

Back in the safety of the locker room, Rudy slumped back onto the bench as Duncan indifferently packed their stuff into their duffel bag. The mountain shivered as he finally gave up fighting back his change. He sighed as his shoulder seams tore open, bleeding thick, sweaty fur.

“Oh, gods, Duncan,” Rudy moaned.

“No, we’ll be fine. The subway’s a, um, um, couple blocks,” Duncan comforted, snagging his brother’s big, trembling paw. Rudy’s arms tore free of his shredding sleeves, now hulking tiger’s forelegs.

“I can’t make it, Dunc,” Rudy said as his white-bearded chin jutted further out. He stood up on his hind legs, sloughing off his suddenly tattered sweatpants as he stretched to a still-growing height of eight, no, ten feet. “Just go home.”

“But...”

“I’ll be fine. Go,” Rudy said, his voice deepening into a soothing growl. Duncan tearfully hesitated as his brother’s snout pushed out of his face and beyond his hood. The mountain smiled, a sly cat’s smirk. But then that smile turned awful, filled with bloody teeth. Duncan looked beyond the locker room entrance to see the third gym rat standing before the pair, the petulant man’s petulant face frozen in a mask of disgusted curiosity as the third gym rat walked in.

“What the freaking freak are you?”

The monster steeped in front of his brother just as his hoodie sweatshirt popped off his still-growing tiger’s chest. That giant, bipedal tiger took a wobbly step forward, easily towering over both brother and gym rat. The monster drank up the fear in the room with a snuffling rumble, but stopped himself before he got heady and forgetful: he had tasks to do now, after all.

“Go. Home.”

Rudy then dropped to all fours, his tiger’s jaw an inch away from the gym rat’s face, his forepaws sunken deep into the lockers behind his terror-soaked prey. The gym rat dropped to his butt as he started squealing. Rudy let his prey escape from the gym. The giant tiger escaped, himself, by squeezing out of a high window. Duncan quickly gathered up the tatters of his brother’s ruined disguise, then followed Rudy out the

same window after barricading the locker room door with a chair.

The third gym rat hurled himself screaming into a busy street. Honking cars, screeching tires, and cursing motorists helped dim his terror. For a moment. Then he caught a glimpse of red fur, heard a snarl just beyond the tumult of stopped traffic. A whiff of cat musk, though, set him back on his heels, him racing across the intersection for the illusory safety of the far sidewalk.

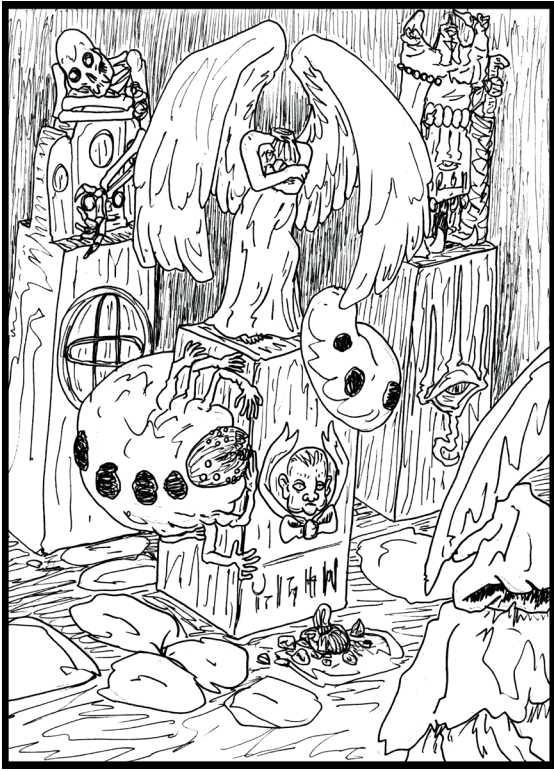
The screaming bodybuilder barged into Wigman's Grocery under the silly notion that one would find sanctuary there. The gym rat plowed through the line at the coffee bar, and, while fending off the flailing, angry people he purposely bowled over, he snatched up a man to rescue, no, to use as a human shield.

"Lemme go!" a squirming Jackie shouted.

"Shut up."

Gym rat and Jackie both fell as the gym rat tripped, but Jackie, alone, impacted with the floor. To the man's side was a bright yellow sports shoe, one of the ones worn by his attacker, laying on its side in a puddle of fresh blood. Jackie looked up to see a great, big shaggy tiger, bigger than a pickup truck, perched high on an aisle shelf. Dangling from the truck-tiger's bloody jaws was the broken corpse of that gym rat. A swish of its long, long striped tail, and tiger and

prey were gone. Jackie wailed as his grandfather picked him up to carry him away from that awful, awful puddle.



Larva

The Larva is a restless ghost born of the forgotten dead. When the living neglect to give a corpse its last rites, especially out of spite or callousness, the corpse's spirit is denied entry into the Underworld. Such spirits then return to the lands of the living as beguiling, shapeless devils in order to torment those among the living who offended them. The Larva can be distinguished in that the Larva always wears a mask. Sometimes, the mask is a warped caricature of who it was in life. Other times, the mask is merely a grotesque aid that frightens the living. The best way to exorcise the Larva is to remember who it was, and apologetically give it its long overdue funerary rituals. Barring that, there is not much that can be done beyond, ironically, ignoring the Larva and pretending it does not exist.

I

The spring storms had come again to Smew's Landing, saturating the surrounding spruce and fir forest with rain water, like they always did that time of year in the soggy, root-bound bowels of Oregon. That week's brood of storms dimmed the gloomy days with veils of drizzle and showers and darkened the nights with impenetrable downpours. The storm seemed to be the run of the litter; the whole morning was just drizzling on and off. Nothing terrible enough to keep the people of Smew's Landing indoors.

Tuesday in Smew's landing meant all of the locals involved with their town's quaint and hockey-themed eateries were bracing for the flood of tourists with smartphones and out-of-town neighbors coming for the various, apparently irresistible Tuesday deals. One site was an especially popular destination. One was the Regal Seagull Café, a friendly space that held a Gunslinger Salami Tuesday Special every week, and was, apparently, home to the best apple fritters in the Pacific Northwest according to the shared opinions of a clique of well-traveled vloggers.

The Regal Seagull Café was built from the renovated ruins of a Victorian-style crystal palace greenhouse, one of many relics from the town's early days as a lumber baron's private folly. Tourists lured in by the spectacle of a two-story greenhouse half converted into a coffee and whiskey bar found themselves ensnared by a menu of fascinating, yet peculiar food ensembles.

It was two in the afternoon, during the doldrums between the lunch rush and the post-lunch rush, that a little girl threw off her puffy pink coat and ralphed up her special underneath the crowded Table Ten. The tallest of the busboys, a veritable toqued lookout tower in flannel, straightened his bouffant, then discreetly ran to get a bucket and mop. The busboy smiled, the radiance of his golden chestnut brown face calming the Table Ten party's squawkings of gross violation. The lanky busboy paused his mopping to reach up underneath his threadbare sleeve of his threadbare flannel shirt with his mahogany spider hand to scratch a thundering itch. After three minutes of vigorous scratching, the busboy rolled up his threadbare sleeve to watch an immaculately fluffy cascade of auburn needles push their way through the polished brown skin of his tanned, sinewy forearm.

It was happening earlier than normal again.

He wanted to rip that suffocating fabric off of his growing arm, off of his growing chest, but clearly, this wasn't an impulse to act upon during the start of the Tuesday post-lunch rush. Defeated, kind of, the busboy sighed as he rolled his sleeve back down and resumed mopping up barf.

"Luke?" Wendy Johnson, the Tuesday manager said. "Luke, you look awful." Luke started to reply, but found himself choking as he swallowed back down a mouthful of hot mucus. He hoped it was just mucus. "Lordy, Lukey, you're turning green!" Wendy proclaimed, watched her busboy's luxuriously swarthy complexion bleach into a bilious olive-oil

blanch.

“But,” Luke sputtered.

“No, Luke,” Wendy countermanded as she plucked the mop shaft out of her busboy’s bony, suddenly auburn-frosted hands. “I’ll cover your shift. You know how you get when you’re like this.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Luke said. “Thanks,” smiling demurely in gracious defeat. Manager Wendy was right: he had to get out of here before he started reeking of pus again.

“Don’t thank me,” Wendy corrected. “Just go home. Our insurance won’t cover another employee dying on the clock again.”

As Wendy took over mopping up the barf, Luke ran his bony, now auburn-frosted, now olive-oil colored fingers through his greased, ebony pompadour. He didn’t spare a look back as he headed toward the employee lounge. A man in a blue suede jacket, the lead of the doomed party at Table Ten, loitered around the mopping manager even as his group dimmed their squawking while they relocated to Table Five.

“Hey, what’s the matter with Slick Racer?” the suede regular asked.

“Asthma or gangrene, or something,” Wendy grumbled.

“The owner insisted we hire that schlub.” Wendy paused her mopping to lean into her regular’s hairy ear. “Though, between you and I, I just wanna keep Luke around long enough to learn how such a nobody can make such a killer Bananas Foster.”

In the employee lounge, Luke chucked his apron and toque into the laundry hamper, then scampered out the back exit. The late afternoon air in the blue spruce and fir forest was uncomfortably brisk, almost clammy, the sort of Spring weather normal people cocooned themselves from in layers of fleece. Rain or shine, Luke always wore shabby, almost tattered jeans and diaphanously thin flannel shirts, whatever he could afford to scavenge at Smew’s thrift shop. Luke didn’t care too much about the weather. Now, for the most part, he dressed solely for other people’s concern. By the time Luke jogged about a mile beyond the town limits, he put his lard-colored, edema-bloating, auburn-furred hands on his bony knees, and bellowed a gurgling roar as he coughed up a bolus of scalding mucus. Everywhere on the mossy forest floor the steaming, bluing gunk splattered upon, blackened and scorched. Luke bellowed again, louder as his auburn-fuzzy, once thin, lard-colored chest inflated with power and muscle, popping off his shirt buttons one by one.

The lard-colored, auburn-furred man straightened back up, and wiped his blue-stained, auburn-stubbled chin on his fraying sleeve as he kicked moss and rotten loam over his ammonia-reeking mess with his blue-stained work boots. Luke scratched his shaggy, auburn-furred chest, then turned his

Luke scratched his shaggy, auburn-furred chest, then turned his head sharply to the right, letting that soft crack sort his wandering thoughts.

“Hey, buddy! Are you okay?” a woolly-faced, wool cardigan-clad yuppie called to the blatantly unwell young man from just beyond a ferny ridge. The scruffy yuppie hurriedly tromped through the damply verdant undergrowth over to his new, ailing friend, frantically waving his mittened hands in garbled semaphore.

Luke, meanwhile, groaned a quiet prayer for a flash flood.

The yuppie samaritan sidled up to his new buddy patient and went “Dude! Lemme dial nine-one-one for you!”

Luke started weeping tears of gummy, bluing goop. He shook his wobbly head as he stifled a laugh. *Who says dude anymore these days?*

“Don’t,” Luke croaked. He swallowed another incoming bolus of hot, gooey liquid. “Just shouldn’t have had all those pilsners for lunch, pal.”

“You sure?” Yuppie savior was adamant about not buying Luke’s machismo. “I can drive you to the Eukaia E.R.”

“I’m fine,” Luke lied as he started to dial up his act a few more notches. The unwell man arched his back as he thrust his swelling, auburn-carpeted chest out forward. He put his

He put his puffy fists akimbo, and stupidly showed off the weird, slithering muscles writhing underneath his visibly thickening layer of bristly, orange fur. The yuppie was still unconvinced, grimacing with even greater concern now as he reached out for Luke's broadening, throbbing shoulder. Luke raised his swollen, auburn-furred paw to fend off the overly helpful yuppie's mitten, only for his paw to connect with the yuppie's bearded face, instead.

It took Luke five, maybe ten minutes to realize the once overly helpful yuppie, now lying motionless in the salal leaves before him, was dead, the dead samaritan's head turned at what should be an obviously egregiously inappropriate angle. Luke grew so light with hot guilt and incandescent dread that his worn and failing shirt tore itself into ribbons, falling off his still-swelling, auburn-furred torso. He fished a smartphone out of the dead yuppie's jeans pocket, crushing the device into glass shards and plastic slivers in his puffy grip. That done, Luke slung the still-warm corpse over his orange, shaggy shoulder, and anxiously hurried home.

For most of the past ten years since Luke came to haunt Smew's Landing, home was a rickety, repeatedly patched and re-patched aluminum storage shed he built from a defected kit he salvaged from the town's hardware store dumpster. Luke tossed his dead yuppie friend into his shed, then barricaded the door with a log: he'd scavenge the corpse further, later. That done, he slipped his swelling, mucus-bleeding feet out of his mucus-coated work boots and mucus-soaked socks. By now, Luke's auburn-furred paws had already

swelled up into useless, auburn-upholstered knobs. No use playing with his jeans' fly now. Not that it mattered, as the seat of his mucus-drenched jeans loudly ripped open, allowing his lard-colored buttocks to fart out a long, squishy, lard-colored tail that flopped about upon the pleasantly rotten leaf litter. Luke spat out a strong gout of boiling hemolymph as his auburn-carpeted back thrust further out in a mountainous hump. That lumpy, orange gold and lard strongman clenched his auburn-bearded jaw as his great, growing tail grew still more auburn fur, then lengthened further and further, growing longer and longer and thicker and thicker with each swishing thrash until he knocked away the log serving as the door lock to his precious shed.

"Criminy," Luke gurgled. He tried to flex his now-impossibly muscular arms but found himself unable to summon the correct brain spark he needed to bend his now-lost elbows. Luke gurgled again as he choked on yet more hemolymph. He spread his freakishly bloating legs, letting a shudder of erotic relief wash through his ballooning self as his useless jeans disintegrated off of his overgrown, shaggy hind legs. The freakish, swollen-tailed, auburn-furred strongman with greasy black hair stood there in the yard of his overturned shed, flapping the two pieces of pallid meat that used to be his arms, impotently trying to pose like his childhood circus heroes, even as he ballooned into a bigger, golden-furred blob with writhing, wormy muscles.

Luke wanted to be a strongman once, a long, long time ago when he was a little boy, by another name, who wanted to be

a firefighter. The auburn-furred blob bubbled in pain. His tiny, still human head then began retracting into his swelling neck! He fought against it for a moment but then let his head disappear into the serpentine folds of his impossibly wide shoulders as a second pair of meaty, cone-shaped arms erupted from his nipples. Luke sank down onto his knees, he was sure he still had knees at this point, and laid onto his expansive, expanding belly. He lay there, his jiggling body seemingly dead for a minute.

Then Luke-blob trembled and quivered as he fought to thrust his still human head out of his golden, gelatinous bulk again. He roared one last gurgling roar as he spewed forth another big stomachful of steaming, flaming mucus. Rivers of more, pallid, scalding mucus dribbled out of his eyes, out of his nostrils, and then out of his ears as his own face ballooned out to rupture like a feverish boil at critical mass.

A big insect head, spattered with yolk-orange eyes, slickly gleaming with congealing hemolymph, fought his way out of the gooey, gummy, gaping hole in Luke-blob's thorax. Luke wagged his kitchen cleaver mandibles as his head eventually ripened into lustrous mahogany. His head now rock-firm, Luke fought some more to pull his new, lacquered ebony limbs free. And once that was done, the van-sized beetle grub casually crawled out of his liquefying old molt.

Luke looked back to see his precious aluminum shed tipped over into his big, stinking, flaming mess of boiling mucus and oxidizing hemolymph. He loudly clacked his mandibles in

frustrated aggravation. He'd have to move again when he finished. So annoying carrying his shed to a new location.

Once Luke's new, dragon bulk dried, he started crawling away as his creamy hide frosted over with a second, thicker, shaggier coat of longer auburn needles. His sight grew bleary as he plowed through the rot-slick humus, but it didn't matter. He knew exactly where he was going, sight or not. Upon heading the familiar trunk of a specific giant spruce, he climbed up and up the trunk of that hapless tree until he penetrated the upper limits of the forest canopy. There, he waited, like he always did this time of month, every month, year in, year out, for decades, for moonrise.

II

Tuesday being Tuesdays, the post-lunch rush at the Regal Seagull Café mutated into the dinner rush soon after three in the afternoon, thanks to a steady flow of out-of-town foodies curious about what exactly was so special about the special. Business was so jumping that Tuesday Manager Wendy found herself thinking the unthinkable and doing the undoable by summoning her neërdowell daughter, Wexler, to the Café to help her cover Luke's shift. As much as she always swore to dock that yutzy yontz's pay, demote him, or even outright fire him, Manager Wendy was always glad to have her prodigal busboy back, whenever Luke bothered to come back. Mostly because Luke was the one, the only employee in this miserable, miserably hip, hipster-greasy spoon whom she could always trust to never steal out of her precious, precious tip jar. Also that his snark was always amusing.

Whatever.

Rather than help tend to the busy tables, Manager Wendy paced around the Monstera Foyer, nervously watching all of the busy tables as she waited for that schlub Deborah to come back with another load of apples. If that dumb crone didn't come back with the Café's secret salami ingredient soon, they were all sunk. Looking down at all those happy customers, chattering in happy anticipation, it made Wendy queasy. With worry. She wheeled around.

"Wkhat on earth are you doing up here?" she yelled at

at Wexler. Wendy actually knew why her daughter was here. She plucked the warm smartphone out of her vinyl-clad daughter's lovingly, competently self-manicured fingers. "Go wait on tables, Wex!"

"But you know how humidity fades my hair dye, Mom," Wexler calmly whined as she straightened her pink and licorice-black hair. Wendy stared at her daughter.

"Do you know what will happen to your hair if you get docked pay again, Sweetie?"

Wexler noiselessly and begrudgingly descended the foyer stairs, secretly scheming a way to recover her precious, precious phone from her imperious manager-mother. Wendy leaned onto the foyer railing, utterly exhausted from goading her slugabed daughter back into productivity. At least that clod Luke never balked about accepting pointless busy work assignments. A hunched-over Deborah in a wilted fedora and a soaked overcoat came dragging a dollie overloaded with crates through the front doors. Wendy came bounding down the foyer stairs, hollering about needing to use the back entrance. Wexler sighed as she looked up from refilling water glasses at the Orchid Booth tables.

Water duty done, Wexler carried her three-quarters-empty water pitcher back to the kitsch, nonchalantly, but narrowly missing getting run over by her Mother madly hauling the Café's desperately needed secret salami ingredient. In the kitchen, one of the cooks handed Wexler a tray of two orders

of salami for Table Twenty.

“Two Saturday Night Specials on a Wednesday!” The cook bellowed. Just as Wexler exited the kitchen, her Mother snatched the tray out of Wexler’s hands. Not that Wexler cared too much; she’d just filch her share of the tips out of her Mother’s tip jar tomorrow.

Whatever.

Wexler went back to fetch the pot of coffee the cook forgot to give her.

“Here y’go, gentlemen!” Wendy said as she cheerfully placed the two orders before the two hard-hatted gentlemen seated at the Bougainvillea Fountain. Wexler came by to refresh the gentlemen’s coffee, right on time, too. “Is there anything else we can get you two before we serve the check?”

The two gentlemen reeking of bark mulch shared a furtive, sinister rumble.

“We’d like to try the apple fritters,” one said. Wexler visibly paled underneath her powdered sugar blush.

“We’ve constantly heard great things about it,” the other explained.

Manager Wendy smiled wide, her normally adamant veneer of professional calm cracking like lake ice in the spring.

She smiled frantically at her daughter, who then replied with an agonized pantomime retelling of the time she almost got fired over Luke's disastrous, nay, catastrophic attempt to teach her how to make their Café's flagship dessert.

"I will get started on that for you guys right away," Wendy proclaimed as Wexler nervously scuttled off in search of other, coffee-thirsting patrons. Wendy made a beeline to the Honeysuckle Lounge and dragged her favorite sidekick, Deborah, into the kitchen. The two foresters shared a shrug.

"Anyway, Derek," one of the foresters resumed. "What is killing all of these trees? For the last ten years straight, they've been dying one by one. Is it a super disease?"

"I found some goop on a tree last month," Derek replied, pecking at his eggs with his fork. "I sent it to a lab." He began dissecting his meal. "So far, the results suggest it's some sort of scarab beetle, maybe a cockchafer or a mutant stag beetle."

"Come on, Derek!" the other forester blasted as he slammed his grungy fist onto his plate. "Beetles don't eat trees whole, drain them dry of their sap or break off all their branches overnight!"

"Calm down, Brad," Derek implored as Wexler came scuttling back into view to sweep up Brad's ruined meal into a

dust bin. “We’re not dealing with a mass murdering serial killer. Oh, and put that, and a new meal on my tab, please.”

“Sure thing,” Wexler replied. “Oh,” she continued, leaning into Derek’s ear. ‘If you two want to know about serial killers, you should take a deep dive on the Killer Oblate.’”

“Killer Oblate?” Brad didn’t know whether to be piqued or annoyed. But since he just broke one of her plates, he was going to be piqued for now.

“Ten years ago, Deacon Jeanpierre Aix was run out of Smew’s Landing when he was discovered trying to kidnap his church’s underaged organist.”

“And?” Derek asked.

“Deacon Aix disappeared without a trace, except for a puddle of slime and his blood in his church’s cemetery. People say God cursed the deacon to become a flying slime monster who gobbles up lost people in our forest.” Wexler then wiggled her freshly painted puce nails for emphasis.

Brad chuckled incredulously. Or sneezed, hard to tell.

“Uh...” Derek vocalized as Wexler grinned.

