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Managing
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2017

Eighty-nine coreschool graduates were left. Two-thirds of my classmates had already disappeared through the door with various combinations of dread and teen bravado. Most of the remainders were stretched out on couches meant for three people, eyes fixed on their tablets. They hardly glanced up when a class clown cracked one last joke before going through the door to his interview. He smiled wide, too wide, and his eyes fell on me. All he wanted was one last scrap of acknowledgement. He had to be aware that there aren't a lot of assignment descriptions with "sarcasm" under the required skills. I grinned and shook my head. Satisfied, he disappeared to whatever life the state could cobble together for him.

We had been cooped up in this waiting room for nearly ten hours. This wasn't unexpected. We had been prepped. We knew that we'd be cut off from the net and any outside contact. Every adult in the state had stories about their interview day, and the vast majority were about the powerful boredom that the fast paced, friendly coreschool environment had prepared them for. Most of my classmates displayed signs of an amorphous anxiety that I could read as boredom, but I can't say that I was uncomfortable.

Aware that my turn was coming, I sat up straight and struggled to focus on my breathing. Even in the quiet waiting room, my classmates gave me much to think about. The loudest sounds were at the snack table, murmured thanks and crunching chips. There were always a few people waiting in line at the bathroom door. I couldn't help noticing that one girl had gone into the little stall eight times in two hours. If she was seeking privacy as a coping mechanism, it wouldn't be lost on her potential employers. Sure, they had access to our records since birth, but there was at least anecdotal evidence that outbursts in the coreschool graduation room had cost promising students their most lucrative offers. Hiding in the bathroom isn't as bad as breaking down in

tears in the middle of the waiting room, but it was surely in the same category. It's only natural to let the most current and shocking data overshadow an adolescence full of high test scores and pleased teachers.

I considered trying to talk to someone. Easy sociability was always a desired trait, especially for entry-level employees. But the class had long since run through all polite conversation. I had made a point of shaking most of the hands in the room, but not all. It was fine to admit that, even after twelve years, I hadn't gotten to know *all* of my classmates. Within the next week, most of us would be in different cities around the country. No need to initiate contact now.

A pang of preemptive shame shot through my neck. The queue was alphabetical. My turn was next. All of my potential employers might be watching, watching me sit silently, sullenly, alone. What if they feared I would be best left in silence, and I was only offered entry-level maintenance jobs? Both of my parents had lived their lives in the maintenance industry. It was statistically likely, no matter how I attempted to use the memories of my aptitude tests to salve my fears.

The class clown had only been gone for a few minutes when a chime signaled my turn. With one last deep breath, I let the smooth weight of necessity press my fear down and out of my mind. My name glowed above the door as it opened. I stood and scanned the room for silent goodbyes. There were a few, all smiling for me. I wasn't hesitating, only being polite before walking through the door.

There was another door at the end of a short hallway. This second door didn't open for me. I was only confused for a moment before using the doorknob. I noted the significance of

having to open this door myself. I planned on sharing this little moment with the employers on the other side. It was a pleasant, reusable anecdote to break the ice.

But there was only one person in the room beyond. A dozen desks in rows, each with a pair of empty seats, and only one woman waited to interview me.

I didn't let dread choke me. I didn't break stride. I didn't let my practiced half-smile slip for an instant. I walked straight for her desk and shook her hand and sat down gracefully but still, somehow, she could see I needed reassurance.

“Zoey Tupper,” the woman cooed. She relished in my name the way you might recall a favorite movie’s title. “Why are you nervous, Zoey?” she said, voice full of motherly concern.

“I'm-” I cut off a reflexive apology, but couldn't think of anything to replace it with.

“I can't stand for you to be worried,” she said. I liked her instantly. In the back of my mind, I was noting her posture, trying to see what was so powerfully pleasant about how she rested one arm on the desk, leaning her head towards me but not her shoulders.

“I know I don't have anything to be worried about,” I said, perhaps a little too quietly. “But I *feel* worried.”

“It's important that you recognize how irrational that feeling is. That's good. Good work, being aware of your emotions.”

“Thank you,” I said, genuine pride swelling in my voice. Nothing is better than being recognized for something you're good at, especially when it comes from someone who ought to know skill when they see it. Whatever industry she was in, she was a recruiter. Reading people was her whole skillset.

Silence filled up that cavernous interview hall but the woman seemed content to let it

drown me. It was up to me to get the conversation started and all I could think about was how little I mattered, how unremarkable my scores were, how none of my letters of recommendation really *glowed* evidenced by the fact that only one employer in the country was willing to take the time to interview me and even she didn't have anything to say.