“I think the Deacon was murdered, probably by his own wife, or the organist’s Mother, who he was having another affair with, and his body got dumped into a septic tank filled with

lye and drain cleaner.”

The Tuesday manager clapped her rough, dishpan hands onto her daughter’s petite, black-lace shoulders.

“That’s enough wowing the paying customers with Smew’s Landing’s colorful local heritage, sweetie,” Wendy cheerfully scolded as she dragged her overly chatty daughter away back into the kitchen. An elderly, almost hunch backed woman in a painfully pale pink waitress uniform came by bearing a tray with two apple daiquiris in two large margarita goblets. Upon setting the two drinks before the two confused foresters, good old Deborah then produced two matches from her armpits, struck the matches on her hairnet, and tossed them into the daiquiris, setting them ablaze.

“Enjoy your Apple Flamberge,” Deborah joylessly declared while the flaming drinks guttered.

“Um, ma’am, that’s flambé,” Derek hesitantly corrected.

“And we ordered the apple fritters,” Brad added. Deborah shuffled back toward the Honeysuckle Lounge.

“Whatever,” Deborah rasped. “The guy who makes it isn’t here, and more importantly, happy hour is almost over. I need more tips to pay off my car.”

???

Dusk came as the wrung-out rain clouds sequestered themselves away. The spring nights in the spruce and fir forests around Smew's Landing were frigid and damp, almost unforgivably inhospitable for humans, even by the hardy locals' standards. They weren't cold enough to discourage the thousands upon thousands of tree frogs vocally jockeying for mates and territory, though. Nor the tiny, loud, speckle-colored owls who ate them, either.

Sunset finally came, and Luke the giant beetle grub's lushly plush, auburn furred back distended out until it burst like a truck-sized blister, spilling out hot pus down his tree's trunk. From that gooey, melting ruin, a pallid, butter sculpture creature, Luke's alter ego, emerged. A vast, pale horn telescoped from his domed forehead like some gigantic pimple while two unblinking ruby eyes turned into glittering topazes. More inflating horns jutted out from his mountainously humped thorax. Crumpled butter pom poms straightened out into sail-like wing cases, and then amber-paned wings. Sticky butter flesh hardened into sleek, shiny, yet thorny obsidian armor bleeding bristly auburn fur.

Sunset progressed into dusk, then into night, and Luke's alter ego, now a dragonish beetle easily larger than a steam locomotive, spread his shimmering amber wings to fly away into the darkening, starry sky.



Sunrise snuck in unannounced and unseen thanks to the

thunderous herd of fresh rain clouds that returned from the coast.

A scruffy-faced man, Augie, cocooned in a puffy, brown, two-hundred-something-dollar fleece jacket slumbered uneasily in his mud-caked station wagon. The scruffy-faced man had been pouting all night, awaiting the arrival of his hiking and drinking buddy, Wayne, who uncharacteristically refused even the basic courtesy of turning his phone on. And after finally brooding himself to sleep at four-something in the morning, Auggie wasn't going to deny himself the pleasure of dreaming about punching out that woolly-faced, backstabbing jerk who stood him up and made him miss out on Zombie Apocalypse Night at the Regal Seagull.

At 9:28 am, Auggie and his wagon were both jostled awake by a very loud, very invisible bolt of lightning striking the road in front of him. Auggie stopped fiddling for his car alarm key fob when he realized it was not a lightning strike, but a fallen, barkless, chewed-upon trunk of what used to be a three-hundred-year-old fir laying in the road. A deep, quiet humming rattled the shrieking wagon, audibly jingling the many coins in Auggie's cupholder. And then Auggie's wilderness yuppie brain went boink the moment he realized that that tree trunk did not fall but was dropped from above.

An obsidian and auburn shadow rode in from the gloomy sky on a cloud of shimmering amber to alight upon that

barkless meteorite. A minute or five of patting the chewed tree trunk with manhole-cover antennae, and the yacht-sized beetle decided that there was nothing of worth left in its half-eaten meal. The obsidian and auburn creature rotated around to fix a glittering pair of giant, topaz cabochons on Auggie's mud-covered wagon. Auggie just sat there in his driver's seat, corpse-like, as whatever this thing was casually walked over to his station wagon. A steely tentacle speared through the wagon roof, piercing Auggie squarely in his stomach.



Thursday morning was thunderously dreary and rainier than usual for Smew's Landing's neck of the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps it was because everything in that particular swath of forest that wasn't wet was inexplicably covered in slime, and that everything that wasn't unnaturally slimy was sopping wet.

It was half-past ten that morning when the foresters Derek and Brad found the chewed-up fir tree trunk laid in the road. The two arborists had seen many, many instances of botanical devastations throughout their careers; a honey fungus apocalypse, two gypsy moth armageddons, fungal and bacterial blights literally out of both their wazoos more times than they cared to count, a Megiddo full of scale insects, and then there was the time the two barely survived getting all of their clothes eaten off in a locust plague. But the state of this tree was something perennially mysterious, vexingly unknowable, yet uncomfortably similar to a rawhide bone fifteen minutes

after being gifted to a dog. The two foresters took a long, creeping walk around the misplaced, displaced tree in that heavy rain, their mouths open despite the power of that rancid, sweet and savory stench stubbornly clinging to the unbearably moist air. Brad's horror suddenly frothed into rage.

"Do you still think a beetle could have done this?" Brad screamed over the miasma and precipitation. The two finally rounded past the gnawed-upon tree's gnawed-off roots, coming to a behemoth knob of putrefied cream surrounded by a battleground of shattered, blackened panels. Derek and Brad finally covered their noses with their gloved hands now that they could see the stench together with its source. Derek motioned at the obviously suggestive arrangement of the shards with his free hand.

"Yes, Brad," Derek answered, trying to yell over their shared nausea. "A beetle probably did this."

The two then noticed there was a car door opened in that van-sized glop of vile, pale goo.

III

It was late Monday morning at the Regal Seagull Café.

Assistant Manager Flauros tented her fingers in satisfaction, watching all those happy faces sweeten in anticipation for that sour swill. If she could make enough profits, or better yet, in tips, she might even convince that anal stickler, Monday Manager Mr. Boonkha, to ask for a promotion. Maybe to Head Assistant Manager, even. Assistant Manager Flauros went back to work checking and rearranging the tables' flower arrangements. Monday Manager Boonkha was finishing inspecting the restrooms, after all. Flauros crushed a spider chrysanthemum bloom in her hand as she watched a familiar-looking mahogany person walking through the front doors carrying a backpack. It didn't matter that Luke was wearing a nice, new, shiny umber jacket. Flauros was going to get hell again if Luke tracked in more odors.

Luke weaved and bobbed around the busy tables, with an unknown destination somewhere in the café. A woman leaving Table Nine bumped Luke, and when a waiter lurched to save his off-duty coworker from reaching the floor, both Luke and the waiter tumbled backward into the indoor waterlily pond. Oh, Flauros was definitely going to get hell for that.

As Assistant Manager Flauros assisted the wet waiter to a restroom, Luke discreetly left a big trail of water lily water

to the currently empty employee lounge. There, he sloughed his wet clothing, put aside his new wallet, and then packed his wet clothing, together with the reeking dirty clothes in his soaked backpack, his soaked socks, and his sopping sneakers into the café's washing machine. He poured in three-quarters of a bottle of jasmine and lavender scented detergent in the hopes of exorcising that rotten sock and pungent corpse perfume he was unfortunately known for. That done, Luke hunted through the laundry hampers for something to wear. He found a pair of dungarees, probably from the Saturday shift, and pulled them up on his shaggy, bronze-furred hind legs.

Luke zipped up the dungarees as he stared down past his carved, cherrywood chest. He felt fleshy, extra meaty this time around. Luke started posing and dancing in the empty employee lounge, a shirtless, wire sculpture of a circus strongman, a smokey-tanned, underfed Adonis. A sinister thought hatched in Luke's shaggy head like some wicked, newborn Athena.

Maybe I could start using more than one host at a time, he considered, shoving an apple, into his mouth. *People would notice,* he predictably realized.

He started filling a paper cup with nondairy creamer and sugar. People would get concerned about the growing missing persons list, too. Luke thinned his creamer slurry, then ate his apple core.

The underfed Adonis paused his overthinking to take a long, slow swig of his coffee-flavored creamer sludge. Luke adored the heady, floating buzz of caffeine, how everything turned into soothingly hypnotic static once that bitter rush hit. He hated the taste of coffee, though, something about the aroma of burnt wood displeasing him. That, and he'd probably need to stay in his normal routine. To be on the safe side, obviously.

"How come you're always doing your laundry in the Café?" Wexler asked. Luke slurped down the rest of his coffee-spiced creamer sludge, turned around.

"On what they pay me, plus whatever I make in tips here in Shangri La, I can't afford to visit a vending machine, let alone go to the laundromat across the street."

"Then why don't you get another job?" Wexler complained as she picked at the corners of her pink nails. "Or at least put a shirt on? You look like a big, skinny wicker-basket man."

Luke snorted and then got handed a novelty tee shirt by a balding, dumpy man in a tweed suit and barista's apron.

"Please remember what management has said about performing stripteases," Monday Manager Boonkha scolded. "As well as flirting, inter-employee romances or other prohibited behaviors on company premises, Ms. Johnson, and Mr., um, Luke."

“Yes, Mr. Boonkha,” Wexler sighed as Luke struggled to pull that medium-sized tee shirt over his head. Manager Boonkha began shifting around the coffee machine, replenishing coffee grounds and refilling everything else Luke had just drained.

“Furthermore, Wexler, and, um, Luke,” Manager Boonkha continued. “Neither of you have shifts today: why are you two loitering in the employee lounge?”

“Why can’t we?” Wexler retorted.

“Yeah!” Luke added, finally pulling his wild, ebony-maned head through that tee shirt hole. “And I’m doing my laundry!”

“You two can’t stay because today, you two aren’t café employees, and more importantly, you two can’t stay because I say you two can’t stay.” Manager Boonkha threw a dozen meadow-lilac dryer sheets into the dryer in anticipation of Luke’s odoriferous load, then sighed in frustration. “No wonder your Mother dyes her hair every week.”

Wendy’s daughter huffed.

“Could the prodigal girl and I at least stay to finish my laundry, your lordshipness?” Luke pleaded. Manager Boonkha gently took both Luke and Wexler by their arms. “If you two are that desperate to loiter, go loiter in a coffee house.”

Manager Boonkha guided the two to the back exit.

“Isn’t the Regal Seagull a coffeehouse, too?” Wexler sarcastically lawyered.

“The Regal Seagull is a café,” the manager corrected.

“But my laundry!” Luke desperately pleaded. “My shoes!”

Manager Boonkha led the two beyond the exit’s threshold.

“You can retrieve your laundry after my shift is over,” Boonkha adamantly stated.

“But, but my laundry!”

“After my shift is over, Mr. Luke. Ms. Johnson.”

And with that, the exit door gently shut closed, and locked. So much for appeals.

Luke raised his big, hairy foot. Wiggled his long, hairy toes, and then started stomping barefoot in the legion of rain pulled in the cracked asphalt of the alley. Wexler watched this spectacle with cat-like fascination. She realized that, in the ten years since she met the restaurant’s favorite busboy, she had never observed Luke’s saccharinely helpful mood beyond enigmatically milquetoast snark, let alone witness the bananas foster child throw an honest-to-God temper tantrum. Then Luke suddenly stopped and turned toward Wexler.

“You wanna do lunch, Wex?” he asked.

Wexler took a second or twenty to process what she just heard before she allowed her puce lips to pry themselves apart. “I thought you just said you were broker than broke less than ten minutes ago.”

“My wallet changed its mind.” Luke loudly rolled his shoulders, mildly unnerving Wexler with his eerie, crackling flexibility. “But I’m not going to let his majesty keeping my clothes-”

“And shoes, don’t forget about your shoes.”

“But I’m not going to let being barefoot stop me...” and then he wrapped a long, dark, willowy arm around Wexler’s wool and corduroy shoulders, “...from stepping out wit’ma baby, tonight!”

Wexler squirmed in her coworker’s apparently iron embrace.

“Baby? I’m a twenty-something townie, and as far as I know, you’re twice as old as my Mom.”

Luke let go of his coworker, truly stung by her cruel assessment. “I’m only thirty,” he lied as he threw up his long, long, tree branch arms to plead. “So I’ve been to a concert back in the day, does that make me Methuselah?”

“See? See? No one alive still knows what you, Luke the busboy man, knows about funny nineteen-eighties commercials!”

Luke’s face turned into a solemn teak mask. “Little babygirl person named Wexlerianna Van Riverstein,” the teak-masked Luke facetiously snarked. “If you’re done with your flailing, can we go out to lunch now?”

Wexler ceased her histrionics, now confused. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“Huh?” Luke put a big, spidery hand to his big ear as he went walleyed. “Can’t hear you! Whatcha sayin’?” Then he hooked his long arm around Wexler’s.

“Don’t you want to, um, new shoes?” Luke lifted up his big, wet, still hairy foot, wiggling his long, wet yet hairy toes. “Well, um, busboy man, lead the way.”

The busboy ran his spidery fingers through his shaggy ebony mane, restoring his beloved, young bouffant. That done, Luke twirled around a lamp post underdressed and then took Wexler’s gloved hand. “Shall we, milady?”

Wexler gave a tired, disgusted sigh as she pulled her hand free, turning away to go back to her Mother’s apartment. “You’re spiking my weirdometer.” But as she walked away, she realized her gloved hand was still caught in Luke’s iron grasp.

“Dudeling Junior O’Gratincakes,” Luke mocked. “You don’t know anything about weird.” Wexler put her free hand on her hip and scowled; Luke got off the lamp post, let go of his coworker. “You’re a big, macher mystery hunter, but you don’t have a blog. You don’t even know why people call me Luke, even though that’s not my real name.”

“Wait, what?” Wexler sputtered.

Luke waved from down the foggy street. “Come with me, and you’ll see a world of pure imagination!” The busboy sang as he bounded away on his long legs. Perplexed, yet annoyed, Wexler followed her gangly coworker while not-so-quietly ruining her town’s awful plague of cracked sidewalks. Luke’s merry little game concluded at the foreboding, tomb-like entrance of a pub. In playful imitation of a cigar chieftain, Luke held one long arm high in mockery of a tomahawk. With his other long arm, Luke held one of the grim, wrought iron doors open for a panting Wexler. She grabbed a fistful of Luke’s tee shirt.

“Huh, huh,” Wexler huffed. “I am so going tuh to kuh kill you fuh for this,” Wexler huffed. “Wah walking in all this accursed humidity is making muh my mascara bleed.”

Luke gazed upon Wexler’s furious, melting face, tittering deeply as he watched tears of carmine eyeshadow dribble down her sweat-marred cheeks. Wexler immediately let go

when she realized her aggravatingly annoying coworker was bouncing his lean, yet disgustingly muscular pecs underneath his tee shirt again. Then Wexler was guided into the hazy lobby. Wexler coughed at the pub's cigar reek while Luke approached a waiter with grease-petrified hair.

"Two for lunch, please," Luke requested.

"The pub doesn't serve minors," Yaan, the oily-haired maître d' growled at the melting-faced girl.

"I'm twenty-two!" Wexler yelled, even as she continued blotting humidity off of her smudged cheeks with a handkerchief.

"I know," the oily-haired maître d' growled. "Got a howl out of your Mother, though, Wex."

"We'd like the special, please," Luke interjected.

"Very good, sir," the maître d' growled. "Right this way."

The maître d' led the two on their winding way through the dim, wood and aged tobacco labyrinth of the pub's main dining room. Wexler remembered one time the pub was closed down. None of the staff or patrons could be bothered to follow the health or fire safety codes about smoking cigars indoors. She was thirteen at the time and recalled quite clearly that the town's extremely fearsome fire marshal made a big song-and-dance about running the pub's staff out of Smew's Landing in a parade, only to suddenly leave town without a

trace, never to be seen or heard from ever again. She also remembered the pub staff naming a cocktail in the disappeared marshal's honor when they reopened the following week.

"Thanks, Yaan," Luke said as he and Wexler scooted into their designated (and overstuffed) booth.

"I'll be back with yer drinks, and tell Wendy I said hi, please," Yaan growled. "Anything else?"

"I'd like a Puff of Smoke with extra mesquite," Luke said.

"Very good, sir." With that, Yaan skulked away into the smoking gloom.

"Isn't Yaan just a ball of sunshine?" Luke beamed. Wexler squinted, unsure if she was hearing weird sincerity or more of Luke's sardonicism. The grimly grinning waiter placed a basket of lacquered chippy things that smelled onto the table.

"Applesauce, compliments of the house," the grinning waiter grimly demurred.

"Thanks!"

"Thank you."

Luke helped himself to applesauce as the grinning waiter, too, disappeared into the smoke. Wexler exhaled for focus, then

“Tell me what your real name is Luke,” Wexler eagerly demanded. The mahogany strongman stopped chewing in order to swallow while his complexion turned cherrywood.

“I never said anything about that, Madam Sherlock,” Luke said. “If you recall, I said I’d reveal why people call me Luke.” Luke then smirked. Maybe it was the creepy, combined ambience of dim lighting, electric candles, and a ten-year-old aura of cigar smoke, but Wexler realized there was something off about Luke’s smirk this time, something scary.

“But-”

“When the time is right, I’ll tell you,” then he grinned wide, flashing bright teeth. “And only on my terms, because you don’t have the upper body strength to pry it out of me.”

Now there was her goofball Luke.

“So, then, why do people call you Luke?”

Luke ate some applesauce. “Remember when I first came to work at the Regal Seagull?”

“Vaguely.”

“Well, when Mrs. Terwilliger’s secretary, her old one, whatshisname, Fungo, Canopenero...”

“You mean Jailbait Ferdinand Cano, who got fired five years

for skimming funds?”

“Yeah, that’s the schmuck: during my job interview with him, he mishears my condition as leukemia, and Mrs. Terwilliger-”

“Wait....” Wexler’s face lit up with that joyously luminescent inner glow of nosy curiosity. “You have a medical condition? Is it fatal? Is it contagious? Are there boils? Is it-”

“Private. It’s private.” Wexler ate some applesauce to shush herself. “Mrs. Terwilliger misheard Ferd say my name as Luke, it was like no one there had batteries in their hearing aids that day.”

“So what is your real name?”

Luke scooped up the last bit of applesauce, shoved it into his mouth, and began chewing. “Mmm.”

Wexler’s smudged face twisted into a gorgon’s mask of whiny agony.

“Oh, come on! Tell me, please? I gotta know your real name, or I’ll just die!”

The mahogany man in a pub tee shirt swallowed his bolus of applesauce. “The opposite, milady. You’ll die if you do know.”

“Your drinks,” Yaan growled as he deposited two parfait glasses, then a fuming, copper goblet before the pair on their table. “I’ll be back with your salami in a moment.”

Luke downed his puff in a hungry gulp, followed by his drink in a predatory slurp. Wexler stared at the mahogany strongman as she sipped.

“What?” Luke asked as he scraped his lower lip with his wrist.

“I thought you hate smoke.”

“I said I hate burnt wood taste.”

“Oh, um, well, then, where’d you come from and why come to Smew’s Landing?”

The mahogany man sighed as he hunted for those last few drops of his finished drinks. He grumbled as Yaan came back with their meal. Luke began neatly dismantling his while Wexler began sawing hers in half.

“Ooo, tell me, tell me, where’ya from, and why do you like it better here?” Wexler chittered as she sank her teeth into her halved salami.

“Let me tell you a story,” Luke began as he organized his salami burger’s solid components. “Once upon a time in a kingdom far, far away, the crown prince decided he was going to become a fireman instead of king when he grew up.” Wexler

squinted incredulously. “But mom said he should be a footballer, and dad said he should be a lawyer.” Wexler ate. “And while the power trio argued, the crown prince’s brother, the other prince, ran away from home to join the circus to live out his dream of being a strongman.” Luke finished sorting his meal’s solid components. “But ’cause the prince’s brother was way too weak and scrawny to ever become the strongman, the circus staff turned him into a lion, a tiger, and a bear, and then tried but failed to put him down when he ate their lion tamer and seventeen audience members.”

Wexler stopped mid-chew, letting a thread of drool dribble out past her pink lips.

“That made no sense,” she stated.

“Neither did Inanna’s descent into the Underworld to steal her sister’s throne,” Luke retorted just before he rolled his salami. “I mean, why did she want two thrones? One for each of her gigantically ample butt cheeks?” He shoved that cylindrical mess into his waiting mouth.

“Point taken.” Wexler finally swallowed the last of her food. “But you still haven’t told me where you’re from, or why you came here.”

The mahogany strongman flushed cherry as he gobbled up some applesauce. He then began meticulously scouring his spider fingers.

"I just did." Luke took forty seconds masticating his, then the rest of Wexler's meal. "You're a clever girl, and I know you're much smarter than a Hollywood actress."

Wexler pursed her pink lips in vexed thought, even as she blotted them clean with her linen napkin.

"Point taken," she repeated with a poutier pout.

"Would you two like any more drinks?" Yaan growled. "Dessert, perhaps?"

Wexler drained the last of her drink.

"We're good," Luke said. He looked at Wexler, who then pushed her plate with her remaining morsels. "We'll pay the check up front."

The pair scooted out of their booth to follow the grease-haired maître d' back through the smoky labyrinth. At the front desk of the lobby, Luke took out his filth-glazed wallet and retrieved a portrait of Andrew Jackson, one portrait of Abraham Lincoln, a portrait of Alexander Hamilton and seven portraits of George Washington, setting them onto the counter before Yaan, with an urging, to keep the change. As the two pass beyond the wrought iron doors, Wexler stopped in her tracks when she realized Luke wasn't walking with her.