I didn't realize I was shaking till she put her hand on my shoulder. I hadn't even noticed her stand up.

“Ask a question, Zoey,” she ordered. Facing her empty seat, focusing on the weight of her hand on my shoulder, I steadied myself.

“Where is everyone?”

She didn't make a sound but I could feel her smile. She went back to her seat, beaming at me like a proud parent.

“There were several companies interested in you. I asked them to let me make an offer first.”

“An offer?” Instantly, I hated how incredulous I sounded.

“You're a good fit for what we need. There's a little extra schooling, but it's mostly about procedures, what goes into a good, brief report and getting to know the software we use.” She blinked slowly, long eyelashes fluttering like luxurious wings. “It's nothing you wouldn't excel at.”

She pulled a satchel out from behind her chair and set it on the desk. “Go ahead. It's yours,” she let her beaming gaze rest on me for a moment. “If you want it, Zoey.”

I would have agreed to anything she offered.

I pulled the satchel to me, and slowly unlatched it. Inside was a super light, matte black

pane of glass with soft, rounded edges. It was the most beautiful tablet I'd ever seen. And it was mine.

Within a week, I was at the training camp. My parents were ecstatic. I didn't have time to take their calls, but their minute-long voicemails were encouraging. Training was a blur of crash courses in the agency's software and seminars on the history of citizen surveillance theory. There were about forty students at the camp. It was clear that only one or two of us were being sent to each city, so very few friendships were forged. We were pleasant to each other, but were we each focused on showing our instructors that we had the will to excel. Simply being around so many equally work-orientated peers was comforting.

We were given our benefit packages on the last day and none of us could hide our excitement. Apartments in the hearts of our assigned cities, utility bills included as part of our salary, and an additional stipend that could support a comfortable life despite the high cost of living downtown. We were getting jobs that most of our parents had worked a decade for. Saying goodbye to the training camp was bittersweet, but I was eager to get to my apartment. In all honesty, the crowded camp and packed schedule was only enjoyable because I knew it was temporary. I looked forward to the privacy of working from home.

My apartment tower was a pleasant twenty minute auto ride from the airport. I didn't have much trouble hauling my backpack and suitcase. The elevator took me from the street, swerved sideways and opened directly into the kitchen. My kitchen.

The cute fridge was shorter than me, the cupboards were thinner than my suitcase, and the juicer was just a sleek dispenser and touch screen. The bulk of the machine and fruit stock was hidden away somewhere in the bowels of the apartment tower. I marveled at the slick efficiency of the space. Beyond the little corridor of my kitchen, the main space opened up. My desk was center-stage, flanked by the bed and dresser and silhouetted against the wide plate-glass window.

The crescent chair and wide display chanted 'luxury' from the first note. The bed was shallow but fairly plush. The bathroom was around the corner. But if I'm being honest, the window would have floored me all on its own.

I had grown up in a pleasant little town built around the school complex that had dominated most of my life. It was known as a place for young parents, not somewhere to start careers. I was in the city now. My apartment's window was a widescreen of skyscrapers all up-close. A thousand windows reflected my grin. I couldn't imagine a more perfect view.

It was a week before I realized I hadn't left my apartment. All my orders, fresh meals and cleaned clothes alike, were delivered within a day. They were signaled by the light hiss of a slot in my front door sliding open and the package clattering to my kitchen floor. Empty cardboard boxes piled up on the counters. Every few days, I took some time to break them down and shove them through the same slot they had come from. Somewhere in the tower, someone sorted garbage and deliveries. More than once, I wondered about what sort of coeschool performance could lead to such an assignment. Or maybe they had rejected their assignments and taken a job like that out of desperation. I couldn't imagine being happy with choices like that.

* * *

It was another week before I even wanted to leave. Learning the new job was exciting enough. I grew up knowing there was always a third party present, but now I got to see how the system worked behind the scenes. Tablets were our main tool, of course. GPS was usually plenty. The mics on the target's tablet helped too. Streetside visuals were useful enough when the GPS failed, (which was surprisingly often), or when we needed to be sure of who was carrying which tablet. But even in those early days, I could spot gaps. There were moments when a target was suspiciously still on the rare corner without streetcams in range. In those moments, coarse bedrock weighed on my chest and rolled me back in my crescent chair. I still had reports to fill out, educated guesses to make. I needed to know where a target was at least once every fifteen minutes, and I needed to note every moment they crossed paths with another target of interest. I tried to be open about my blind spots in my daily reports without complaining about the system's limitation, but the lack of feedback kept me up at night. It wasn't like school. There was no grade to tell me how I was doing.