Luke was almost startled when he felt Wexler's gloved hands hook onto his bare, walnutwood arm. He looked to his side to

see strong, independent Wexler holding onto his arm, wiping her blush onto his tee shirt sleeve as she made fluttery goo-goo eyes at him with her mascara-smeared eyes.

“Isn’t the big, strong, sailor man going to escort the poor, defenseless, little Wexler home?” Wexler cooed. From Luke’s lofty height, he couldn’t even bother to summon an insincere reaction of amusement. Wexler punched her coworker in his floating ribs. “Take me home, you blockhead. Be a gentleman.”

Luke sighed as he readjusted his arm in his coworker’s demure embrace. “Fine, fine, gentleman mode: activate.”

Five blocks down the foggy street, a left turn at an avenue, and the two came to the statue-heavy entrance of Pennyroyal Apartments.

“We’re here,” Wexler said.

“I live at the Water Lily Flats on the other side of town. I thought you knew this.”

Luke threw up his spidery walnut hands in frustration before rubbing his agonized face. “I thought you knew I’m not a nosy person....” He dug his spidery fingers deep into his sable hair, churning it vigorously before recomposing his calm and reconstructing his pompadour. “Just please lead the way, Wexler.”

Wexler retook her gallant coworker's willowy walnutwood bare arm and snuggled into his side. "Look at us, bickering like an old married couple..." she giggled. "Imagine what our kids would be like!"

Luke sighed, then discreetly gulped to keep a bolus of salami-flavored mucus from rising back up into his throat.

The walk from Pennyroyal Apartments to Water Lily Flats was lovely; the clouds boiled away, and the fog delightfully evaporated in the afternoon sunshine. Blackberry bushes were everywhere in town, dominating empty lots, infesting landscaping and choking the greenways. The way the black berry bushes were the densest in the blasted ruins of Mergel lus Manor suggested the plants were actually a curse levied upon Smew's Landing. Luke's chest heaved and expanded ever so slightly; he was looking forward to Blackberry Season. Free food, mostly. He sighed wistfully, then Wexler, too, sighed.

At Wexler's urging, the pair cut through an alleyway as a shortcut. "Romantic, so romantic," she insisted, probably sardonically, and God help him, Luke found himself almost agreeing. Grimy, eroded brickwork, oily puddles of ominous garbage juice oozing between his spidery toes, numerous bouquets of rancid trash aromas assaulting his nostrils, definitely a place that made him feel alive. And then the two coworkers arrived at a sprawling complex of stucco bungalows and fluorescent-white flowering pear trees. Luke gawked at the swimming-pool-turned-lily pond by the manager's

Luke gawked at the swimming-pool-turned-lily pond by the manager's office. He gazed longingly at that scummy, speckled green lens even as Wexler guided him toward Apartment B-Two Seventeen.

At B-Two Seventeen, Wexler finally let go of Luke's arm to fish out her door key. Luke wrenched off a twig full of pear blossoms as Wexler fumbled for her key, and he dragged the twig through his bright teeth, flicking the now-bare stick away the moment before Wexler turned to look back at him.

"So, see you at the 'Gull?" Luke asked as Wexler opened her Mother's apartment door. Wexler smirked.

"Yeah, people have been complaining about your apple fritters."

"Oh? What's wrong?"

"You haven't been making them."

Luke chuckled as he walked off.

It was dusk by the time Luke finally returned to his aluminum shed. It had been a long time since Luke had walked through the forest barefoot, and he realized he needed to enjoy doing that again. He pulled off his tee shirt, wiggled out of his coworker Dean's dungarees and flopped down to wallow in a thicket of soft ferns and salal leaves.

Luke lay there in that thicket, naked except for a sudden dusting of wispy black hair on his chin, chest and belly rapidly thickening into a fluffy blanket of auburn fur growing across his body down to his wrists and ankles. As he lay there, waiting for the waning half-moon to rise, he decided he'd just relax that night. His wiry muscles grew loudly lumpy as his auburn chest became vast, broad and quite shaggy. "Yeah, I'm gonna take it easy tonight," he smugly growled as his suddenly deeper voice dropped another five octaves. Luke stretched mightily, letting his lumpy, shaggy body grow lumpier and shaggier. He took his swelling, auburn paws to his still-human head and vigorously ruffled his bronzing coif. "Yeah, I deserve a break."

IV

In the dimly dappled summer light of the spruce and fir forest, that gray limo barreling down the I-Two Ninety looked like a black hearse late for a funeral. The limo's passengers were indeed in a hurry, as they were indeed late for an important appointment. Thus the impetus of the chauffeur to go thirty miles over the highway's speed limit. Inside the limo's cabin, Miriam wore a dark, probably blue business dress next to the limo's minifridge, helping herself to yet another swig from her bottle of sparkling apple cider wine every time she felt the limo dip below sixty-five miles per hour.

"Mother!" a woman in an identical dark business dress scolded. "We're late, already! What will they think if we show up with you stone drunk again?"

Chuck, a man in a dark, also blue suit took another chug from his own bottle of apple cider wine, numb to his indignant wife's nagging, and oblivious to his two sons' violent bickering over yet another round of punch buggy. "Anita, dear, let your Mother unwind," he said. "You know how tense she gets whenever we have to deal with that toupéed boor your benighted sister shackled herself to."

Miriam chuckled into her cider as Anita fought hard her urge to sink her four-hundred-something dollar manicured nails into either her Mother's throat or her own temples. "Listen, Chuck. Just because Mother has put us in her will

“Listen, Chuck. Just because Mother has put us in her will does not mean we’ve been enslaved forever as her mindless enablers.”

“Daughter, hold your tongue,” Miriam barked.

“Mother, either talk, or drink, not both.” Miriam snorted as she kind of begrudgingly returned to her bottle. “Heracles! Pluto! Stop!”

Everyone was thrown onto the limo cabin’s floor when the chauffeur slammed hard on the brakes. A branchless, barkless tree had tumbled onto the road two hundred feet ahead.

One of the boys peeled himself off of his brother and crawled away to press his face onto the limo window. Deep in the undergrowth beyond the side of the road was a big, topaz orb, like an orange-brown glass sun hovering over an ocean of green foliage. Then the boy realized that sun was really an unblinking eye.



Enough dreaming, enough sleeping. It was summertime, and that meant it was Berry Season. Luke sat up in the stream he fell into the night before. He touched his thin, wiry-muscle chest just as the last of his new host’s ruined shirt finished disintegrating into watery slime. He stood up, and the slimy remnants of his new host’s jeans finished dissolving into slimy, bluish gunk tangling in the soggy, bronze fur of his

gangly hind legs.

“Ugh.”

Luke squatted back into the water, taking annoyed care to rinse his fur clean. If he didn’t, wearing pants would be hell. Now clean, Luke bounded out of the stream and spent a half hour discreetly hiking his nude way through the forest back to his shed. Since it was peak tourist season, Luke had to move his shed five times in the last month to keep nosy picnickers and buttinsky nature lovers from stumbling upon his precious home.

Back at shed sweet shed, Luke quickly pulled on his usual outfit of a threadbare flannel shirt and repeatedly torn jeans. It was slim pickings in Luke’s shoe pile, as he fitted his big, ebony-furred, flipper-like hind feet into a mismatched pair of flip-flops. If this kept up, Luke would have to save up to hitchhike to that Cost-Fewer Shoe Store downtown. Maybe he could wheedle Manager Wendy into giving him a ride.

Whatever.

Luke grabbed a pair of plastic, ten-gallon buckets, shut his shed, padlocked it with that new lock he finally got around to buying and bolted back into the forest. It was Berry Season, after all.

???

It was Thursday lunchtime at the Regal Seagull Café. That meant it was Canard en Daube Day. And that meant that the restaurant was a zoo full of enraged customers, and stayed that way until closing time.

Assistant Manager Flauros carried a full tub of dirty dishes into the jam-packed kitchen in order to hand it off to Dean and Wexler, who were currently on dish duty. That done, Flauros squeezed her way through the crowded kitchen, wormed her way through the equally crowded employee lounge and made her way to the back exit, sitting down on the steps just beyond the exit's threshold. Flauros let out a pained sigh, then pulled out a book of matches and her last emergency cigar from her shirt pocket. She lit up and groaned relaxingly as she puffed away at her stogie.

"Heya!" Luke shouted.

Flauros almost dropped her cigar upon hearing that.

"Oh, Mr. Luke," she said as she recovered her bearings. She reluctantly offered her precious cigar to the smiling, bucket-bearing, off-duty busboy towering over her. "Did you want this?"

"Nah, but thanks," Luke demurred. He set his two apple-loaded buckets down, then sat down beside the obviously frazzled assistant manager. "Everything okay, Flower?"

"No. Today's been so busy, I haven't even had time to set the

flower arrangements.” The assistant manager sucked hard on her stogie. “If Boonkha was here, I’d probably be fired already.”

“Well, help isn’t here today, so there’s that.”

“I suppose so. Thanks. And thank you for getting the apples for Pie Friday, too.”

“Try one,” Luke suggested. Flauros stopped puffing her half a cigar. Luke smiled slyly as he hefted one of his apple buckets.

“You think I should?”

“Gotta taste test for quality, after all.” Flauros shared the busboy’s sly smile. The assistant manager grabbed an apple. Luke stood back up to carry his buckets through the lounge and into the kitchen where Deborah eagerly snatched both buckets out of the off-duty busboy’s spidery hands. Just as Luke turned to go, a damp, dishpan hand gathered up a fistful of Luke’s shirt.

“Hey, where did you take my pants to?” Dean demanded.

“They’re in the hamper where you always leave them. Besides, it was one time.”

Dean paused thoughtfully as he let go of Luke’s shirt. Luke then disappeared back into the crowd of coworkers while

into the crowd of coworkers while Dean looked back to see Wexler wasn't at the sink.

Workers at the Regal Seagull Café almost unanimously chose Thursday Manager Steph as their favorite manager, as Steph was always too busy helping bus tables and taking orders to bother with bossing or nitpicking on anyone. That worked in Wexler's favor that day, as there was no one guarding the Monstera Foyer leading to the administrative offices on the second floor. Every time Wexler made her way onto the second floor, she felt like she was going back in time. Dim yellow light emitted by lamps, antiquated, flaky fleur-de-lis-themed wallpaper, fading photographs in frames, it was a dusty, mil-dewy paradise. Wexler fished out a worn-out credit card just as she fiddled with the doorknob of the records office. She then returned her lock-picking card to her pocket upon remembering that none of the second-floor offices were locked.

Inside the dark office, Wexler booted up the nineteen ninety-two computer, only to discover that Dean never got around to updating or upgrading that computer. The computer had a velvety layer of dust that should have clued her in about its condition, too.

No matter.

Wexler opened a filing cabinet drawer and began rifling through employee files. Jeff Boonkha, Dean Endao, Deborah York, Mizia Flauros....The room turned into an abyss of light.

elderly voice barked. "What, may I ask, are you doing snooping here?"

Wexler stood up straight to face a silver-bunned old woman in a dark gown glowering at her.

"I want to know the secret ingredient to the salami," Wexler lied as she slammed the drawer shut. "Deborah was being too coy."

Mrs. Terwilliger squinted her sunken eyes, and quietly hissed through clicking, age-yellowed teeth as she slowly stalked toward the computer.

"Oh, please, deary," Mrs. Terwilliger burbled. "I stole the recipe."

"Ssso, nothing special besides capers?"

"None at all, I'm afraid." Mrs. Terwilliger put a long, white nail to her warted chin as she studied the pattern of dust on the computer keyboard. "But I doubt that this is why you're here, Ms. Johnson."

Wexler ummed, then sighed in defeat.

"I wanted to mail Luke a letter, for a surprise," she lied. "You don't suppose I could get his address with your help and permission, Ma'am?" Mrs. Terwilliger scratched her beak-like nose, then proudly strode over to the filing cabin-

et against the far wall. There, she opened another drawer, fished out an employee file, and made Wexler's heart skip two beats by clicking her teeth again in audible disapproval.

"Look at this," Mrs. Terwilliger complained as she showed Wexler the empty employee file folder for Luke Nööguy.

Wexler skittered backward toward the door.

"I'll just give the letter to Luke when I see him, then." Wexler curtsied. "Thank you so much for your help, Ma'am."



Luke hiked through one of the rockier forest paths, whistling as he hefted a big trash bag filled with food scraps and wilted flowers. He'd eat like a king. At least for a day. Technically, Assistant Manager Flauros asked him to take that load to the dumpster.

"Hey, Mr."

Luke stopped in his tracks. He dropped his sack of treasure, scanning for his mystery guest. Dangling from a tree branch, maybe ten feet off of the ground, was a girl in a pixie haircut. Luke reached up and plucked the girl from the branch like a midsummer pear. He set her down onto the needly loam and set about gently flicking stray leaves out of her hair.

"Lemme guess," Luke grinned.

“I saw a big green bug,” pixie cut replied. “Thanks for getting me down.”

“How big?” Luke asked, motioning widely with his long, tree branch arms.

The girl held out her fist, enclosing a space as big as a large strawberry. Luke chuckled.

“It was really shiny, but it flew away when I almost fell.”

“Sounds like a fig-eater beetle.” Luke grew thoughtful. “I haven’t seen a fig eater in a long time; they don’t usually come this far north.”

“How come?”

“Too wet, winter’s too cold.” Luke smirked again as he folded his arms behind his shaggy head. He stretched loudly, then his threadbare flannel shirt yawned wide, vomiting forth a red wave of damp, auburn fur. “Uh....”

Pixie cut girl shrieked, taking to her booted heels as a pair of lymph drenched, bony arms erupted from Luke’s broad-again, shaggy-again chest. Luke snatched up his trash bag of treasure, and bolted again, leaving behind his now-ruined flip-flops.

???

Luke, tall, young with sweaty, shiny, cherrywood skin sat on the bench at the number Three Hundred Sixty-Four Bus at Downtown Smew's Landing. He anxiously tapped his enormous, plastic-bag-taped feet on the sidewalk as he waited for the Twenty-Two headed north. The young man nervously adjusted his newish tank top over his massive, auburn-furred chest, hopeful that no one would notice his second pair of arms hidden somewhere underneath his tank top. Luke was confident that he could afford the fare and transfer onto the Forty-One.

"You can do this, Luke," the young man with cherrywood skin huffed. "You can do this. It's just public transportation. What happened last time was just a Luke fluke." Luke snorted.

Luke turned to his side to see an old lady in a white fur coat, holding a snarling albino pekingese. The young man snorted at the sight of a bandy-legged dollop of whipped cream then immediately stood up to wordlessly offer his seat.

"Pardon, Ma'am," Luke said over the barking.

"So gracious," the old lady cooed as she plopped herself onto Luke's prewarmed seat.

"You headed north, too, Ma'am?" Luke asked as he kind of surreptitiously shifted his arms. That loud mutt reminded him why he couldn't stand small dogs. Or big and medium dogs, either.

“Oh, no, I’m headed to see my acupuncturist, then do some shopping.”

“Oh.” Luke scratched his furry throat.

The old lady cackled as she stood up for the arriving Twenty-Two. As the two got on, Luke whistled, blowing at his jet-colored bangs. It was fun being able to walk to the back of the Bus.

The back of the Bus was nice. The seats’ polyester plush still had an acrid new car smell to them, lovingly blending with the many hidden layers of aged sweat, cigarette smoke and drug fumes within. Luke looked out the dingy window, watching Downtown Smew’s Landing transition into Oregon suburbia. As much as Luke loved people, he couldn’t stand the suburbs. Too many strange trees that too many fussy people fussed too much over, and too many dogs.

The lady’s Pekingese started barking at Luke again the moment it realized he was glowering at it again. Luke broke eye contact to go back to looking at the suburban trees. He shifted uncomfortably in his lonely seat at the sight of a strawberry arbutus. He ate a strawberry arbutus once, having mistaken it for a large manzanita. Gave him painful, and painfully skunky gas for a week. Luke looked away when he caught sight of a bay laurel.

Downtown continued transitioning into suburbia. Dusty, urban-blighted. The old lady and her dog got off of the bus.

Luke yanked on the cord getting off at a stop next to a bodega.

Just as Luke walked over to the Bus Stop's grimy bench, his stomach trumpeted loudly. Perhaps there was time for a snack before the Forty-One arrived. Luke lifted up his wrist to check the time, and saw just his cherrywood-skinned wrist, coated in a generous dusting of ebony and auburn hair.

Luke then remembered he hadn't worn a watch since his last watch, a wristwatch his Father gave him as a birthday present. The first night he started changing, in fact. He realized he loved that dinky thing. That, and he had time for snacks, and he had money for snacks.

Inside, the Bus Stop was grimly dim, and cramped. Nonfood items reeked of dust, lemony furniture polish, and detergent. Luke mentally thumbed through the plastic packets of freeze-dried apples, then scanned the other shelves. The moment Luke reached for an apple, a fluffy, brown and white Persian cat suddenly emerged from behind the shelf to screech at the young man as though he tried to wrench her fluffy tail off. Luke jerked backward, bumping into the apples, knocking them to the floor. The big, toothy grin of a nearby boy in a dingy gray wifebeater wilted into a snarling scowl as the screaming cat fled deeper into the Bus Stop.

“¿Qué carajo le hiciste a mi gato, pastel prieto?” a tanned boy growled.

“Nothing, nothing!” Luke pleaded as he picked up the apples, even as the snarling boy in a dingy wifebeater drew even closer. A big, burly bald man in a matching dingy gray wifebeater emerged from behind another aisle. El Baldo scanned Luke disapprovingly, scowling sharply when he saw Luke’s homemade boots.

“What are you doing?” Baldo shouted. Luke put up his big, spidery hands and gently backed away from him.

“Nothing!” Luke pleaded again. “I was just leaving!” Baldo grabbed at Luke’s tank top with a meaty hand.

“What is going on over there?” Clemente, an old, must-ached man with snow-white braids, hollered. Then the old man turned toward his elder grandson, shouting, “Van, let go of that boy!” Van gripped Luke’s wrist harder as Clemente turned toward his younger grandson. “Chuy, stop being a creep!”

“Chuy and I caught this freaky bum trying to murder and rob us!” Van shouted, still gripping Luke’s spidery hand. “I say we give this jerk a tour of our dumpster!”

The younger grandson Chuy’s scowl bloomed back into a big grin at the sound of that, a switchblade in his grip clicking with joy.

“Chuy, stop that!” the old man calmly repeated. “Let the boy go, Van. Listen to yourself, what are you even

thinking?”

Luke pulled his wrist free and hurled a plastic two-liter bottle of apple soda onto the floor. By the time the rest finished wiping their eyes clean of soda foam, Luke was already outside, bounding down the street. Luke let a stray thought about regretting not getting any apples float into his head. That particular musing quickly evaporated as demonic pain erupted in Luke's left calf. Luke limped around a corner and down an alley. He stooped down to dig his index finger and thumb deep into the hole in Dean's dungarees fishing out a hot bullet.

“¡Te encontré, pinche ojete!”

As Chuy grappled with Luke, Luke finally decided to burst free of his tank top, unfolding his auburn-furred arms. Chuy's brown eyes went wide as he gawked at the sudden, metamorphic appearance! He just kept staring at his big chest full of matted, blue-stained auburn fur until Luke clamped his spidery hand over the boy's unresisting, slack-jawed face. Luke then clutched the boy's thin neck, and then he squeezed hard. That done, he then threw that now wet, still-warm corpse aside, uncaring of the loud, messy splat on the alley wall.

“Urgh,” Luke spat. Dungaree seams giving way as his swelling hind legs bloated too quickly with too much painful power. He inhaled, growing taller, growing wider as he regretted not having the time now to savor Dean's pants tearing apart. He could feel his hairy, furry skin peeling off in big, wet sheets.

He could feel his hairy, furry skin peeling off in big, wet sheets. More pain blossomed across Luke's still-widening back as Van emptied a round of bullets into that monster. Luke slowly turned around, stepping out of the sticky, dissolving ruins of his borrowed dungarees as Van frantically tried to reload his handgun. Luke casually slapped the gun out of Van's palsied hands, and grabbed his surviving assailant, freshly unsheathed hooks digging deep into hot flesh. Then Luke opened his mouth wide, letting his long, suddenly centipede tongue snake out toward his captured victim, only for Van to bite down hard on the tip.

Van choked on a mouthful of scorching, acridly scalding venom as he tore himself free of Luke's pronged grasp. Luke collapsed onto the concrete, his hulking, malforming body suddenly transforming into a blue mass of rancid, auburn-furred insect parts. Van ran away screaming down the street, not looking back even as he tore off all of his stinking, blue-defiled clothing.

???

Shopkeeper Clemente Verididas could not bear to enter or even turn toward the alley where police and that hazmat team were investigating his grandson Chuy's corpse. Not just because his grandson was murdered, and not just because Chuy died from being mangled alive by someone's bare hands, but because the stench off of Chuy's mangled corpse was just too much for that poor old man and his much put-upon heart and lungs.

Back in the backroom of his bodega, a police investigator helped Clemente into a chair, and another detective handed the old man one of his own bottles of apple juice.

“Please tell us again what happened when you last saw your grandsons Chuy and Van, Mr. Verididas.”

The old man clutched his bottle, fingered one of his braids, and finally sighed. “Chuy got into a fight with some homeless guy ‘cause the bum, a really big’n tall bum, spooked our cat. He tried to murder and rob Chuy and Van.”

“And then what happened?”

“And then my other grandson, Van, jumps in, threatening to murder the bum ‘cause Van’s always such a dumb encabronado, always needin’ to be his white-knight protector.”

“And then what happened?”

“Then I got to arguing with that zoquete Van, who tells me he’s gonna kill the bum ‘cause that wey thinks the bum is some sort of bank-robbing desperado! All ‘cause the guy spooked a cat!”

“Mr. Verididas,” the investigator said. “Can you describe the homeless man your grandsons were harassing?”

“He was really tall, really tall, taller than either Chuy or Van. Really buff, really buff, with a big, big chest, and really, really

long arms. And really long, really skinny legs in loose pants. He seemed top-heavy, he wasn't one of the neighborhood bums."

"What ethnicity was the vagrant?"

"Um...he had a dark complexion, like a mug of black tea."

"African American?"

"I don't know, he had shiny black hair, in a greaser's jellyroll, an--"

"Pardon?"

"Y'know, bouffant hair, but the hair on his big chest was red, I like he was hidin' a big dog or a tiger under his shirt, and he had a really big nose."

"I see. How old was he? Could you tell?"

"I, um, I don't know..."

???

In another alley about forty-three-and-a-half blocks away from his grandfather's bodega, Van Nanchez, now naked, climbed up a fire escape and into his girlfriend Nancy's apartment. Van wanted to hide at his Mother's apartment, but police had already been there by the time he approached

it, and more importantly, he was in no proper state of mind to talk or think about what happened to his poor Chuyito.

Van slunk about in that dark apartment like some exhausted beast who was just too frazzled to bother searching for that light switch. Thank God Nancy was working late at her beauty salon that day. He was in no state of mind to explain to her what happened either. Van crept into the bathroom, locked the door, and after, maybe, ten minutes of hesitation, flicked on the lights. Van's reflection was tallow, sallow and puffy-eyed. Am I dying? He touched his painfully puffy eyelid, making both eyes water copiously in retaliation. His jaundiced fingers stung as he touched his drool again. The rancid metal taste of that monster slobber loogie was getting stronger. Van downed an entire bottle of minty mouthwash, that brand with alcohol, and assumed he got some respite from that awful curse lingering in his mouth. He scratched at his slimy, sticky, graying, swollen, swelling chest, suddenly realizing that his chest was frosting over with a thin layer of fine, black hairs. He reached into the medicine cabinet for a razor. When he tried to remember if the pink one or the purple one was his, a thin stream of green, mint yet cinnamon-flavored drool dribbled out of his mouth. Then the rest of the swallowed mouthwash came raging up out of Van's stomach and into the sink, immediately followed by a stomachful of hot, beige-colored, ammonia-flavored pus. Another bellow, and the sink was filled to the rim with disgorged vileness. Weakness grabbed the unwell young man, dropping him onto the floor. When Van dragged himself over to the toilet bowl for another round, all nausea could squeeze out of him at that

moment was a belch of cadaverous acridity that wafted back into his sallow, suddenly whiskery face. When he sighed in wobbling, trembling relief, Van then shuddered, then gurgled, then emptied his bloating stomach three, four, and then finally, five more times of that awful, awful overripe béchamel-like bile.

“Am I dying?” Van crawled into the shower stall and, after another ten minutes of back-and-forth between catching his gurgling, burbling breath, and painful weeping, mustered back enough strength to turn the shower faucet handle. Cold, lukewarm, very warm, to hot, to scalding hot, and then the handle came off in Van’s wet, sticky grip. Not that Van was in the right state of mind to care. That boiling rain was what Alkaious, what Van needed. Enough strength was returning to his pulsing, throbbing, jaundiced limbs to let him pull himself back up onto his sticky, grimy, pulsing feet.

Blotching tan skin finished turning butter yellow, finally turning ever so slightly pinkish as Van ground a bar of soap into his darkening, increasingly shaggy chest. As he began singing in an off key, roughened voice, he was too busy trying to reabsorb life energy from the hot water to notice or care that, underneath his foamy exoskeleton of fresh lather, that wispy coat of fine black hair spreading past his abdomen, down his thighs, onto the tops of his throbbing feet, across his broadening, aching shoulders, down his halfway bulging arms, was steadily thickening into a deep layer of warm, walnutwood-brown fur.

Van grabbed one of Nancy's shampoo bottles and squeezed hard. As pale, lavender-colored shampoo and conditioner went everywhere, Van thought for a moment he had Chuy's face in his hand, his manito's brain matter oozing from between his fingers. Startled, Van backed out of the shower stall, shattering the shower stall door. A concerned knock on the bathroom door.

Nancy arrived home early.

"Van? Are you okay? What happened? Your Mom called, Chuy died!"

"My God, what?" Van feigned. He reached back into the shower stall to fiddle with the handle. After scrubbing himself dry of lather with a towel, he draped the towel over that puddle of glass shards on the floor before wrapping another towel around his hairy waist as a damp, terrycloth sarong. A couple of flushes to the toilet, and Van finally opened the bathroom door. The young hairdresser waiting on the other side fell backward onto her shag carpeting as that miasmatic wall of ghastly, funky, escaping steam punched her square in her pretty face. Van offered Nancy his abnormally hairy hand.

"What happened?" she croaked.

"You fell over," he chuckled.

"No. What happened at the bodega?" Nancy groggily reiterated. "What happened to you? Your hair...you have hair." She

She motioned at his shaggy, tan-furred chest. “Everywhere.” Then she motioned at the layer of tan creeping across his scalp and chin.

“I’m trying out a new hair tonic I got. Used up the whole bottle,” Alkaious lied. Nancy furrowed her professionally manicured eyebrows as Van faked an obviously insincere smile.

“What brand did you buy? What happened with Chuy and you? The police are looking for you.”

Nancy took Van’s hairy hand. He pulled back, silently praying that she didn’t have time to feel the gunge leaking out of his still damp skin.

“I’ll talk about it tomorrow.” Van sighed anxiously. “I just wanna sleep it off, babygirl.”

Van waddled over to Nancy’s couch and flopped onto it. Nancy smirked when she noticed how Van’s back hair matched the couch’s upholstery.

“You want a blanket?” Silence plucked her smirk off of her face. “Honey?”

“Yes, please” came a hoarse whisper.

Nancy got a cotton comforter out of her closet and draped it over her ailing boyfriend’s unnaturally hairy body. When

she bent down to kiss Van's now-sideburned cheek, they both shrank away in a shared cringe. Nancy spit out a tongueful of brown hair, immediately realizing her boyfriend's freshly washed skin shouldn't taste like musky bile.

"Van, are you feeling okay? Maybe we should go to the ER."

He pulled the edge of the comforter over his scruffy head.

"

Can we go tomorrow? Please, babygirl, I just wanna sleep."

"Okay," Nancy shrugged. "But first thing in the morning, I'm taking you to the hospital, even if I need to use a wheelbarrow."

She walked into her bedroom, unable to banish the stray thought of Van's gigantic silkworm cocoon appearance.

???

Luke is it now? a voice allied out. Luke, tell me, is this the end? Is this our end? Is this your end?

"Not at all. Of course it isn't."

Aren't you tired? Aren't you tired? Aren't you ready to go?

"I am not, I wasn't ready to go when we first met, and I'm not ready to go now. I will rest when I need to, and I will not be ready until I take back what was taken from me, what was

taken from us.”

What about the price you’ve paid? What about the price you’re still paying?

“I agreed to our bargain, and I uphold my end of it, even now. If all you wanted, if all you want to do, is to wheedle out of me a confession of regret I don’t actually have, stop bothering me.”

But all you’ve done. All you’ve witnessed, all those faces, doesn’t all that weigh on you like a pile of boulders?

“Again with the wheedling. What I’ve done, all I’ve seen, everyone I’ve met, everything confirms my epiphany about life!”

What was that?

“What’s the point of life if you can’t consume it?”

Is that what you believe?

“It’s what I know. And until I get my fill, and until I get tired to the point where rest won’t heal me, it’s none of your business. When it is your business, I’ll let you know.”

???

Nancy could not fall asleep. Van started up with that heart-

breaking, wet, hacking cough, spending four hours sounding like he was trying to regurgitate a hairball. But every time she tried to wake him up to take him to the hospital, he'd just speak in a demure tone. "No, no, I'm fine, I'm fine."

Maybe around two something in the morning, Van finally stopped coughing, and instead, started making an awful squelching sound. At first, Nancy thought he was puking or retching, but then eventually realized the sound was more rhythmic, as if someone was stomping their feet or clapping their hands inside a tub of jam. Then she realized it wasn't squelching, nor puking, but tearing, as if someone were digging their fingers deep into a raw chicken thigh to peel the wet flesh apart from the bone.

"That does it!" Nancy shouted.

With that declaration, Nancy threw off her covers, hopped out of bed, stormed out of her bedroom, flicked on the living room lights, and was struck dumb. On her couch lay the now-impossibly swollen, gelatinous Van Nanchez, once her boyfriend, now this big and jiggly, cavefish cream-colored almond jelly sculpture. Nancy's heart pounded in her fore head as she watched whatever that thing that used to be her boyfriend sit up on her couch to look at her. Now, that thing was hatching. A tall, butter-white, pus-soaked man with a big nose rose from the rupturing, boyfriend-shaped sac. Nancy turned away to vomit at the scent of that old funk coming off of that hatching abomination on her melting couch. And as Luke regained his bearings, as much as he would have loved another long, hot shower, he took advantage of Nancy's

incapacitating distress by grabbing her recliner to smash open her living room window. By the time Nancy could breathe again, that horrible slime man who hatched from Van was long gone down the fire escape. And her couch cushions apparently all rotted away from the smoldering, blue goo.

V

It was another summer Monday morning in the spruce and fir forests around Smew's Landing. Warm, humid, perfumed with loamy, piny fragrance. The Westbound Eighty-Three came rolling down the I-Two Ninety West. As the Bus leisur-ely made a turn in the forested highway known as Widow's Twist, something, a brown carcass appeared on the asphalt in the Bus's wake, as if the Bus hit a dehydrated deer that wasn't there a moment ago. The carcass straightened his long, hairy limbs, then Luke stood up on his auburn-furred hind legs to scamper off the road and into the ferny undergrowth.

As much as Luke loved running barefoot through the forest, and despite having lived as a carefree, clothes-free hermit for almost thirty years straight, that gangly, auburn-furred beast was not in the mood to enjoy running around naked in the forest at the moment. Call it pique, call it frustrated petulance. Luke's plan went bust, and he was aggravated and mortified. What was supposed to be a simple shopping foray wound up as a big bungle of death, destruction, and grief.

Luke knew better than to let his emotions get the better of him. He stopped to sniff the sultry air while checking exactly where he was in his forest. This was just a setback. Judging from the cluster of yew trees, Luke estimated he was about four miles southeast of his shed. This was just a setback. He had two more packets of emergency outfits left in his shed. Luke bolted again as he heard a falcon screeching. He'd just go back to the Regal Seagull and beg for a ride from Wendy

or another coworker. Now he was two miles from his shed. And if all else, he could call Yaan up on that big, big favor he still owed him.

Three miles past Widow's Twist was a fenced-off bend of the river called Quahaga's Tears, named after a vengeful, local goddess to whom the Twist also refers to. As it was once told to Luke, a long time ago when he was someone else, the swift rapids of the bend were the remorseful tears the goddess shed for all of the lives lost whenever she fed her children, the big, slick boulders hiding underneath the jade and foamy waters. Luke avoided Tears whenever he could, for obvious and not-so-obvious reasons. But Tears was still a lovely place to visit from a safe distance. The droning roar of the rapids was soothing, the colors of the dancing waters, jadeite and nephrite, were hypnotic. Luke decided he wasn't in that big of a hurry to get home as he leaned against the cast-iron guardrail. The interplay of cool spray and muggy summer air was thrilling and made Luke's auburn hackles rise up in a big, shaggy wave.

Whatever.

Luke inhaled deeply, letting his hairy wicker chest violently expand, loud enough to be heard almost above the river roaring.

As the shaggy-furred busboy sagged onto the railing, he noticed someone on the far side of the river. Some dumb kid was sticking their dumb little head through the spacing

between the railings. Luke felt his belly fur thicken in big clumps as a defense mechanism.

“Hey! Hey!” Luke tried to yell over the spraying din. “Hey, kid! Don’t do that!” The kid leaned further into the rapids, then grew more interested in looking at his light-up sneakers lift from the damp pavement upside down in a cartwheel. Luke began frantically waving his long, long arms. The boy stood upright to see a dancing strongman on the other side. The boy smiled and waved, and when he turned back to call for his Mommy to see the funny man, too, the boy fell backward onto his butt, then slid forward into the waters below in one fell, silent swoosh. His own warnings failed, Luke leaped over the guardrail and into the raging waters, hind paws first. In a calmer stretch of the river, perhaps about two miles downstream from the goddess’s tears, a sopping wet mahogany strongman, covered from chin to elongated toes in sopping wet, dark auburn fur, majestically rose out of the river, carrying the boy he rescued from being dashed upon the rocks. Luke laid the still, wet boy on a sun-warmed rock, and realized the blue-faced kid wasn’t breathing. He placed his palm on the boy’s shirt and felt a faint heartbeat. He touched the boy’s pudgy face and had a vision of Chuy. Luke put the tips of his right index and middle fingers to the boy’s belly, pressing ever-so gently down, making the boy thrash and cough while spitting up a lot of river water and his half-digested lunch. Luke casually turned the coughing, retching boy onto his side as the boy continued puking up, from the stench of things, salami. Luke tried to remember what he was like when he was a kid.

“Are you okay?” Luke asked as he wiped the boy’s chin with his spidery fingers and a leaf. A woozy grunting. Luke picked the boy up in one hand, tucking the still woozy thing in soggy clothes firmly under his long arm, and walked away from the river edge.

“Hey, mister,” the boy said as Luke continued to carry him under a still damp, furry arm. “Um, thanks a lot for saving me, but I can walk by myself.”

“The path I know back to Tears is a steep climb, and I don’t want you getting hurt again.”

“Oh, I guess you’re right, then, mister.”

“Call me Luke, kid.” He picked up his pace as he scrambled up a mossy rock pile. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Ravah.”

“That’s a nice name.” The Tears’ roaring came back into his ear’s view.

“Yeah, it’s great.”

Luke stopped at the end of the great log bridge he was scaling, threw back his shaggy, still wet head and howled into the forest.

The two came to a vast thicket of blackberry bushes. Luke

Luke hoisted Ravah onto his shaggy shoulders, then continued onward through the thorny thicket. Five minutes through the brambles became ten minutes through the brambles, then half an hour. Ravah plucked a berry, spat the sun-rotted thing out, and then got handed a sprig of perfect berries by Luke. The boy handed a half-smushed berry back to his escort, a thanks.

The Tears Visitor Center came into full view. Luke hadn't been to this wretched, log cabin hive of villainy and eyesore since the staff banned him from it for that incident with that not-so-tame raccoon over twenty years ago. He figured it would be safe, or at least okay to bring the boy inside, though. It would be safe to go inside, after all. There had to have been staff turnover, as those grizzled knotheads couldn't last forever.

"Hey, Mr. Luke Man," Ravah asked again, bending over Luke's head. "Whatcha sayin'?"

"Oh, um, just a bird call."

As the two exited that bay of endless brambles, one of the staff, a burly forest ranger with long, gunmetal-colored hair done up in tightly wound buns, stepped out onto the Center's observation balcony. She turned toward the bramble field, her dark eyes narrowing in aggrieved hate as she spotted Luke. She cocked her tranquilizer rifle before unholstering her walkie-talkie.

“Stalker, stalker, ten-nineteen, ten-twenty-four, stalker, this is Clyde: the booger-wooger is back, I repeat, the booger-wooger is back.”

Clyde’s walkie-talkie squawked back to life in her gloved hand.

“Clyde,” Rutherford responded. “Ten-twenty-two. Find out what booger-wooger wants, stall for time until we get back there, then shoot.”

“Ten-four.” Ranger Clyde squinted harder. “The booger-wooger has the boy.”

“Stay there, Clyde, don’t engage.”

“Roger.”

Luke walked up the steps of the Visitor Center, and upon reaching the threshold, lifted Ravah off his shaggy shoulders to deposit the boy on the floor. Ranger Clyde slowly, carefully approached the two, her rifle clenched securely in her large gloved fists, her square jaw clenched with two decades worth of lovingly tempered wrath. Luke’s topaz eyes watered as he struggled to keep them from rolling back into his head. He forced a polite smile as he placed a spidery hand onto Ravah’s shoulder.

“Well, well, well,” Clyde cawed. “Your sick reign of depravity here twenty-two years and seven months ago wasn’t

here twenty-two years and seven months ago wasn't enough for you, eh, booger-wooger?"

"Hello, Anita," Luke sighed.

"Hiya, Ms. Clyde!" Ravah piped. "Mr. Luke Man saved me from drowning!"

"How nice!" Clyde cooed. "Luke Man is it, now? Too bad you neglected such heroic prestige with Rutherford twenty-two years ago."

"Whatever, Anita," Luke sneered, ignoring the ranger's seething. He bent down, putting his mouth close to Ravah's ear. "If you're ever in Smew's Landing, stop by the Regal Seagull Café, and I'll treat you to ice cream and a movie."

"Wow!" Ravah began to wiggle with excitement. "You live in a seagull?"

Luke patted the boy on the head before jogging back toward the brambles. He wondered what went through his own parents' minds when they realized he disappeared from their world and they weren't going to find him.



It was another summer Saturday morning in Old Town Smew's Landing. That meant Old Main and Juniper Streets were taken over by the Saturday Farmer's Market. And that

meant almost every local farmer, gardener, picker, baker and anyone; everyone else in the western half of the county with even the pretense of artsy-fartsiness to set up a stall to hawk their overpriced wares to tourists and other ne'erdo-wells suffering from too much money in their pockets. And then there was Wendy Johnson, who, with her sidekick Deborah, and minion-of-the-day Dean (lugging Wexler's old Radio Flyer), each having to go down to the Smew's Landing Farmer's Market to pick up the twenty gallons of mugolio syrup from Frau Tanne's booth that Mrs. Terwilliger ordered. Wendy would have preferred to save time and money and just make some syrup, but Mrs. Terwilliger insisted on authenticity for the Seagull's upcoming March of Flavor Week next week.

Oh well.

"Luke!" Dean shouted as he spotted Mrs. Terwilliger's favorite busboy sitting at a ridiculous-looking makeshift booth made of cardboard and fruit crates, apparently selling little paper lunch bags filled with blackberries. "What did you do with my dungarees again?"

The off-duty busboy in overalls scowled as he folded his long, willowy, auburn-furred arms across his puffier than normal chest.

"You're wearing your dungarees now, Dean," Luke retorted. Dean scowled back while Wendy gigglesnorted. "You're always wearing dungarees. If I didn't know better, I'd think

you don't wear dungarees, you grow dungarees. And if you're always so worried about your precious deangarees, why do you keep washing them in the employee washing machine?"

"Ha!" Wendy cackled. "*Deangarees*, I love it!" Dean's wrathful countenance softened while Deborah's wrinkled, deadpan face remained unchanged.

"Well, I, um, nevermind...." Dean stammered. Luke snorted again and closed his topaz eyes.

"So, since you're done playing around, can y'guys stand to the side so you don't scare my customers away?" Luke said.

"Customers?" Wendy asked in between giggles. Deborah finished the last of her salami sandwich, then scrubbed her lips clean of sauce with the back of her wrinkly wrist. "How's business coming, Mr. Knott's?"

Luke scrunched his face into an uncharacteristic pout. "I'll have you know I've racked up two hundred and fifty-seven dollars, and ninety-seven cents today," Luke lied.

"Really?" Wendy asked, her sunny face all aglow with astonishment. Luke's pout scrunched poutier as he pulled his long legs up in a vain attempt to retract himself into an oblong ball.

"Ten dollars and a button," Luke begrudgingly confessed. Wendy burst into a firestorm of guffawing that was snuffed

Wendy burst into a firestorm of guffawing that was snuffed out as she choked on a chunk of her sandwich, spraying her flunkies and Luke in their faces with a mist of salami-flavored slobber.

“Why don’t you just come back to the Café and get some extra tips?” Deborah asked while Dean whacked the gagging Wendy on her back. “Besides, what do you need all that cash for?”

“Excellent questions, Deb,” Luke sardonically enthused before thumping his heel onto the counter of his make-shift berry stand to show off a big, red and brown-furred, paddle-shaped hind paw. “I can’t go back to the Café at this moment because I have no more shoes and I got mugged.” He wiggled his odd, elongated, hairy toes. “I mean, I could go back, but being barefoot in a licensed eating establishment is a health code violation, and the health inspector already has it out for me.”

“Don’t say that, Luke, honey,” Deborah consoled, her craggy face crinkling in sympathy. Dean shook his head just as he finished the last whack on Wendy’s back. Luke put his hind paw back onto the pavement.

“He’s not exaggerating,” Dean corrected. Wendy coughed again for good measure.

“Wendy elbowed Dean, who started putting Luke’s apple bags into the red wagon. “Lukey, you should’ve told us you

were having hard luck,” she continued as she counted twenty wrinkled portraits of Abraham Lincoln onto the cardboard counter of Luke’s pretend stand. “Come with us to Frau Tanne’s, and then we’ll all go with you to Judi’s Boutique for some shoe shopping.”

“The largest men’s shoes Judi’s sells is size ten,” Luke stated. “And as you’ve just seen, I’m a not-petite size.” He shuffled the money into his overalls’ bib pocket. “Thanks for the sale, Wendy.”

Deborah helped put the last of the apple bags into the wagon. Dean smirked.

“Have you, ahem, tried shopping at Ha Ha Hut Clown Supplies in Eukaia?” Dean finally sniggered. Luke stood up and put his stool into the wagon.