On my sixteenth day, my manager was waiting for me when I logged in for the morning. Dread filled my throat with tar, but I managed to be friendly. After going over a few of my reports with her, I relaxed. She seemed pleased. I was starting to thank her for meeting with me when she cut me off.

“Zoey,” she said, “We're accelerating your training. There's no reason to wait around when we're so clearly in need of staff with your abilities.” She could have told me I was going to be handed a mop and bucket and I still would have been grinning like a madman. “You know how to focus,” she continued. “But we need more than just confirmation of what we already

suspect. We need new insight. For that, you need another level of familiarity with the battlefield. For the rest of the week, consider every moment *on the clock*. And you are forbidden to sit in that chair.” My manager raised an eyebrow and rusty springs shot up through my ribs.

I stood, sending my chair rocking wildly. I leaned awkwardly into the scope of my deskcam.

“Good, Zoey. Get those veins pumping! Get out and see the city. You'll be focused on locals for years to come. Better get to know their space now. A dynamic map of new hotspots is being installed on your tablet as we speak. Spend the next five days following the instructions of that app, but follow your nose if the urge strikes you. See what's current, meet people, and get to know your new city as well as you've come to know our agency's mission. I expect you'll do well, but please, always come to me first if you have any concerns.”

Her image nodded on my screen. My shoulder and neck screamed little shocks of pain at the odd angle I was holding, leaning over my desk. I think I must have mumbled agreement. I hope it was graceful. I was too overcome. This was fieldwork, a clear promotion, and hardly two weeks out of the gate.

For a few minutes, I paced between my dresser, bathroom and my tablet charging on my bedside table. I was caught in a loop of undressing and trying on tops, checking how long my tablet's update would take, and testing the temperature of my shower. When the shower was warm enough, the tablet was too close to being ready for me to break away. I let the water run cold as I played with the new app, reading automatically generated reviews of theaters, bars and even the crossroads in public parks.

The app drew from anonymous recordings of conversation in well-populated locations to determine not just where people were, but why they gathered there. Seasonal rushes, ever-busy street corners and chances for rubber-necking were discarded while potential trends were calculated. Leaning in the doorway to my bathroom in just my socks, I planned out a tour of today's unexpectedly popular spots. It was noon before I stepped into the elevator, but I did feel prepared. My tablet was fully charged, like the whole agency was radiating warmth in my pocket.

In five days, I had eight front-row seats to eight blockbuster premieres. I ate out two meals a day and never went to the same restaurant twice. Trying to keep up with the crowds didn't give me idea of what spots were popular the next day, though I did tend to try new arcades and food carts the day they opened. I prepared a report on how reliable fragmentary conversation was in determining short-term trends, but nothing compared to professional ratings from restaurant blogs when it came to predicting crowd habits even a few days out.

It was all too obvious. By Friday, heavy velvet resignation smothered me from all sides. I readied myself for being reassigned to desk work. These couldn't be the new insights my manager was after. But another Monday came and my manager's shaved head and white-toothed grin filled the screen again. She had nothing but praise. I was given another week to continue the same assignment, though my manager wanted me to socialize more. "Be part of the crowd, sweetheart. Not just a student of it." It was like being evaluated on how much I enjoyed a vacation.

I took to walking instead of taking autos everywhere. I became a regular at the cafe on my block. The old man that staffed it remembered my name the third time I told him, though he never gave me his. He was so wrinkled it seemed his eyes were struggling to stay afloat on a choppy brown sea.

Wandering between bars and theaters, I chatted with anyone waiting at a crosswalk next to me. Most people were happy enough to talk about where they were headed. I made a point of tipping well and asking waiters how they were doing. Ticket clerks were less rushed though, and so easier to get talking.

Though I saw a lot of the same staff, conversations with them never went beyond pleasantries. People on the street were more interesting, complaining about work or the heat. But I rarely talked to the same person twice, and they didn't remember me when we did happen to cross paths a second time. My lack of acquaintances was pointed out to me at my next evaluation, as if I hadn't noticed. My manager encouraged me to stay out of the apartment the coming weekend, and to try to make plans with someone. When I mentioned that I would make a meet-up app profile, she wrinkled that perfectly motherly smile up into a paper ball.