“I’ve been there,” Luke replied. “I also found out the hard way that authentic clown shoes aren’t designed to be worn on big feet.”

Wendy choked again as she tried to leak a laugh. As Deborah finished her turn at whacking Wendy’s airway clear again, Wendy fished out another apple and placed it into Luke’s spidery hands. The off-duty busboy bit into it, and then took a look at the mugolio syrup invoice. Once he realized they were looking for the vendor lady, he finished his apple before leading his coworkers to the Swiss chalet-looking booth on Old Main that was manned by the creepy Austrian super-

supermodel-looking people in lederhosen.

The original plan the power trio conceived was to use Wexler's old red wagon to haul the twenty gallons of mugolio syrup back to Dean's car. Reality busted that plan as the glass bottles were simply too heavy for the wagon to carry. Not that that mattered, as Luke was on hand to carry fifteen of the twenty gallons to Dean's car. Wendy was so pleased by this that she bought Luke another dozen apples and a salami.

In the ten minutes from the farmer's market back to the Café, Luke consumed his salami sandwich together with all of his apples he didn't share with Deborah and Dean. And as Wendy and Deborah helped Rory sort Tanne's syrup and Luke's latest batch of apples away into the Café's larders, Luke summoned Dean to his front passenger seat, and the two drove off to Eukaia on Wendy's orders (and, apparently, Mrs. Terwilliger's blessings).

Luke lit up like a pecan Christmas tree over Dean explaining they were headed to Cost-Fewer Shoes. The drive to and through Eukaia was the fastest half hour he had ever seen. What would have been a tedious four hour and forty-five minute slog on two different buses went by like lightning as the two coworkers bobbed their heads to some rock music.

"What?" Luke shouted. He got out of Dean's stopped car. Dean just looked on, genuinely stunned by the spectacle of Luke actually expressing actual, genuine anger.

Luke walked toward the empty storefront that used to be Cost-Fewer Shoe Store. The faded, broken electric sign over head suggested that the shoe store had already died and was replaced by Allspice Valley Gifts before becoming Ozymandias' glass tomb. Luke raised a hairy, spidery hand, a hairy, spidery paw, and slowly clenched it into a hairy fist. Dean clapped both his meaty hands over that hairy fist, struggling and yanking on it to keep Luke from putting it clear through that dusty, flaking for-rent sign stuck to the dusty window-pane.

"Easy there skinny fella," Dean urged. Luke inhaled, his puffy chest puffing out just a little more. "Don't need to get your panties bunched."

"What do we, what do I, do now?" Luke asked, now a little unsure what to do with his raised fist.

"We'll go over to Bargain Club, they have everything there," Dean promised as he tugged on his killer coworker's hairy wrist. "And even if they don't, I'll order it for you on the internet."

"Internet...."

The trip to the Eukaia Bargain Club was somber; Luke's angry disappointment over the whole Cost-Fewer disappearing debacle polluted Dean's car insides worse than Luke's more usual, more typical stench. If it hadn't been for Dean putting the rock music on a seventeen-minute loop, he might

he might as well have been chauffeuring a hearse to a funeral. And then they arrived.

"This is it?" Luke asked as he gawked at the sprawling building housing. Dean locked his car with his key fob and darted off to get a shopping cart.

"What'd you expect? Shangri La?" Dean sarcastically asked as he flashed his membership card at the clerk at the front entrance. "It's just Bargain Club."

"I mean, I grew up with department stores," Luke said as he passed by a ten-foot stack of Vitamin E jars. Dean stared quizzically at Luke. "It's just that, this place seems so crass."

"How old are you?"

Dean continued staring even as he loaded the cart. "The last Seers store in Oregon closed thirty years ago, when my Mother was in high school. And who uses crass anymore?"

"I...didn't grow up in Oregon," Luke half-lied. "And stop talking like Wexler."

"Eh, why don't you stock up? I know you live off the grid, so get some supplies, and we can charge it to the Café's account." Luke took hold of a five-pound bag of apples. "Besides, Seers may have been great, but can they compare to the eighth wonder of the world like this?" Dean motioned eagerly at a fifteen-foot-tall pyramid of pickled

apple slices, flashing his patented toothy grin. “But seriously, help me load what we can into the cart; Mrs. Terwilliger’s March of Flavors is coming back, and we have a ton of apple-sauce to make.”

Thirty-two, then fifty-two-gallon jars went into Dean’s cart, then another cart Luke got, then sixty-something pounds of assorted salami, then a baker’s dozen bottles of local apple-flavored barbecue sauces, and then the two stopped in Bargain Club’s footwear section.

Luke picked up a left sneaker and fondled it longingly. A tear easily slipped out of the corner of Luke’s saddened topaz eye as Dean pointed out a men’s size eight. Luke then tossed the shoe over his shoulder, almost beaming some oblivious flannel-clad schmuck as he pounced on something else, instead.

“Ooo, this is good!” Luke purred as he slid one furry hind paw, followed by another, into a pair of ugly, blocky, mocha-tan, fur-trimmed hiking boots. “Really good.”

Dean peered closely at the box’s label.

“They’re size eleven, though,” he said. “And you’re a size twelve.”

Luke dropped five more boxes into his cart. Dean snorted as they pushed their carts deeper toward the cavernous heart of Bargain Club.

Dean being Dean, he parked his car near the employee entrance of the Regal Seagull Café to make unloading their freshly acquired supplies easier and more discreet, in stark contrast to Deborah's gung-ho hilarity of going through the front entrance. A dozen staff came from the employee lounge to meet Dean and Luke at the employee entrance, taking all of the stuff, aside from Dean's share of his dungarees, into the restaurant to be sorted away, with all of Luke's goodies packed neatly into a big box for him.

Luke picked up his box but then set it back down near the employee entrance when he heard a chorus of loud laughter wafting in from the main dining room. He hadn't heard yucks that outrageous since the Cafe's talent show last month when Boonkha got hypnotized into impersonating Caleb. In the main dining room, the party of twelve at the Masdevallia Table were apparently having a grand time watching and laughing at Wexler struggling to prepare an order of Apples Foster without setting the entire restaurant on fire again. But just when Wexler was about to spill another blazing skillet, a familiar, spidery, auburn and mahogany paw clasped her rubber gloved hand, steadying it and her trembling skillet.

"Easy, easy, dudeling," Luke calmly urged. "Don't need to flip or shake, not pancakes, not a wok."

"Right," Wexler affirmed, sighing out her pent-up anxiety.

“Thank God and goddess you’re here,” she then said. Luke straightened the guava-pink half of her bangs, then made a smug salute.

“Okay, patrons and matrons, that’s our show for tonight!” Luke boomed, eliciting applause from both the Masdevallia Table and the party of seven at the Impatiens Table to the right. “And remember to tip your arsonist, folks!”

As the laughter lingered, Wexler hooked her hand around Luke’s woolly arm.

“Wait, you’re leaving?” she anxiously whispered. Luke slipped free of his coworker’s concerned, fearful grasp.

“Not my shift tonight, kid.” He winked, flashed a pearly toothed smile, and let his already puffy chest puff out enough to almost let Ganderville, the cartoon character on his tee shirt, take flight. “I’ll be back for the March of Flavor, though.”

“You’d better,” Wexler grumbled. “I am not mixing all that applesauce all by myself.”

Luke laughed all the way back to the now-empty employee lounge, stopping at his big goody box. He husked himself of his lucky Ganderville tee shirt, kicked off his new boots, piled his shed clothing on top of his box, and carried it out the door in a brisk trot.

His brisk trot lasted well beyond the town limit, through the forest, and up to that grim little patch of salal he normally avoided. Luke set his box back down, and finally sloughed off his overalls, kicking them away with his swollen hind legs. Then he coughed, retched, and groaned orgasmically as his hackled back humped. Luke straightened up as his already enlarged chest thrust painfully further again. He looked ahead to glower at a pair of flannel shorts-wearing hikers gawking at him in the dimming, evening gloaming.

“Hey! Bloody lookiloos!” Luke angrily hollered. “Haven’t you ever seen a guy put on his animatronic bigfoot suit before?” The two hikers shared a puzzled, muttering glance, shrugged, and continued on their befuddled way in order to leave that grouchy bigfoot wannabe in peace. Luke rolled his head as his neck crackled and bloated while his increasingly shaggy shoulders continued widening further. “I hate tourists!” He stroked his chest fur to compose himself. Now a little less frazzled, he gathered up his shed overalls and box, and resumed his own journey.

Back home, the now-ten-foot-tall Luke tucked his box of treasures into a corner of his precious shed, next to his last emergency packet of clothes. That done, he shut the shed’s doors. As he hefted the big log he used as a lock in his swelling paws, he chuckled, no, belched up a trickle of mucus. That creamy vileness formed a string from his smirking lips, and sizzled as it touched his faithful log.

Was this wish worth this?

Luke felt himself continuing growing bigger, stronger! Though his second pair of arms were still not yet ready to sprout.

Is it worth being a strongman with no circus? A fireman with no brigade? To only be human some of the time?

Luke lifted one mighty arm high, flexing it as though he were a woolly bodybuilder. He flexed the other, and twirled his log in his paws, twirled it around his monstrous, now-maned neck, then found himself pitching his faithful log into the distance. Luke grinned as his second pair of lymph-drenched arms finally began to fight their way out of the flesh of his meaty pecs.

Of course it's worth this, this power. Luke was strong, he was powerful, he had friends, he could make new friends. In fact, he had a job now and he figured he was going to live forever. Maybe one day, he'd even get the courage to tell someone what he really was.

Luke stopped his daydreaming and his flexing to lope away on all six as an auburn, apish yet insectile bear to fetch his faithful log, hastily praying along the way that he hadn't heaved that blasted thing into yet another campsite or another cabin again.



Lou Carcolh

People have been eating snails since before they left the cradle of humankind. One snail, Lou Carcolh, understands this sad fact, and seeks to avenge itself and snail kind upon humanity. This wrathful gastropod is known for crawling into the mouth of a sleeping man eating him from the inside out, then does the same to his family, and then, the next nights, does the same to the man's neighbors. The survivors complain to the village lord. The lord, in turn laughs in their faces, ceasing only when he is suddenly gobbled up by the snail, now big as an oxcart.

A hero comes along to vanquish Lou Carcolh. When the hero's sword fails to pierce the creature's slimy hide, he tears up an oak tree to use as a club to smash its shell. The hero fails in that, too, instead pounding Carcohl deep into the earth, eventually trapping it in a cavern filled with its own slime.

Lou Carcohl's shell remains intact, eventually becoming a hill forming the heart of the city of Hastingue. The beast still lives, as spelunkers entering Lou Carcohl's slime-filled tomb are seized and devoured on a routine basis.

Upon completion of construction during the miserable 1920s, the Lourdez Building was repeatedly described as a glowing, 70-story torch of (modern) design. And despite the shared madness of its designers, despite the dusty, corrosive vicissitudes of decades, and despite now being the official headquarters of a manufacturer of offensively vapid junk foods called Go Eatziik Snax, the Lourdez Building remained a popular destination for tourists. Mostly the sumptuously furnished lobby and the penthouse gardens.

That day's afternoon went normally; at 1:15 pm, the day's tour group gathered in the lobby and visited the spot where Imogene Lourdez, née Hatridge, murdered her husband, Harold Lourdez, in nineteen forty-two. At 1:25 pm, the group toured the lobby museum housing the exquisite collections of antiquities illegally collected by Yakov Lourdez, then a visit to his great grandson Yakov Lourdez III's office, where both of them mysteriously died from a shared fatal heart attack in nineteen sixty-seven.

At 2:38 pm, the afternoon tour concluded its trip through the penthouse botanical gardens by coming across one of the higher level managers, a hulking, blonde, pallid-skinned, mostly naked man in leopard-spot underwear lying on a chaise lounge as his comely secretary massaged his muscular, yet crème-fraîche flesh. At 2:45 pm, the traumatized, yet delightfully titillated tourists exited a lobby elevator. Just before the elevator doors closed, a tall, bald man in casual business clothes darted past a crowd and into the elevator while carrying two bags of lukewarm takeout.

Gordon, the tall, bald man escaped from the elevator onto the forty-seventh floor, one of sixty or so Go Eatziik corporate office labyrinths in that building. He rounded a corner and entered a room.

“Hey Zacharias, here’s your salami,” Gordon said as he handed his shaggy-haired coworker his takeout carton at their table in the Go Eatziik company breakroom. Zacharias plunged his fork into his meal and started shoveling it into his sour face. Gordon began the same with his salami.

“I don’t know,” Zacharias grouched. “Both of us have been here at Go Eatziik for ten years, hard workers, loyal-”

“Yeah,” Gordon clucked.

“But who gets all of the credit?” Zacharias glowered at a cardboard cutout of the slug-like company mascot in the break room corner.

“And the money, don’t forget the money.”

“That wretched glory slug, Max.” Zacharias spat a chunk of gristle onto the floor. Gordon turned his head toward the security camera hidden in the coffee machine. “I mean the Manager. Employee-of-the-month-for-fifty-seven-years Powell.”

“What can we do about it? We’re his assistants,” Gordon lamented as he handed Zacharias an apple. Gordon tossed his

empty carton into the trashcan and left the breakroom.

Zacharias bit up the last of his salami, then chucked the empty carryout container into the trash, too. He picked up his apple. Zacharias left, trailing after Gordon.

That afternoon saw the hulkingly suave Manager Powell, his two dutiful assistants, and his latest, lovely, young secretary, Livia, hosting some Go Eatziik executives about a new line of snacks. Or rather, that afternoon saw Zacharias boring the attending executives with a tedious slide presentation, with Gordon serving them subpar apple snacks their company was notorious for. Their overgrown boss, in the meanwhile, did very little beyond playing kissy-face with the lovely, young secretary half his alleged age planted firmly in his massive lap.

“And so, the success of Go Eatziik’s new snacks, or ‘Apple 5,’ is guaranteed since we’re using Triple Yumyum’s apple-flavor formula,” Zacharias droned.

A walrus-faced executive spat out his half-eaten green apple.

“We have one of Triple Yumyum’s trademarked formulas?” Walrus Face growled. The other executive froze Gordon in place with a searing glower. Zacharias nervously ran his fingers through his dark, shaggy hair in the vain hopes of manually jumpstarting his brain. “So when are we getting sued?” Walrus Face asked. Gordon scratched his shaved

scalp as he shot a pleading look back at Zacharias.

“We, um, aren’t going to be, sued,” Zacharias stammered.

“That’s right,” Max reassured. Both executives smiled as Max restored his golden, kissy-face-damaged hair to its perfect, coif state. “Triple Yummy is letting us use their formula as a courtesy.”

“How did you do that, Powell?” the other executive asked. “Triple Yummy is so tight-lipped and spy-proof.”

Max took a hearty swig of YumYum’s apple cider swill as the lovely Livia giggled.

“It was nothing. I just spoke with Rory, the CEO, talked to him as if a sensible audit, schmoozed him a little, and voila!”

Walrus Face and the other executive sat there, happily dumb-founded like a pair of astonished first graders at a magic act.

“Powell, you continue being a godsend to Go Eatziik,” the two executives gushed in unison.

Zacharias glowered while everyone was distracted by his superior’s victory grin. He forced himself to fake a neutral smile as he watched the two executives pour themselves a laughing toast with a side of apple fudge.

“Schmooze, frame and blackmail Rory for murder,” Max

mumbled into Livia's flawless lily neck. "Tomato, toemaw-toe."

Gordon strode over to Manager Powell and patted him on the back for a job well done again (and for saving his butt once again, too).

Another presentation successfully concluded, and another subpar line of Go Eatziik snacks greenlit. Max Powell went over to the company gym to celebrate with some weightlifting at the bench press. To Zacharias' eternal aggravation, it was Gordon's turn to spot Manager Powell, and it was Zacharias' turn to blot Max. It was the very worst part of his job; as much as Zacharias despised his supervisor for bossing him around, and for stealing credit, and for showing off like some sort of giant sweaty teenage footballer, blotting Max's warm, and gooey, and sticky, and smelly sweat was a torment straight out of hell. There, Max went against, grunting and klinking like some enormous, slimy monkey. Gordon hovered around his boss as though he were a balding magpie nursing an eagle-sized cuckoo chick.

"Ay, there!" the magpie squawked. Zacharias quickly blotted his cuckoo chick's moist pec cleavage. Grunt. Klank. Blot. And on the cycle went for two Stygian hours. Then Max finally klinked the weights one last time, shot his two faithful assistants his winning smile and snatched the sweat-drenched towel out of Zacharias's hand as he got up from the bench. He draped the towel over his head, then effortlessly ripped off his tank top. Zacharias cringed in

shameful envy at his boss's swollen, glistening, pulsating muscles. Max met up with his secretary as he ambled toward the showers.

"I'm gonna wash up and head out," Max said as Livia played with his shorts. "You guys get the Trakhanov Report ready for tomorrow's meeting, 'kay?"

It took Zacharias forty-five minutes of furious scrubbing in a scalding hot shower, and maybe peeling off a layer and a half of skin to finally scour himself clean of the stench and feel of Max's awful sweat. Another six hours later, he saw Zacharias and Gordon crammed into their shared, crate-like cubicle, putting together the Trackhanov Report as per their boss's orders. Upon losing a game of rock-paper-scissors, Zacharias left their cubicle to get takeout. And as Zacharias made his way to the parking complex, his lurid little detour through the company gym let him know that his boss and his secretary were furiously making out in the showers.

Zacharias sat in his car, on Level B of the parking complex, stewing in negative emotions he falsely identified as disgust. Fifteen minutes into his latest brooding saw him struggle to fish out his smartphone to text Gordon.

Hey, Gordon, I'm not feeling well. Can you finish the report without me? he texted.

Sure, but u'll owe me.

Absolutely, thanks!

Half an hour later found Zacharias unlocking the front door of his apartment. Zacharias liked to think his apartment was spartan. Others preferred the more accurate assessment of squalid, noting Zacharias's judicious, or perhaps ludicrous use of pilfered supermarket crates as furniture. He sloughed off his clothing as he made his way to his bedroom. Upon reaching his ratty, moth-eaten mattress, clad in his ratty, moth-eaten boxers, he flopped facedown, figuring he'd turn off the lights in the morning.

Zacharias found himself in his Mister Universe dream again. He always forgot why he hated his Mister Universe dreams. After all, he always got a fantastic kick flaunting how masculinely superior his skinny, yet flabby, no, his powerfully wiry physique was compared to those of those blobby, lowbrow bodybuilders. He also loved to show off how talented he was in his Mister Universe dreams, too, given how he was the world's greatest concert pianist and the world's greatest baker. At least, in this dream, he was. And then came the master of ceremonies, no, Zacharias's main competitor, Maximillian Q. Powell. Now that Max showed up, there was nothing Zacharias could do; not even playing all of Vivaldi's Four Seasons on a church organ could possibly top the way Max could woo the judges, even the ones on the Supreme Court, with his sickeningly saccharine smile, or with how Max flaunted his titanic muscles by flexing out of his shimmering, three-piece tuxedo.

II

“Yo, Zack!” Gordon hissed. Gordon was frustrated that his shaggy-headed coworker was zoning out yet again at yet another meeting that could cost them both their jobs, yet again. “Zacky, you’re on!” Gordon hissed again, this time pinching his zoned-out coworker’s lips to make a desperately impromptu fish face.

“Right, right, the Trackhanov Report,” Zacharias grumbled as he begrudgingly came back to life. He shuffled Gordon’s lovingly assembled papers into a stack only for it to be immediately snatched up by a big, infuriatingly familiar, sweaty, ring-bedecked hand.

“Keep cool, my buddies,” Manager Powell said with a smiling wink. “I owe you two guys big time.”

Manager Powell stepped behind the modest podium of that dinky, dingy, and crowded, hellishly off-white meeting room. Max surveyed that meeting room, drinking up the rapt attention the assembled executives and upper management were putting on him while paying minimal attention to either Gordon going limp with relief or Zacharias retreating into yet another childish sulk. Max quickly skimmed through his assistants’ report. The stage was set, and Max casually chucked the Trakhanov Report over his broad shoulder, launching, instead, into a rambling, joke-plagued monologue that may or may not have been about Siberak Trakhanov.

In mid-sulk, Zacharias noticed something different about the mini-skirted toches bobbing back and forth and up and down behind Manager Powell. He realized Max hired a new secretary, and this new girl was picking up Livia's slack in picking up the strewn Trackhanov Report. Zacharias flared his nostrils as he sarcastically wondered what happened to Livia.

"Her boobs must've shrunk in the wash," he muttered.

"Ay, that's a good one, Zack, my boy!" Max boomed, sincerely thrilled his peon was paying attention to him. Apparently taking Max's cue, everyone, the executives, upper management, Max's urging, politely applauded. Zacharias, wholly unaccustomed to large-scale attention, blushed mahogany.

Thus, the Trakhanov Report ended as a success through Max Powell's intervention, as usual, and Zacharias and Gordon by the skin of their teeth through Max Powell's intervention, as usual. Just in time for lunch.

Back at the perennially semi-empty Go Eatziik breakroom, Gordon was busy preparing himself a meal of coffee, mostly creamer. Zacharias, meanwhile, was prowling through the breakroom refrigerator, hunting for snacks out of other unknowing coworkers' lunches. Gordon downed his third cup of swill when Zacharias finally sat down.

"Woou, ain't Max a lifesaver?" Gordon finally said.

"If you're gonna brownnose the glory slug, at least do it when he's here." Zacharias then loudly sucked the cream filling out of his apple snackcake for emphasis.

"Dude," Gordon harrumphed, pointing back to the spy-cam coffee machine. Zacharias chucked his cream-free snackcake at it with a soft splat.

"Now we can speak freely, Mr. Shumway."

Gordon sighed as he got up from their table. "Max ain't going anywhere for a long time, Zack. And if we don't want to go anywhere, either, we have to make nice with him, as we're gonna be stuck with him for a long while."

"Mmmhmmm..." Zacharias squelched an urge to roll his eyes as Gordon exited the breakroom.

"I'll meet you back at the cubicle," Gordon said as he entered the hallway.

Sitting among Zacharias's prizes was a fortune from a fortune cookie. His ire raised once more, he snatched it up. The offending slip of paper read: *Don't follow through with this. Your lucky numbers are 0-*

Zacharias flushed mahogany again. He flipped the table as he stormed into the hall.

"I need to see Max Powell!" Zacharias shouted as he banged

his fists on the secretary's desk. "Immediately!"

"Big Buffy Bigbottom, I mean Manager Powell cannot be seen," Bigbottom's new secretary stated.

"I don't have time for this crap, Livia," Zacharias shouted.

"I'm Miriam."

"Miriam, Lulu, Livia, Poopsy, Agnes McCuddlestein, I don't care!" And with that, Zacharias opened Powell's office door with a banging clap. "Listen here, you—"

Zacharias and Miriam stood in Max's posh, cloyingly humid, houseplant jungle office. A quick scan of the dense foliage suggested that its owner recently abandoned the room, or was hiding inside of an elephant trap.

"I tried to tell you. Manager Powell just left for a very important appointment."

Zacharias found it difficult to focus on Miriam's blathering while also listening to the hypnotic interplay of Max's indoor rainforest river mingling with his weird, spa-salon-style muzak going on.

"An appointment where, Miriam?" Zacharias coolly demanded.

"Hippies told me not to say," Miriam solemnly swore.

Zacharias strode over to Max's polished, teak-and-walnut desk. He spied a half-open drawer.

"That's HIPAA, you giant-boobed boob!" he corrected while slamming that drawer shut.

"Can you please leave Manager Bigbottom's, I mean Powell's office? I really don't want to report you."

"Fine, fine, fine," he growled as he stomped out. "And it's security."

As luck would have it, Zacharias spotted his boss in the office parking complex, getting into a convertible. Not wanting his prey to elude him once again, Zacharias hopped into his sedan and followed his boss out of the parking complex.

Had Zacharias been twenty years younger, or heck, even five years younger, he would have been tickled incoherent to be a participant in a car chase, let alone be the instigator of one. But that was then, and this was now, as he had been following his boss's fancy car down the highway out of town for hours. Within the speed limit, of course. The last thing Zacharias needed right now was police in his audience.

The two Go Eatziik employees had been driving for six hours, and an hour and a half past the reservoir, the dry scrubland foothills evolved into damp, mountain pine forest.

"Where is bloody Gory Slug's *very important appointment*?"

Zacharias growled. “Sasquatch Town?” He just remembered he could have turned on the radio all this blasted time. It didn’t matter anyhow: he was too aggravated to bother listening to music, anyhow.

Oh, his prey’s convertible just turned to the right. He turned to the right. He turned to the right, too, and found himself driving in the dirt, or rather, humus and mud parking lot of Piker’s Ghost Forest Campground according to the sign dangling overhead in the central California treebranches, at least. Zacharias stopped his car the moment Powell parked his. He hopped out of his car to stomp over to the still-closed convertible.

“Listen here, you cheap, chiseling, bully bastard son of...” The convertible door opened. Zacharias paused his stream of expletives as he watched Max Powell, who appeared to be swollen to twice the size he was that morning, and wearing a painfully small suit, struggle to get out of his convertible. A minute of leg waggling, and Powell’s swollen, slimy foot burst out of his leather shoe as he finally planted it into the muddy ground. As Powell began to pull himself free of his car, Zacharias studied the worrisomely overstrained, slime-leaking seams in his boss’s pant leg.

“Listen, Zack,” Manager Powell began, his voice three octaves lower than it was at the Trackhanov meeting.

“Don’t call me Zack.”

"Listen, Zacharias, at the meeting, it was just a joke, I'm sorry." The seams of Powell's jacket began popping open, making Zacharias think of a worn-out, overstuffed couch stuffed with slime.

"You're absolutely right, you're gonna be sorry, you fat slug." Zacharias brandished the gold-plated revolver he stole out of Powell's desk drawer, pointing it squarely at the center of Powell's sweat-drenched shirt. Powell's shirt then suddenly tore open by itself to reveal two giant, slime-glistening pectorals, no, four giant pectorals, no, five giant pectorals, now all in a slimy column! No, Max Powell's shirt shredded apart to reveal a great, and massive chest overflowing with slimy, squirming muscles all rhythmically undulating in unison. Zacharias cocked the revolver to keep himself from being mesmerized, and, more importantly, to keep his anger from precipitating completely into mindless fright.

"Just calm down, Zacharias," Max urged in a deep, soothing growl, his voice eight octaves deeper than forty-five seconds ago.

"What, what are you?"

"Listen, Zacharias, if you go home, and forget today, I'll give you a five-thousand percent pay increase, and I'll give you your own office and secre--"

"What are you?"

Zacharias watched as Max's suit slowly peeled away from his boss's growing, swelling body in slime-soaked ribbons. Max grew eight feet tall, then twelve feet tall, now twenty feet tall, a massive, mountain-like torso overflowing with writhing muscles. Zacharias hoped what he saw writhing in Max's body were muscles. He thought his boss now looked like a giant cartoon bodybuilder now. Max rested one of his sequoia trunk arms onto his convertible, inadvertently crushing it.

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"I like y-," Max stammered. Zacharias looked up to see his boss's still-human, still-human face struggling to keep from being swallowed up in the slithering folds of his broad, broad shoulder muscle. "Don't want you to make my mistake after fifty years." A pair of long tentacles sprouted forth from the apex of that now-headless air of impossibly wide shoulders. The big, inverted pyramid of power that used to be Zacharias's boss flexed and shuffled his great chest of power as he stretched himself. Zacharias skittered out of the way as he came crashing down onto his great

belly of power, splashing his would-be murderer with mud and slime. Zacharias made a beeline toward his car just as Max's great, staring eyestalks erupted from his great slug's head. By the time Zacharias was twelve paces away from his car, Max pooped out a forty-foot-long tail. The moment Zacharias opened his car door, a tooth-studded, rabid python, no, a long, long tooth-studded tongue slapped the door of its hinges! Zacharias carefully turned around to face the giant, giant-armed, slug-dragon thing that used to be, and still kind of was his boss, Maximilian Q. Powell. And as Zacharias gawked at his boss's glistening, seemingly emotionless snail's head, it dawned on him; he was meeting Go Eatziik's mascot face to face. And then Max-Slug emoted, or rather, parted his curtain-like cleft lips to reveal a drooling sea filled with shimmering waves of finger-sized, finger-shaped teeth. Zacharias bolted into the forest, narrowly avoiding contact with his boss's twenty-foot-long tongue.

Zacharias ran and ran through the murky pine forest, a frightened rabbit desperately fleeing from the worst hellhound slug-dragon ever loosed upon the world. And then Zacharias saw salvation about three hundred feet to his left.

The Merton hunting party was a riotous success. Sheldon Merton and his friends were dowsing themselves with self-praised and fancy beer as they laughed and dressed the two mule deer bucks and three whitetail does they shot that afternoon. Their merriment came to a screeching halt when a screeching yuppieman came running through their camp. When the screaming yuppie reached halfway across the

campsite, he flew screaming backward straight into the yawning mouth of a giant snail or a slug the size of a tanker truck. Sheldon and his hunting buddies took aim at the hellworm to avenge their momentary guest, and fired. And fired, and fired, and fired, unloading everything they had in order to make that monster thrash and dance. By the time Max finished squishing the last of his folksy assailants, a series of painful poppings made him spit out a skinless corpse. Zacharias's skinless corpse. Who was still armed with his now-hot antique revolver. As Max wrapped his serpentine tongue around his flunkey's corpse to swallow his wayward meal again, that still-living corpse raised its arm, and fired Max's revolver into the gaping spiracle two, three, four times. And then Maximillian Q. Langley Powell, Favorite Manager, Go Eatziik Food's Employee Of The Month for fifty-seven years straight, cannibal, and part-time giant slug-monster, deflated like a collapsing circus tent filled with slime. Even as Max's corpse began rapidly dissolving into vile-smelling goo, his serpentine tongue continued wrapping itself around Zacharias's skinless body like some self-knitting, undead vest.

Zacharias didn't waste any time with surveying the slime-washed carnage while he dance-shambled through the wreckage of Piker's Ghost Forest Campground. Of course, it was hard to survey anything when all of one's skin and sensory organs were chewed off less than ten minutes ago. But, by the time Zacharias managed to successfully grope his way to his car, his eyes and ears grew back enough to make him feel comfortable enough to drive again. By the

time he fitted his dismembered car door into his passenger seat, his nose was beginning to grow back. He buckled up, turned on his car radio in anticipation of his ears eventually growing back and drove off. He hoped that, when his skin grew back, he wouldn't stick to the upholstery.

Business at Piker's Ghost Gas had been very grim that week. Some fancy, schmancy hunting party caravan full of gun-toting, wooly yuppybillies came by the other day, and only bought between them six gallons of gas and a length of jerky. It was enough to make the attendant, Earl, spit more frequently. Earl had seen a lot of horrible things in his horrible forty years of life, especially while touring Syria, Iraq, Serbia, Somalia, Nam, and Korea; no, those last two were Earl's Father's tour. But still, Earl took grim satisfaction in that his twenty odd years in the graveyard shift at Ghost Gas was nowhere near as ghastly or as frightening as his twenty even years while on duty. A blood and mud-spattered vehicle pulled up to the self-serve pump. Earl's bubblegum-pink skin blanched cotton colored as he watched a blood-covered skeleton man come out of the car to pump gas. Earl fell off his stool and went catatonic when he witnessed the same bloody skeleton man enter the gas station mini-mart to place one hundred dollars in bloody five-dollar bills onto the counter.

The drive back into town was uneventful and soothing once Zacharias's ears grew back enough to let him listen to his car radio. The drive to the hospital was equally pleasantly bland, at least until a hospital security guard started yelling at Zacharias when the guard saw him park in the handicapped

parking spot. The security guard stopped yelling when he saw a skinless man get out of that muddy, battered car. The walk from the parking lot to the ER waiting room was drafty and cold. Feeling was coming back into his body apparently. Upon entering the ER waiting room, Zacharias got in line to see the front desk.

“And there’s always a line,” Zacharias croaked. He realized he had lips again just as everyone else in line noticed what just entered. The other patients in line got out of the bloody, kind of skinless man’s way. The nurse at the front desk craned her neck to see what was going on.

“Sir,” the nurse politely called. “Sir? Are you sure you want ER services, or would you prefer the burn ward two doors to your left?”

The skinless man shrugged his skinless shoulders, then turned around to waddle back through the automatic doors.



Sui Hu

There is a princess who was cursed to become a baiji dolphin because she took a lover who offended her father, the emperor. The princess's son becomes a monstrous tiger with the countenance of a snarling wolf. The emperor's subjects become fearful, and the gods subdued Sui Hu, placating him by making his mother a river goddess, and him guardian of the empire. Sui Hu delights in protecting humans, but could not forget his mother's original slight. So, one day, Sui Hu succumbs to wrathful temptation and eats his grandfather and his uncle, the heir to the throne. The gods then chain Sui Hu to the bottom of a lake as just punishment.

A thousand years later, Sui Hu escapes when a drought eats his lake. Freed, Sui Hu wanders the broken land, sorrowing at the suffering he witnessed. A boy attacks him in hopes of feeding his dying village. Moved by the boy's plight, Sui Hu feeds himself to the villagers, and loans the boy his pelt and his power. And the hero continues to grow and grow in might and power and legend until one day, he looks down at his paws, and realizes he was the Sui Hu all along.

And so, a hero who hunts the Sui Hu must choose between being eaten by the Sui Hu, or being eaten by his heirs.

I

The moon hid beyond a silvery veil of darkly sparkling clouds on a warm night. Even so hidden, Lance could clearly hear the moon calling him, calling to him with a siren's deafening clarion. Holes began to form in the clouds as the cloud layer moved itself, first in half, then into quarters, then into wispy silvers. Moonlight flooded back into the shadowy forest below.

The night forest was noisy with life, choruses of frogs, amorous insects, small owls, bats and bigger owls all calling, calling. Calling. And then everything shushed as a howling roar shook the trees ever so slightly.

A venerable, old stag that, Lance, named Thornbush was issuing another challenge again. Lance trotted out from his lounging spot and lifted up his shaggy head, pointing his long snout toward the full moon. Steamy breath blew out of his wet nose, then out of his fanged mouth as he let loose his own howl; a low, purring, rumbling, grumbling growl. Thornbush's challenge accepted, the night birds and vermin resumed their opera of death and love.

Lance continued to growl, much softer now, as he ambled through the forest, sniffing for Thornbush's spoor. That great, shimmering shadow snuffled about the leaf litter, padding much more quietly than a human would expect of a car-sized horror like Lance. He scuffed at a log with his claws, then put his big paw through it, crushing the worm-

eaten thing. Some three years ago, Lance gouged out Thornbush's left eye just as the stag tore open his attacker's belly. Since then, Lance lingered in this valley forest, making hunting that elk his hobby; eating sheep, chows, and the occasional horse while bidding his time.

Thornbush roared again, louder this time. Lance lifted his snout back to the moon to taste the quarry's impatience. But before Lance could answer this second call, a third roar blasted through the forest gloam. Ol' Thorny has another rival. The big, sable-furred beast flicked his pointed, little doggy ears, then loped deeper into the darker bowels of the forest.

Elsewhere in the nighttime forest, an elderly, one-eyed elk prepared to charge at a bowing challenger one-third his age. Normally, the challenger would be asleep, but that stag was a paranoid bogeydeer ever since the loss of his left eye, eager to hide during the day, eager to lash out at night. The two crashed together, once, twice, thrice before both withdrawing to circle each other again. Thornbush charged again at his rival, who, in turn, leapt away back into the forest dark. Lance lunged at Thornbush, great claws outstretched, big jaws open, fangs and carnassials gnashing. The old stag leapt away, too; Lance's long talons touched Thornbush's fur long enough to comb it, but not long enough to catch. The shadowy beast stumbled, having apparently momentarily forgotten how slippery that one-eyed stag was.

The one-eyed stag barreled through the night forest, crashing through brush, trembling over brambles, terrified over be-

A sedan drove down the southbound lane of The Interstate. Prester Langley was driving his son home from the most egregiously disappointing violin recital ever. Prester scowled slightly, his caramel-haired son downcast and crushed by his Father's furious disapproval. Prester's scowl evolved into a sneer amid the muffled hum of his car's engine as he recalled how his incompetent son was butchering a classic artist no less than thirty minutes ago. The recital was a total disaster for the ears given as how all those other blithering, dithering idiots sharing that stage with his idiot son were somehow, someway, impossibly even more worse. Prester pressed on the bridge of his glasses to stifle a snort.

The forest surrounding The Interstate parted to the left, then from the right as the car approached the river. Only forty minutes left with this twit. Prester cast a quick, aside glance to see the boy shedding silent tears.

"Shrieking temper tantrums won't change people's minds anymore than your subpar music, boy," Prester scolded. His glance lengthened into a glower. "When we get home, boy, I'm putting my foot down. No more of-"

"Daddy, look out!" Prester's son impotently shrieked.

"Don't-"

Prester's scolding was cut short by a bloody-faced, broken-horned elk thrusting through the car's windshield

in a rain of glass shards. Prester stomped on the gas pedal in his throes, sending them crashing through the highway guardrail and into the river.

Another car on the other side of The Interstate stopped. As the driver got out while dialing nine-one-one on her phone, she saw a second splash in the river.

???

He remembered drowning, he remembered the inky blue water swooshing in through the broken windshield as a swift wave stole away his breath.

He remembered seeing a big black dog's nose that bloomed into a big wreath of sharp, ivory knives.

Am I drowning? Am I dying?

Then he remembered being pulled up, and he remembered being freed of his seat belt, being freed of his Father's suffocating glare, even being freed of his recital tuxedo. He looked down at his bare, slight, peachy-skinned chest, and he roared, flooding everything in a vast sea of wet, black fur. He touched that damp gunk, and both it and his skin crawled.

He remembered his skin splitting open as a tumult of wet caramel fur spilled onto that inky sea of black, of sable.

???

The caramel-haired boy awoke in a parked car with his tired face resting on a massive tuffet. He tried to raise his head, and realized he was apparently swaddled in an enormous plush blanket that reeked of dog musk and stale sweat gone manly. He squirmed a little, settled into a more comfortable position, and leaned his face back into that warm, pleasantly stinky plush blanket. Then the boy felt that blanket wrap itself a little tighter around his bandaged shoulders and torso. Then the boy realized the blanket was rhythmically heaving up and down in time to a heartbeat not his own. He thrashed, pushing himself away from that shaggy whatever's embrace. The boy saw a face, a young man's sleeping face framed in sable. The face smiled softly as he opened his bright green eyes.

"Heya, Sparky."

The boy rammed his open palms into the shaggy-furred face's jade green eyes, making his captor yelp like a dog, exactly like a struck dog. The boy made little fists with his little hands to pound on the blanket man's eyes again and again until the man wrapped his shaggy hand around the boy's head. A car door clicked open, and the shaggy blanket man and the caramel-haired boy both tumbled out of the man's back seat and into a rest stop parking lot. The boy got up and bolted away in the bright morning light. He got from the dusty, dirty parking lot to the weedy, flower-filled edge of the forest when the shaggy man stood up, dusted

off his shaggy-furred chest, straightened his boxers, pointed at the boy, and shouted “Stop!” The boy’s legs ceased moving, making him crouch down in the weeds. The shaggy man snapped his thick, hairy fingers twice, pointed to his hind paws, and loudly shouted “Heel!” The bandage-clad boy found himself scurrying back to the parking lot of that dusty rest stop where he waited at the shaggy man’s hind paws.

The shaggy, boxer-clad man finished rubbing his still-sore eyes, then plopped down into the dirt with seated boy. He clapped a big, paw-like hand onto the boy’s peachy bare shoulder. Looking at the hairy tarantula-looking thing on his shoulder, the boy realized it was, indeed, a paw. The man sighed.

“Sparky, you can’t just walk around in nothing but your underpants,” the man explained. The boy looked into the man’s bloodshot eyes, perplexed upon seeing no anger in them.

“You’re not mad at me?” the boy asked. The shaggy man smiled, giggling as he flashed finger-sized canine teeth.

“I spooked you,” the shaggy man admitted. “Gettin’ mad at you ‘cause I triggered your fight and flight response would be really stupid, honestly. I mean, we’re gonna be together for a long while.”

The boy tilted his head as the man set his paw onto the ground and leaned on it.

“A, um, a while?” the boy sputtered. “I bet you think you’re still human.”

The boy hesitantly nodded. The man snagged the big nails of his other paw on the boy’s bloody bandages, and ripped those discolored cotton strips off of the boy’s chest, revealing a constellation of red, scabby toothmark-shaped scars. “You’re not human anymore. Last night, your car fell into the Salamander River when an elk squished your deer, um, dad.” The boy grew dizzy as his stomach fell. “My name, um, call me Lance. What’s your name kid?”

“My name...?” the boy repeated. He shivered in the morning heat even as Lance wrapped his shaggy arm around the boy’s slight shoulders. The boy felt swishing behind him... Lance’s...tail? “I can’t remember...I can’t remember my name....” The boy’s steel gray eyes stung as they grew hot in their sockets, warm tears scalding as they trickled down his burning cheeks. Lance huffed as he held the boy closer.

“You’re always full of fire, kid. I’ll call you Sparky for now,” Lance said. He hugged Sparky again, patting the boy’s shoulder for good measure. “Let’s get you some clothes and breakfast: you like apples or salami?” The boy buried his hot face into Lance’s shaggy side and cried.

Lance pulled the bawling boy onto his big, shaggy lap and held Sparky for fifteen minutes, cradling and rhythmically jiggling the crying child like a colicky baby. After another hour of pacing around his car while holding Sparky, Lance

After another hour of pacing around his car while holding Sparky, Lance finally swaddled the boy in a tee shirt too big, parked him in the front passenger seat, and fished out his razor from the glove box. After scraping his beard and mustache off as best as he could, Lance returned the razor to its hiding spot, pulled another tee shirt over his still-shaggy-furred head and torso, then danced for a few minutes as he pulled on a smelly pair of jeans. Upon squishing his denim-encased butt into the driver's seat, Lance stared intensely into the rearview mirror as he used his strong nails to sculpt his wildly disheveled mane into a roguish mullet, taking extra care to tuck his big, pointed wolfish ears behind his big, woolly muttonchops. He looked at his new copilot, and proceeded to comb Sparky's caramel hair over the boy's freshly pointed ears, too, before buckling everyone up.

Key in the ignition, and the engine growled to life. Lance gave Sparky a wide, fangy grin as he fumbled with the radio knob before fumbling with his stick shift. The car filled up with bouncing voices of autotuned Korean tenors, then the car abandoned the rest stop in a dusty cloud. Lance sang along, sounding very much like a pleading husky. Sparky stared out the car window, watching green and yellowed trees race through his view.

"Hey," Lance said in between Hangul-bleating. He pried a paw off of the wheel to pat Sparky's petite, peachy-skinned hand, then got an opened bottle of warm orange juice from the cupholder to set into Sparky's grip. "Drink this, y'need to build up your strength for breakfast."