“Meet people naturally, Zoey. Go out and find someone that stands out of the crowd to you. We need you to be able to strike up a friendship, and I know you can do this.” She paused, biting her lip. When she looked me in the eye again, she laughed a little. “I see you and I know I'm right to put my neck out for you. We're moving you along very quickly, and my manager keeps reminding me of the risks, of the trouble new recruits cause when they fail.” She could see me tense, of course. Maybe she could smell the fear-sweat gathering on my back and filling my

skull with a hot red flood. But she smiled again, and leaned towards her deskcam. “Don't fret too much, Zoey. Have a good weekend.” My screen went black.

I wondered at the silence for a moment. I couldn't quite place why it was so strange. Stepping away from my desk, I realized the LEDs were all off. For the first time since I moved in, my computer was shut down. I had to laugh. My manager was serious about getting me back out into the city on my own free time, and of course she knew my weekend habits. I had been looking forward to another two uninterrupted days of playing through a few games while shows streamed in the background. Shaking my head, I disconnected my tablet from its charger. I tapped it, and received no response. It was as dead as my desk.

I spent Saturday much the same way I'd spent the previous week. I wandered between theaters and restaurants, and even though navigating the city by memory was an interesting struggle, the repetition was weighing on me. I had no way of finding new places to check out. I tried asking a barista for a suggestion of how to spend my day and received nothing but a twisted glance and a mumbled excuse about him already having a girlfriend. A bitter taste filled my mouth and couldn't be washed away by the mocha he set on the counter, rather than handing it to me.

The flash of his unrequired rejection kept strobing through my mind, interrupting my attempts to formulate possible friendly cold openings with other strangers. Introducing myself gracefully seemed less likely than bumping into old classmates, now scattered to the winds of their own new assignments. I wasted the day fretting and returned home as the sun was setting. On the upside, I got to sleep earlier than I have in years.

* * *

She must have spotted me from across the plaza, but she made me speak first. It was early Sunday morning. I had rolled around in bed as long as I could before boredom drove me over the edge. I felt naked leaving my apartment without my tablet.

I was sitting at a little round table, one of twenty surrounding the juice kiosk. The sun was already warming the plaza. Most of the light crowd seemed to be commuter-types. I wondered what sort of assignments could have people up so early on the weekend, in suits rather than aprons.

Her mess of blinding white curls made me reach for my sunglasses. Despite the fact that most of the tables were empty, this total stranger took the one directly in front of me. She didn't have a drink, and she didn't pull a tablet out of her satchel. She just leaned back in her chair and shook her hair. Silver threads sliced my eyes and it felt fantastic.

I was staring, and she knew it. She scanned the plaza, looking in every direction but mine. She couldn't have communicated her awareness of me more clearly if she had shouted my name. I calculated. The lack of a drink on her table was an invitation in and of itself.

I went back to the kiosk. Standing in the short line, my back to her, I couldn't help but tremble. When I brought her a coffee, my jittery hand spilled a few drops on her table. She didn't notice, or had the grace to not show it if she did. She just smiled up at me, waiting. She would cut through the nagging frustration of nothing to do, but she didn't exactly make me feel clothed.

"You look like you need a drink," I said.

"Well *thank* you," she sang. "I guess it *is* a bit early for a beer, isn't it?"

That would have been the moment to introduce myself, but I failed to open my mouth.

“I’m Payton. Why don’t you join me?”

I took the other chair at her table.

“Well?” she said, cocking her head to the side and sending those curls tumbling around her deeply tanned shoulders.

“Zoey, sorry,” I stammered.

“Oh lordy, don’t start apologizing so soon. I can tell you do that a lot.” She laughed, and proceeded to tell me all about myself. She could tell I was new to the city, that I had probably just started a new assignment fresh out of school. She guessed my favorite types of games, and what sort of town I had grown up in. She paused occasionally for me to tell her that she was right. She told me a little about herself in the process. While I was so clearly from a small town, she had lived in the state capitol before receiving her first assignment. I noted that she didn’t tell me what that assignment was. When I cut in and asked her what she did for work, she waved off the question.

“Nothing is less interesting than work. What I want is what you do when no one’s paying you.”

With the afternoon approaching, she suggested a little place for lunch. She took my arm and walked me there, talking the whole time. Over sandwiches, she informed me that we were going to a theater when we were done eating. I had no reason to protest. She suggested a movie I had seen the previous week, but I didn’t want to tell her no. When she asked if I knew if it was good, I just told her I’d heard it was doing well at the box office. Payton offered to get us both tickets, but I insisted on getting my own. She did manage to talk me into letting her buy my beer.