Sparky sniffed at the bottle's mouth before putting it to his own. Orange juice. Lance leaned his shaggy elbow onto the boy's shoulder as Sparky took a sip, then a chug. The boy went back to staring at the racing trees. The warm summer hadn't been kind to the trees, he realized, seeing some browned hemlocks.

"Where are we going?" Sparky finally asked. Lance chuckled as he took back his bottle to finish it in a quiet gulp.

"Gonna pull a favor before we go to Tower of Pancakes."

Oregon forest gave way to tree-corralled pastures as the car sped down the Interstate. Lance easily knew this sheep-haunted patch of woods as his favorite stomping grounds. He needed to show Sparky this tonight.

Assez tôt, assez tôt.

The car slowed down as it passed by the dilapidated ranch house of old man Bideaux. The car groaned to a halt as Lance craned over Sparky to stick his shaggy head out of the passenger-side window. Despite old man Bideaux not being on the front porch, Lance grinned ominously nonetheless, then sped off.

Woodland pastures became forests with dense undergrowth, then opened up again to become a nest of flower-lined streets filled with log-cabin-facade shops. Lance parked in front of a drugstore with a pestle and mortar embedded above its

entrance. Lance pocketed his car keys, leaned back to get his sneakers out from the back seat, and opened the door. And after picking up Sparky with one arm, Lance slipped his hind paws into his sneakers, and got out.

“Just play along, kid,” he urged. Sparky groaned, then shrugged in half-hearted affirmation, resignation really. *Maybe this wasn't so bad after all.* “There's a candy bar in it for you if your acting's up to par.”

Lance carried his swaddled partner in future crime across the drugstore's threshold, the door's bell tinkling in retaliation.

“Hi hi, welcome to-” came the proprietor's voice. “It's you.” Lance and Sparky looked over to the service counter to see an aggravated, paunchy old woman manning the cash register. The proprietor glowered at Lance as she brushed invisible lint off of her white blouse. Her big scowl contracted and expanded, like the flapping of a cranberry-red seagull as she fought hard to decide between sighing and shouting. “We don't have any odd jobs for you, today, Lawrence.”

“Non, non, non, Dani, mon cheri,” Lance smirkingly demurred. He hoisted Sparky up a little more in his grasp.

“We don't buy children here, either,” Dani snapped. Lance frowned. “Try Caffeine Hovel next door.”

“It was one time, Dani,” Lance whined. “It was a joke, and we found the parents.” Dani's scowl straightened. Lance bounced

Sparky a little more in his mighty, shaggy arm. “I’m babysitting.”

Dani crackled derisively at the mere thought of any moron moronic enough to leave even a plastic houseplant in the care of a moron like that ball of hair, Lawrence.

“My friend’s kid-”

“Oh, God, take whatever you need!” the proprietor wailed. “I’ll just put it on your tab, just spare me the details!”

The shaggy man looked deep into his little cohort’s confused, steel-gray eyes and smirked even smuglier.

“You just won yourself two candy bars,” Lance gloated as he carried Sparky over toward the next aisles, snagging a hand basket along the way. After filling his basket halfway with packages of underwear of varying sizes, Lance turned back toward the service counter and boomed, “Hey, Dani, y’mind if we try some outfits on?”

Dani paused her nursing of her plastic cup filled with apple cider beer.

“Use the men’s room; try any funny business, Lawrence, and I’ll call the cops on you again.”

“Love you, too, Dani,” Lance called back as he reached the clothing aisles. He flipped through a rack of shirts, and

picked out a tee shirt for his little cohort. Sparky shook his head, reaching for one, instead, making Lance laugh in hearty approval. Basket filled with supplies, snacks, shirts and unmentionables, Sparky was now presentably attired in his shirt, shorts, and pink flip-flops. Lance now happily presented his loot to the perennially dour Dani. As the proprietor rang up Lance's stuff, she looked Sparky over.

"The little prince cleans up, nicely, doesn't he?" Dani commented. "That'll be three hundred and fifty-eight bucks."

"For two candy bars?" The sincere shock in Lance's voice ratcheted Sparky's anxiety up six notches. "Oh, right," Lance phewed. "I'll pay for it at the end of the week." He turned back to Sparky. "Come. See ya, Dani."

With a knee, Lance opened the trunk of his car, and then he dumped his supplies next to other piles of junk. He then handed Sparky the promised candy bar before reinserting the boy into the passenger seat. Now buckled in, Sparky unwrapped his candy first, the crinkle crackling of its plastic foil wrapper a euphoric thunderstorm, practically a chorus of the birthday song, like a whole lifetime of the song compacted into a five-second note. He bit into the first chocolate dollop. Sparky heard Lance slam the driver's side door shut getting in, and he heard Lance jabbering on about something, but Sparky couldn't bother to understand what. Sparky had had candy before, whenever he could scrounge up enough change for the school vending machine. *But what was this? What is this buzz?* Each sip, each crunch, each chew, everything made

the boy's brain whirl, made his heart hammer against his sternum.

Lance was saying something, maybe he was singing? It didn't matter. Pancakes? What? Tower? Towers? *Whatever*. Sparky peeled the green and purple wrapper off his candy bar, then shoved the whole thing into his mouth. Lance chittered something about squirrels. Sparky counted as he chewed. He could taste the rancid tang of grape gelatin amidst the raisins and dried cranberries. And that smothering saccharine waxiness of the white chocolate. He kept chewing, he was up to one hundred and twenty-nine. He didn't swallow, no. He kept chewing even as the last fragments dissolved away. *Am I in heaven now?* He didn't flinch as Lance scrubbed away lavender-colored drool from his peachy-colored chin with sable-furred fingers. Lance parked and Sparky bolted out of the car. *A gift shop*. He was in heaven, after all.

Heaven had car horns and screeching tires.

"Sparky! Careful...." Lance's concerned voice melted the joyous haze away. "Kid, don't play in traffic," Lance scolded. Sparky was held aloft, held tightly in Lance's big, shaggy arms, standing in front of a honking pickup truck in a dusty, dirty, crowded road. "Sorry, guys!" Lance yelled as he jogged across the busy street. Once on the sidewalk, Lance set Sparky down. The boy trembled, his eyes watering.

"Um..."

With one paw, Lance scrubbed the boy's incipient tears, and with the other paw, he stroked the boy's caramel hair.

"Nobody's mad, kid," Lance cooed. "You're hearing *her*."

"Her?"

Lance squatted down onto one knee so he could look directly into the boy's steel-grey eyes.

"The moon, Sparky. She's calling you. She's calling us. She's got big plans for us tonight."

"Calling us? Tonight?"

The big, shaggy man stood back up and guided the caramel-haired boy into a piny-smelling gift shop. They walked by shelves of snowglobes, wooden toys and lacquered pine cones. Lance stopped at a gondola stacked with painted masks.

"Miss Moon's callin' to us, saying 'Hey, Lance! Hey, Sparky! Y'guys ready for your party tonight?'"

"Really?" the caramel-haired boy asked. Lance put a sun-burst-maned lion mask on the boy's face. "Will there be games?" Lance put on a wolf mask.

"Yep! And the best part is when we put on, no, when we *grow* our own costumes!"

The lion-faced boy was dumbfounded. He had never worn a costume before, let alone grown one. The wolf-faced man led Sparky to the counter, got out his wallet, and paid the gift shop clerk for their masks.

Sparky gripped Lance's paw as tight as he could as they walked down the sidewalk. The caramel-haired boy was heady, but he tried as hard as he could to focus on Lance's voice to keep from getting swallowed up by that joyous haze again. He stared at a window that read Candy Shoppe even as Lance tugged him toward their original destination. Then the two came to a log cabin facade with an electric sign shaped like a cartoon chef precariously holding up a plate of teetering, towering stack of pancakes.

"Here we are, Sparky, Tower of Pancakes!" Lance declared. "Come on," he said as they walked through the opened front entrance and up to the waitress at the counter. "Table for two, please."

"You two masked men aren't here to rob the place, are you?"

"We're going to a party!" the lion-faced boy piped. "It's tonight!" Lance chuckled.

"We're headed to a costume party later," the wolf-faced man clarified.

"Oh, fair enough," the waitress said. "Would you two mind

a booth?”

“Not at all miss,” the wolf-faced man replied.

And with that, the three headed toward a booth at the far side of the crowded dining room. Sparky slid in first, and kept slipping and sliding back and forth, up and down until Lance took his own place, tapped on the cushion to the right of his thigh with a big, hairy finger, and calmly said, “Sit.”

“Would you like something to drink?” the waitress asked the wolf-faced robber.

“Coffee, please,” Lance replied.

“And for your son?”

“He’s my brother,” Lance corrected. “And he’ll have apple juice.”

The waitress pursed her lips in muted askance, or perhaps concern.

“I’ll be back with your beverages, gentlemen.”

The wolf-masked man smiled a big, fangy smile as he elbowed his fidgety, lion-masked brother.

“Their coffee here will put hair on your chest,” Lance giggled.

“Did you drink a lot of coffee?”

The wolf-faced man put his paw to his mouth, but scowled instead of laughing when, peering across the busy tables, he realized their waitress was back at the counter, arguing with some loudmouthed, balding boor in a polo shirt. The boor looked across the crowded dining room, and made eye contact with Lance. Then the boor grew louder.

“You!” the boor accused. He stomped across to Lance’s booth, shoving aside another waitress who couldn’t get out of reach fast enough. Lance scowled harder at the thought of putting this putz in his place. “Who do you think you are?” the boor bellowed upon reaching Lance’s booth.

“I think you’re mistaken, mister,” Lance calmly replied.

“Me?” the boor hollered. “You’re the mistake, moron! I almost wrecked my truck ‘cause you can’t keep your freaky brat on a leash!”

Lance saw the boor reach across his table, and the last thing the wolf-masked man remembered seeing was Sparky running to the restroom. Then the whole world turned into a white flash for a second. And then Lance found himself flung far into the future by a minute, now standing in the ruined Tower of Pancakes’s dining room, a dozen tables smashed to bits while people were still screaming and scrambling about. Both the boor and Sparky were gone. Lance realized his shaggy shoulder and bicep were hatching

out of his now-tattered tee shirt. He touched his wolf mask.

Colorful shards of Sparky's lion mask lay with shards of furniture on the floor.

Lance readjusted his wolf mask as he barreled into the men's room.

"Heya, Sparky..." Lance called, "...kiddo..." He approached a closed toilet stall overflowing with familiar-sounded whimpering. "I, um, I'm okay...now, let's get going, kiddo." More whimpering from inside the stall, now with added crying. Lance stuck his big, hairy fingers into the stall's gaps, and, with some slight pressure, pushed the stall door off of its hinges. He tossed the door aside, snatched up his crying, squirmy brother, and then galloped out of the restroom and ruined diner. As Lance carried his crying, squirmy brother across the dirt street, he didn't bother to notice the balding man in a polo shirt, lying motionless on a badly crumpled car hood. Back inside the car, Lance pulled the seatbelt over both Sparky and himself, whereupon the car revved back to life, speeding down the road back into the forest.

Once the car passed by Bideaux's house, Lance made a pained, grunting sigh as he took off his wolf mask, chucking it onto the dashboard.

"I'm sorry," Sparky muttered. Lance sighed as he shifted his shaggy arms in an attempt to hug his sniffling brother with out actually taking his paws off the wheel.

“Don’t be, Sparky,” Lance sighed again. “Y’know how I said tonight’s gonna be a party?”

“Yeah?”

“Y’know how we’re gonna have games and grow our own costumes?” Lance shifted the car into park and cut the ignition. As Lance unbuckled, he sighed again, now sounding so pained. Sparky looked up, past Lance’s scruffy chin, worried that his new big brother was going to cry.

“Are you okay, Lance?”

Parked again, Lance opened the car door as he wrapped his shaggy arms around his new little brother. He stepped out of the car, set the boy down onto the dusty dirt of their abandoned rest stop sanctuary.

“I...” Lance finally said, “...um, it’s not gonna be fun, kiddo.” He kicked off his sneakers, and plucked off his already ruined tee shirt. Sparky watched Lance dance, grunt and make crunching noises, trying to slide off his jeans, then his boxers off of his big, shaggy hips and hind legs. And then Lance stood before the seated boy, this big, sable-furred, pouffy-tailed young man-faced wolf, standing on his hind legs. He quickly flopped down onto all fours. “Y’know about the wolf man?”

“Doesn’t he come out on Halloween?”

Lance closed his hot eyes, squeezing out tears as his strong cheekbones grew stronger with a loud crunch. He nipped at the blue fabric of his new brother's tee shirt. "You'll wanna take your clothes off, soon," the man-faced wolf advised. The boy did as he was asked, pulling his shirt off to see a layer of caramel hair encrusting over his scarred chest. "Moon's calling you, calling us."

"What's she saying?"

The man-faced wolf chuckled ruefully as he sank onto his shaggy belly

"Party's gonna be wild, whether we like it or not. You know, when I was your size, I loved camping. I'd go camping with my family, go camping with my friends, go on field trips from school..." Lance looked up at the blue noon sky as Sparky leaned on him. "When I made Kodiak rank in the Cubby Squads, everyone was so proud at the Jambouree." The boy sank his thin, caramel-furred arms deep into Lance's mane, fearful over the melancholic waver in his big brother's croaking voice. "Then this thing came out of the lake and bit me." Sparky hugged Lance's neck harder as the man-faced wolf began crying. "When I came to, everyone at the Jambouree was dead. And then, at the hospital, I changed for the first time." Sparky gently pressed his palm into Lance's hot green eye to wipe away those hot tears. "Oh! It was, oh....My sire, Thorvald, came for me a month later, after I ran away from home."

"What was your sire like?"

Lance rose up on his shaky legs, snarling as his nose grew bigger.

“He was a jerk. So bossy, so snobby, so picky, always telling me I need to get stronger, always making me do the worst crap, like I was some apprentice movie monster.”

Lance lay back down onto his belly, and rolled onto his broad, broad back. Sparky knelt down to lie his head on his brother’s great chest.

“What happened?” the boy asked as he climbed onto his brother.

“One full moon, he finally told me how he bit me at that Cubby Squad Jambouree, how he chose me to become *The Avatar of Strength*, or some earnest lie, that I was a half-eaten snack he decided to make into a grand art project.” The man-faced wolf whimpered as he choked on some more tears. “So I beat him like a drum. I, I ripped him in half, and then I ate him.” Lance convulsed with a sudden laugh. “My sire said he was so proud of me as he died.” Sparky winced, at Lance’s pained laughter.

“I’m sorry.” Lance started wheezing as Sparky tried to hug tighter.

“Last night, I messed up. I didn’t want you to die...I know CPR, but I can’t do it when I’m the wolf, and....”

“Thank you,” Sparky said as he pressed his face into his big brother’s mane.

Lance finally closed his burning green eyes. He felt his new little brother convulse. Sparky lifted his head off of Lance’s mane, raising his suddenly feverish head toward the bright, blue sky to steam as a thunderbolt of pain rode down his spine into his agonizingly tender coccyx.

The man-faced wolf chuckled softly as he folded his sable foreleg around Sparky’s waist to pull the screaming boy back onto his chest.



The pain got worse as the afternoon wore on. His pain got worse, their pain got worse. Lance lay in the dry grass, groaning through bloody, clenched teeth as his man’s face gradually submerged beneath more and more sable fur. He’d gone through the same yesterday, and the day before, and every month before today, and it still enervated him so dreadfully. Watching Sparky struggling with this made his hot eyes water. The boy aging ten years in thirty minutes right in front of his scruffy snout was awful by itself. Watching and hearing that hairy-shouldered, suddenly-a-teenager weep over bursting nails and sprouting bloody claws made Lance cry in empathy. He knew that agony well enough! Intimately enough. Lance remembered quite clearly how it was excruciating enough to wake him out of a morphine stupor. Then the big hump of muscle in Lance’s big back grew bigger enough

to rouse him from that particular reverie.

“Enough,” Lance grumbled. The kind-of-man-faced wolf grunted and growled as he reluctantly hauled himself back up onto all fours. On wobbly, pulsating legs, he haltingly padded over to his throbbing, wailing little brother. Lance gently headbutted Sparky’s caramel-furred back. The caramel-furred almost-a-man screamed again as arthritis seized his fuzzy spindly limbs. “Come on,” Lance said as he threaded his shaggy bull neck through the crook of his brother’s furry arm. Sparky started whimpering again as Lance hoisted the almost-a-man onto his hairy, swelling hind paws. “Come with me, kid, moving helps with the pain.”

With that hesitant promise, the humpbacked, almost-a-wolf and his brother both hobbled through the brush and into the forest.

Spruce, pine, desiccated hemlock, mushrooms hiding in rotten oak leaves. Lance found the odors of the forest soothing. He closed his stinging eyes even as he plodded along, keeping time by listening to his brother’s pained mewling slowly evolve into agonized growling.

“I can’t,” Sparky whined. The boy’s voice was so different now, parched, cracking, and rasping.

Lance chuckled, or purred, perhaps. “Rest.”

Sparky let go of Lance’s man, collapsing into the crispy leaf

Sparky let go of Lance's mane, collapsing into the crispy leaf litter. Lance opened his watering eyes to see the dimming gloom of sunset.

Lance's big nose continued inflating, his snout thrusting forth from his face, thrusting, thrusting, lengthening until his big, doggish, wolfish snout bumped into Sparky's hairy face. The boy cried out again and again in his man's voice as the gloaming gloom deepened into the early evening.

The moon rose, slowly lifting into the starry sky as the brothers' bones grew white hot together inside their spasming flesh. Sparky bellowed, roaring, howling as his own doggish, wolfish snout thrust forth from his once-childish face. Fresh, sharpening talons dug deep through piney, oak leaf loam as small hands became paws. Lance gagged, strangled by his own bull neck as mountainous fountains of muscle erupted all along his spine, his mane and hackles fluffing as his already broad back ballooned with even more power. Lance's jaws split wide in a shrieking yelp, the man-sized wolf bloating into a bear-sized wolf.

Lance's empty belly was imploding with hunger. As Lance grew bigger and bigger, approaching his beloved car, he saw his Sparky thrashing and rolling in the crunching leaf litter, snarling and squealing in pain as the young beast kept trying to snap at his fluffy orange tail. The elder beast pinned his brother to the ground with two huge paws, only for Sparky to escape after nipping Lance's nose hard.

The car-sized horror licked his bleeding nose, then snorted even as Sparky galloped away. *Ce petit punk est un gardien*, Lance smugly mused. *Plein de feu*.

Sparky was fast. The car-sized horror had been chasing that caramel punk for an hour, and he had already lost his pup. Lance dredged his healed nose across the leaf litter, plowing through the loam in search of his beloved pup's spoor. Something had to be done, and done soon. He had to find Sparky before the kid got hurt, or worse. Lance placed his great forepaws high up a tree trunk, pointed his big snout toward the still-rising moon, and howled, squeezing as much sound from his lungs as his diaphragm could muster.

The whole valley forest grew respectfully silent as that baritone pall fell over everything. Lance's doggish little ears twitched, trying to hear beyond the deafening roar of his empty stomach. And then a shrill, distant howl came from the direction of the Bideaux Ranch. Lance howled again before galloping off toward the ranch.

Sparky's spoor grew stronger as Lance made his way forward. Forest gave way to tree-sheltered pastures. Lance came to a stop upon reaching a ragged, still-hot horse carcass. Lance sniffed, then clamped his mighty jaws onto the corpse's belly, tearing it open to feast upon the deliciously scalding viscera. As Lance began chewing on the ruined withers, the not-so distant thunderclap of rifle fire made the car-sized horror jerk his big, bloody head out of the horse carcass.

The outer wall of Old Man Bideaux's living room exploded as a big, sable cloud filled the already-shattered place. Sparky was here, Lance could easily smell it. All of the crushed and broken furniture was giving him Tower of Pancakes flashbacks. He padded around an overturned sofa, china chunks and glass shards crunching loudly beneath his paws. Underneath the sofa were Bideaux's daughter and granddaughter. Even with loaded handguns held tightly in trembling hands, the two women were of no concern to Lance. Thorvald, Lance's sire, wasn't here, so Lance had no intention of eating them. More importantly, the two weren't bitten; he was having enough trouble with one pup as it was. Lance couldn't help circling overturned so far, though. The cornered women's radiant fear was just too palpably scrumptious. It had been so long since the sable-furred monster had a chance to feast on pure terror.

Another rifle blast, now coming from Bideaux's barn, cut through the night air, and Lance disappeared.

Old Man Bideaux stalked about the maze of stacked hay bales in his barn, reloaded rifle ready in his hands as he waited to finally blast that orange horror back to hell once and for all. Was this that menace that's been killing my animals for the past three years? he wondered as he stepped into another puddle of sheep entrails. He fired at another orange shadow once more, toppling another column of hay bales. Then Bideaux stepped on a rake, falling down while attempting to dodge the incoming shaft. His stumblings lured the orange dog-monster out of its hiding spot, long fangs hungrily bared.

The orange horror leapt at him, only to be tackled back onto the gory, haystrewn floor by another, bigger wolf, bigger than a pickup truck, with fur darker than night. The bigger wolf clapped its bigger jaws around its orange puppy's waist before galloping out of the barn.



Dawn finally came, and the morning sun shone down on the ruined Bideaux ranch, revealing it to be thoroughly infested with police, animal control personnel and wildlife agents. Old Man Bideaux was thankful that his daughter and his granddaughter were safe, but was heartsick over the insurance assessor's car breaking down twenty miles down the road.

Elsewhere in the forested valley, the morning sun shone brightly down upon an abandoned rest stop where Lance's car was parked. Inside the car, a caramel-haired boy lay asleep on a massive tuft of sable fur. The boy woke as he wriggled in his big brother's shaggy embrace. Sparky's wolfish ear twitched as he realized, yet didn't really care, that he was human, in underwear, again. Sparky closed his eyes, trying to reminisce about when he was back home the day before yesterday. He was...he would have been....Sparky realized he was home now. The boy buried his face back into Lance's sable mane, hooking his thin, bare arms around his big brother's shaggy bull neck.

"Mornin', Sparks," his big brother purred. The boy pressed

face deeper into Lance's throat as he felt his big brother letting go of him. Lance's mighty limbs straightened, his hind legs reaching out of one opened window, his forelegs out the other. Then, after a minute or five of wiggling his hairy fingers and hairy toes in the warm sun, Lance retracted his shaggy limbs back into the car, and said, "Come on, let's get dressed."

A growling grunt came as a reply. Lance giggled as he folded his big arms behind his shaggy head.

"Yeah, the first time takes a lot out of you," Lance said. "But we have places to go. Come on." Lance sat up in his back seat, readjusted his boxers, and spent another ten minutes carefully extracting his little brother's powerful little fists from his mane. Setting Sparky down beside him, Lance licked the ball of his thumb so he could begin combing that grumbling, grouchy, groggy boy's disheveled caramel hair with his talons and bulky fingertips. Once he had finished sculpting and licking his brother's orange cowlicks into submission, Lance hastily yanked a pink tee shirt and a pair of jean shorts onto Sparky's body, then quickly plonked the boy into the car's front passenger seat before grumblings of protest could erupt. Lance grinned a fangy grin as he buckled Sparky in, and said "Betcha thought I couldn't do that. Well, I got experience..." Something suddenly sucked the joyful smugger out of the shaggy-furred man as he found himself remembering his family, his old family, his younger brothers and sisters. *Sont-ils toujours en vie?* Lance opened the car door. "...don't go anywhere; I'll be right back."

Sparky growled as he summoned the strength to squirm, only for his heavy head to flop forward as he found himself falling back asleep.

Outside, Lance drank in the morning sunlight before doing his private, personally sacred dance of shoving his hind legs into his jeans. After he pulled on his red hockey jersey over his mighty torso, Lance began picking cornflowers out of the rest stop's weed patches. By the time he had made a blue bundle thicker than a corn cob, he lashed his blue bouquet together with some grass blades, opened the driver side door, and tossed the bouquet onto his sleeping brother's lap. Inside again, Lance filled his car with K-pop, revved his engine, and drove off.

The drive through the valley was uneventful, even with Lance's habit of driving no less than twenty miles above the posted speed limits. By the time Lance merged onto Interstate Six Hundred and Three and traversed the Salamander Bridge, he parked his car, a hundred feet away from a Mother and Daughter going back and forth from a powder-blue sedan, setting up a shrine of toys and silk flowers at a familiar-looking break in the guardrail. Lance discreetly grabbed his cornflower bouquet without waking Sparky, then got out. He walked toward the two, moving the obvious familiarity in their strawberry-blond hair, and freckled faces to Sparky. Lance held out the bouquet he was going to send to Thornbush's memory to the weeping lady. She accepted it with a mumbled thank you before handing it to her puffy-eyed daughter. The two scurried back into

their car, and Lance watched them drive away. He visually rummaged through that makeshift shrine of stuffed animals and silk flowers and plastic violins. He reached out to grab a sheet of paper in a plastic sleeve. It was a color print of a photo featuring a surly-faced, balding man wearing glasses, trying too hard to smile while standing next to a familiar-looking, caramel-haired boy holding a fiddle who was too timid to smile. Prester Langley and- Lance rolled the plastic-sleeved sheet up tightly as he walked back to his car. In the opened trunk, Lance momentarily shut his hot eyes to squeeze out hot tears as he touched an old, scratched mahogany and rosewood cigarbox, Thorvald's precious, precious keepsake box, now his. Fifteen deep breaths later, and Lance unhooked the lid, placed the rolled up sheet in with the other keepsakes, shut the box, slammed the trunk lid, and got back into the driver's seat, quietly praying he'd never be given another reason to open that blasted box again. Lance leaned over to tap his forehead against Sparky's, turned his key in the ignition, flooded his car with more K-pop, and resumed his trOnce upon a time, a brave, strong, handsome, but ultimately poor and lowly hunter wooed a cheesemaker's daughter. She returns his love, but her Mother demands a brideprice of a hundred wolf pelts before she would allow her daughter to marry him. The hunter is in love, and happily gathers a thousand wolf pelts to acquire his sweetheart's hand.



Vargyr

Because he slakes himself on the heart's blood of a thousand wolves, the hunter becomes a giant wolf, himself. But the cheesemaker gave her word, and her daughter is in love. Thus, the fair maid's mother reluctantly gives her blessings for her daughter to wed this beast, the beau who was once a man. Soon after, the cheesemaker's daughter has a son.

The boy quickly grows into a big and rugged man like his father once was, and eventually leaves home to seek his place in the world. The hunter's son has a long and lonely quest. Among people, others could plainly see the hunter's son is a raging beast. In the woods, there is smothering terror as animals could clearly tell the boy smells exactly like his father. So the boy, Vargyr, still wanders in search of his perfect place.

I

He was alive. Fern opened his eyes to see bright white light. After some minutes of vigorous blinking, Fern realized he was looking up at the grim, gray winter sky, filtered through barren tree branches. Feeling began to return to Fern's slim, cold body. Upon moving his stiff arms, the young man realized he was naked, clothed only in chilled gelatinous gore and forest filth. More importantly, Fern realized he still had a right arm. And a left arm, too.

As fern lifted his gore-helmeted head to sit up, he began to recall some of what happened last night. He remembered driving late. He remembered the full moon shining brightly in the night sky. He remembered seeing something on the road. He remembered hitting something. He remembered hitting a thing.

And then Fern realized he wasn't breathing. He tried to inhale, but could only make a bubbling gurgle. Pink froth oozed out of his open mouth. Fern put his scalding hands to his scalding throat in the insane sudden hope of squeezing out whatever mystery bane he was choking on. Thin ropes of pomegranate-colored syrup dribbled out past his blood-chapped lips. Then an apple-like glob of garnet-red congealed blood leapt from his lips and into his hot, steaming hands. Then another clot leapt out, and another, and another. Then with a last roaring belch, Fern finally emptied his lungs and stomach of that clot-jeweled gunk.

So much blood. In him, and everywhere in this grove. Was it all his? The blood-soaked, filth-caked young man finished peeling himself off of the forest floor, pulling his sticky, feverish, yet aching chilled body onto wobbly legs. Fern looked behind him to see a big, charred splat. Within that still-smoking mess laid a jumbled, still-smoldering pile of blackened bones. Where a skull once was was Fern's flaregun, burnt, crushed, chewed, laying in a pile of ashen pottery shards. Fern squatted down to pick a gold earring out of that mess. Something else caught his eye, and he reached over to pick up his wallet from a sticky, sooty wad that used to be the pair of slacks he wore to that party from yesterday.

Suddenly, Fern's nose and eyes burned, as he realized he was about to die from hay fever. His eyes stung, watering like they were melting in their sockets. And then he sneezed out a bolus of pink mucus. And then Fernando Cana could smell the whole world, the snowy loam, his own salty filth underneath congealed blood, pine resin, the snow, the burn thing, everything. Fern could even smell his car and the decaying asphalt of the road three miles away. He scratched his ears, digging into his ear canals in vain hope of sating his suddenly itching brain.

Fern sighed, exhaling a billowing, steaming gout of warmed fog.

"What the?" he rasped. His voice seemed deeper, by almost an octave. He found himself coughing again. *The cold, it's the cold air.* But Fern didn't feel cold anymore. He felt...sticky.

Fern shuddered, he clutched his sticky, hot, scorchingly feverish belly as it growled, as it roared. His weakening knees buckled, then failed as he toppled back onto the earthy, sticky loam.

He felt hungry, too.

Fern wallowed in the snow, reveling in how its cold wetness was neutralizing his itchy stickiness. He unfurled a long arm, and let it drop into the snow, leisurely listening to it sizzle as his arm passed through it.

Sizzle?

“Weird,” he croaked.

Fern pulled himself back up onto his unsteady legs again.

Sizzle?

“Weird,” he croaked.

Fern pulled himself back up onto his unsteady legs again. He wobbled back over to the charred splat. Fernando tried to remember what the charred splat looked like before it went splat dead. Before it charred. He remembered it was big, really, really big: judging from the diameter of the splat, the thing would have been at least as big as his car. He remembered it was dark, dark-colored, maybe with lots of dark fur. He found himself putting that stray earring

into his left earlobe. That thing, that pre-splat thing had teeth. Fern clearly remembered the thing having lots of big, yellow teeth, like a shelf full of swollen parsnips and really, really pointy rutabagas, all stained red and yellow, yet almost as bright as its big eyes. Big, blue eyes, shining like a pair of hellish lanterns filled to bursting with blue lightning.

Fernando walked slowly toward the carbonized jumble that used to be the splat's skeleton, eventually putting a big, sticky foot through the segment that used to be the splat's neck.

It smelled like him. It smelled exactly like him. He remembered it smelling exactly like him.

Then Fern sneezed, spending a good five minutes sneezing before spending another ten minutes snorting and milking blood and mucus out of his big nose.

"I'm covered in his horror gunk!" Fernando yelled at himself. "And covered in his bile, and his slobber, and his-"

Fern ran through that winter forest, looking for all the world like a big, wet rat that got spat out by a cat. He ran, not looking back as though the Furies, themselves, were snapping at his heels. Then Fern stopped.

He saw the hood and grill of his vehicle crushed and crumpled up as if someone with a gigantic fist gave his poor car a good one-two-three punch. Fern picked a fluffy tuft of dark fur out of the crimped metal ribbons of the grill and put it to

his big nose.

It smelled just like him.

II

A day passed, a week passed, then two weeks passed. Fernando Cana eventually found the strength to dismiss that awful, yet vaguely remembered night as simply having hit a bear, or maybe it was a moose, and then puking on himself afterward. His insurance carrier bought that story, and that was good enough for him.

Still, people noticed a change in Fern. Several people would even chime in about a drastic change in him.

For starters, people noticed Fern gaining, practically doubling in weight over the course of three weeks. Most simply dismissed this as the sad inevitability of Fern's teenaged metabolism finally winding down before his teenaged appetite could consider having a chance to consider stopping to catch its breath. Neighbors noticed Fern jogging to convenience stores, fast food joints and the supermarket before work, after work, on his lunch breaks, buying and eating sandwiches and junk food either which way.

People snickered behind his back, and a few even snickered to his increasingly scruffy face that, since he hit a bear, he was trying to become a bear, himself, as a replacement. Fern didn't care what they said about or to him, just so long as they didn't get in his way. He was bulking up, yes.

Fern decided life was short, and he'd get into weightlifting. All this snacking and eating was fuel. And if, in Fern's new quest to change his name to Fernando Olympio, he would be forced

But the truth of the matter, the real nitty gritty that Fern was actually too embarrassed to, no, that Fernando was too terrified to admit was more complicated. Ever since the accident, a weird fire lit in his stomach. It warmed him, filled him with energy, filled him with power, but it made him ache, and when he felt this weird fire in his belly wane, he felt like he was dying. So he ate, and feeding this flame would keep him alive. And going to the gym was the perfect, socially acceptable excuse.

And that was the lie-washed half-truth, Fernando Cana kept telling himself. Because if he stopped going to the gym, because if he just stopped eating to let that weird flame gutter and die with him like he secretly, truly wished to, because if he just stopped, just lay down to rest, and, worst of all, closed his eyes, he'd see the splat again. Except now, the splat had his eyes. And those were glowing in his dreams.



That day started like it always did since Fern came home. Fern woke from an unrestful night's sleep of tossing, and turning, of moaning and groaning, and aching, of nightmares about teeth and claws and blood and glowing eyes. He quickly flipped his lamp switch to brighten his still-dark room (and, more importantly, to make sure his eyes weren't actually glowing). He sat up and yawned. And then screamed and cussed upon snagging his tongue on a suddenly sharp tooth. Fern bolted from his bed, catapulting

himself to his vanity mirror. In the diffused light of Fern's small and still rather dim bedroom, a roaring panther stared back at him from the mirror. He swallowed, tongue pristine, but his fanged mouth still tasted of blood.

In his brightly lit bathroom mirror, Fern studied his lengthening canines. To his silent horror, he watched his fangy canines steadily grow a centimeter longer over the course of four minutes before he finally closed his mouth. Then he realized he had a beard! What was originally a devilish, stylishly unruly goatee on his hero's chin the night before was now a wild and woolly beard trying to crawl into his nose. Fern opened his pajama shirt, then ripped apart his undershirt to see that his massive beard wasn't (just) a beard, it was a part of this monstrous, parasitic shag carpet growing all over his torso (and his arms and elsewhere) that was trying to reach up and fuse with fluffy unibrow.

"We'll see about that," he sneered as he clicked on his electric razor.

After spending almost an hour shaving himself, Fern squeezed into a tracksuit. He grabbed a couple of salamis from his fridge on his way to the door. They would give him enough energy to make it to Gail's Bakery without fainting. Or eating someone.

He opened his front door. The morning outside was cloudy, but still bright, and very, very cold. The chilly air stung his hot, freshly shaved cheeks. He left the packaging of his salamis

He left the packaging of his salamis on a counter near his door as a trade for his house keys. His car keys to his new replacement car sat untouched in their own little bowl for over a week. He'd drive his new car. Eventually. Fern shoved one salami into his waiting mouth as he exited his house, and finished his other salami just as he locked his front door.

The jog to Gail's was quick, not so much because Fern was in a starved hurry, but merely because it was five blocks down the street. Inside the bakery, Fern began his month-old daily ritual by saying "Hi, Gail!" Another hello to sister, Chastity Claire.

And Chastity Claire replied, "You're so funny, Mr. Jungle Man," as she always did. "Here to pick out more doughnuts for your office?"

"Of course," Fern lied, as he did for a month.

But, as the hungry, scruffy man in a tight tracksuit began picking out which twelve doughnuts he was to eat in five minutes, he realized something was off. The apple jelly doughnuts smelled salty, tangy, and were raspberry-red. No, no, they weren't doughnuts at all, there weren't any doughnuts in the display case at all. Only big clumps of clotting blood, exactly like the clots he puked up a month ago, on the day after running over the splat.

Fern gawked at the half-eaten corpse gurgling at him from

from the other side of his wrecked car.

“Huh?”

“Would you like the daily special, Mr. Cana?” Chastity Claire repeated.

“Oh, yeah, absolutely!” Fern laughed, pretending he had, instead, just misunderstood a batch of apple jelly doughnuts. He kept laughing even as he pulled out some bills, kept laughing even as Chastity Claire put twelve apple fritters into a paper bag.

Those twelve apple fritters lasted Fern for almost eight minutes. As tasty as those fritters were, as almost filling as they were, Fern found himself suddenly struck by a craving.

Blood.

His gut rumbled so painfully, an old woman sitting on a bus stop bench turned to gawk at the scruffy man in a tight tracksuit.

That day at the office was the same as every day ever since Fern came to work at that hellhole. Barely tolerable bordering on insufferable. Fern ran errands between departments all morning, bringing and taking memo after memo hither and yon because the idiots at I.T. couldn't fix the program again in a timely fashion. And just before lunch, Fern got his arm caught in the copy machine for seventy-four minutes all

because Bron from Accounting just could not be asked to understand that one cannot operate a copy machine at the same time it was being repaired for a paper jam again.

Once finally freed from the copy machine, Fern made a bee-line to the break room. After surreptitiously helping himself to a few of his coworkers' salami sandwiches, and then after three, then five cups of apple juice, Fern parked himself into a chair. He pried off the cap of a bottle of apple cider, and found himself oddly calm as he suddenly began daydreaming about Bron's entrails.

"What the hell are you wearing, Ferdinand?" Kew from I.T. demanded. Fern looked down at his torn, toner-soaked sleeve, watching toner-soaked fur leak out of the wet, rented fabric.

"It's called a tracksuit, Kew. I tore it while fixing the copy machine." Kew snorted. "And my name is *Fernando*, not Ferdinand. You should know this, we've had the misfortune of working together for eight years."

Kew snorted again, this time flashing yellow-stained teeth.

"I just think you should dress more appropriately, Ferdinand. You're not some fruit-picking slob from El Salvador, after all."

Fern's scruffy, ruddy face grew reddish, his hairy hands balling into hairy fists. A woman in a blue and tweed business suit stepped into the break room, her polished glower chilling

Fern's temper. Kew sneered harder, this time.

"Enough, both of you," Office Manager Onnia declared. "Fern, take the afternoon off; get bandaged up or shaved." Then Onnia focused on Kew. "Mr. Oglethorpe, you're not in H.R., stop pretending you're in it, or else, please."

Kew angrily cocked his head, bringing it dangerously close to Onnia's startled face. Fern gently, swiftly attacked Kew's chest, violently sending the I.T. blowhard tumbling backward onto a table.



In the men's room mirror, Fern watched his reflection as he struggled to unzip his tightening tracksuit. He stared as his already-ruined suit slowly tore open, his big, woolly chest thrusting out a foot, then two feet, his hot flesh bubbling underneath a thick, thickening layer of black fur.

III

Fern woke from another unrestful night's sleep filled with tossing and turning and groaning and moaning and dreadful nightmares filled of puberty and eternal hunger. He sat up in his bed to spend a minute, then ten, then twenty dragging his strong-nailed fingers through his voluminous, unnaturally luxurious chest hair, partly to scratch his incessantly itchy skin, and mostly to unravel the knots and snarls in his parasitic shag carpet. Then he finally opened his eyes to see two little amber stars staring back at him from the depths of his darkened vanity mirror on the far side of his bedroom.

At least he didn't scream again like he kept doing a week ago. Fern knew what was happening, he just refused to brood or acknowledge or even think about it. His clock radio read 10:51 am. Fern hesitantly got out of bed to shuffle over to his bedroom window. Fiddling with his curtains got him stabbed through his luminescent eyes with a very sharp ray of sunlight.

Fern's brain caught on fire. He screamed, he wailed, he swore, perhaps even roared in pain as he clamped his hairy hands over his watering eyes. Fern tripped over a chair, tumbling onto the floor. The fire in his lobes ran down his spinal cord, making him writhe more as he felt his hairy back grow hairier. His shaggy arms spasmed as he shucked himself of his pajama shirt. His screams turned into shrill squealing as his hips grew hot, grew boiling again. He scratched away at his pajama pants as he felt his under-

pants bursting open, and....

The pain suddenly waned, the spasms calmed. Fern sniffed the air, and gave a sacrilegious thanks to God as he patted his floor and himself on his hairy butt to confirm he didn't lose control of his bowels. But, by God, he had a tail now! From a hesitantly exploratory tug, his new tail was three feet long. Fern tore off his ruined underpants as he realized there were footfalls at his doorstep. He hastily pulled a blanket over his black-furred shoulders even as his doorbell began ringing. By the time he creaked his front door, his two neighbors just stood there at his threshold, their mouths agape as though they were a pair of hungry, fancy goldfish. Fern squinted in the sunlight as his eyes began watering again.

"What? What do you want?" Fern demanded as he pulled his blanket around his big, shaggy body a little tighter.

"We heard screaming!" the gingham-clad neighbor exclaimed. Fern grunted.

"I'm hungover, and I just stubbed my toe," he lied, squeezing a squeak of sympathetic, almost pathetic concern out of the flannel-clad neighbor.

"And some weird guy's looking for you, Fernando," the flannel-clad neighbor chimed in, accidentally milking a drawn-out groan out of Fern. "Seemed really-"

"Creepy?" Fern suggested.

“Yeah, yeah!”

“Glasses?”

“Yeah!”

“Reeks of stale energy drink, b.o., and a bad attitude masking an obvious inferiority complex?”

“That’s the guy! Really, really creepy guy,” the gingham-clad neighbor chirped.

“Yeah, that’s Kew Oglethorpe, former coworker. Helped him get fired when he attacked me and my manager. Call the police if he comes back.” Fern began to pull his blanket over his face.

“Will do,” both neighbors replied together. And with that, Fern gesticulated thanks before shutting his front door. He slumped down to the floor, exhausted as he listened to his two neighbors chitter and glug in mortal concern. Once he heard them finally walk away, he crawled out of his blanket to painfully amble, on all fours, over to his bathroom.

Fern counted to ten, then to thirty before flicking on all the lights in his bathroom, gritting his big, fanged teeth as his amber eyes gushed, almost as if they were melting in the glare. He staggered into his shower stall, spending half an hour vigorously splashing that blessedly hot water into his eyes. After another hour of lathering, rinsing and more

After another hour of lathering, rinsing and more lathering, he groped for a disposable razor to peel his wet fur growing on his neck, his chin, his cheeks, his broad shoulders, his now-massive chest, and his arms. After he wore out his third razor in the depths of his left armpit, he chucked that plastic gewgaw out of his shower and shut off the hot water.

He stepped out, looking past the steam into his bathroom mirror. He fancied he looked like a sopping satyr, or a half-dressed sasquatch. Then Fern wiped the condensation off his bathroom mirror. He forgot his pique of fancy as he studied that puckered, stubble-encrusted moonscape of scars across his great chest, rippling chest. He put his fingertips, one by one, into the line of shallow craters running from above what was left of his right nipple down into the unshaven depths of his black belly fur where his navel used to be.

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Stanton Fink is an amateur artist and writer who currently lives in Oregon. Stanton grew up in Southern California where he studied biology and Oriental medicine, then moved to Oregon. Stanton's hobbies include drawing, writing stories and scripts, and tending to his menagerie of rare trees.