The movie was actually better the second time, knowing the surprises before Payton and getting to watch her gasp out of the corner of my eye. Another movie set in the same universe was playing at the same movieplex, so I offered to get us tickets. We quickly grabbed another around and rushed back into a theater. Only seats in the front row were open, but she didn't seem to mind. I'd seen this one too, and if Payton noticed me watching her reactions, she didn't show it. It was well past sunset before we had had our fill of superheroes. We chugged another round before heading out into the warm night.

The streets were nearly empty. It was a Sunday night, and most people were focused on preparing themselves for the oncoming workweek. For a moment, I was infinitely grateful to work from home. I had no urge to rush back to bed, but without anything else in mind, I instinctively wandered towards my apartment tower. Payton paused her rambling to ask where we were going. I mumbled something about my house and, to my astonishment, she blushed.

“Oh sweetie, a little early, huh? Let's find a place for a nightcap. Maybe next week though.”

Maybe it was the porter warming my chest, or the star-white light of the streetlamps, but I felt smooth as hell. “So Friday night, I'll pick the movie and then we can just bring a six pack to my place.”

Oh, that giggle. Chimes in a cleansing summer shower. “Is that supposed to be your flirty face, babe?”

My bubble burst with a snap that broke my grin like a spine over a knee. Her giggle rose into a sympathetic coo.

“I don’t mean to make fun, I’m sorry, Zoey. Come here,” she said, pulling me close. She gifted me with the lightest little kiss. “You’re very charming, don’t you worry.”

I think I let out a goofy grateful laugh. She gently pulled away to tap at her tablet. I let her find us a bar to wrap up the night with. I stood with my hands in my pockets and admired the city at night.

Whatever place she had picked out, it was nearly empty and still felt cramped. When we ordered whiskeys on the rocks, the bartender offered to just sell us the half-bottle he had left rather than open a tab. I scoffed loud enough to draw a glare from him, but Payton agreed and paid in cash.

We drank slow, but we got through the bottle. Somewhere along the line, Payton found the civility to finally ask me about myself. I told her a lot of stories about school, and the sort of life my parents had trying to make a household out of their ever-shifting service industry assignments. One of the clearest memories I have of that night was when she asked me what assignment I had accepted. Training kicked in sharply. I remember telling her that I couldn’t tell her. A little blunt, sure, but in the back of my mind I figured it would make me seem mysterious. The conversation kind of trailed into nothing after that and we went our separate ways.

I think I was hungover till Tuesday, but I rarely stopped smiling that whole time too. Payton messaged me every few hours. We were just exchanging funny videos and such, but I crafted every response with the same care that went into my reports for work. Her messages rang with her rambling cadence. When Friday finally showed itself, I woke up with my heart racing. The workday was over in a flash, and I was strutting down the block towards the retro-style dinner she had picked out for us.

* * *

They only served breakfast, despite the oncoming sunset. My scrambled eggs were still wet. I worried over undercooked eggs through most of Payton's chatter. I would have pulled out my tablet and googled my way to peace of mind, but I had left its inert corpse at home again. I wanted to listen to Payton, truly. She was talking about what her friends did with their free time, pointedly educating me about them. She had decided that I was going to meet them at a bar after we were done eating.

"Sophie sings," Payton said over the rim of her dingy coffee mug. "Like, she doesn't really talk. She sings everything she wants to say. It's a trip. She says it proves she means everything she says, as if no one ever lied in a pop song but whatever. She's got the attic room and doesn't come out much. If you come to our place, don't be offended if you don't meet her. She probably won't be at the bar tonight but if she is, don't be alarmed. James you will for sure meet. He's got a little fan club that'll be tagging along. He's a paper-nut like me, but he's more into making it or scrounging it up at flea markets."

"At what?" I cut in. I had already gotten over the fear of interrupting Payton. She didn't mind it and if I didn't, I'd never get her to explain the abundant obscure references she made.

She didn't skip a beat. "Oh they're the *best*. You can find them in the suburbs here and there. People don't really advertise them cuz they're not licensed merchants but Big Brother really doesn't give a shit about them. They sell old crap nobody is making any more. Antique toys, books, handmade stuff like clothes and dishes. If you want anything unique, you can't just order it or get it in one of malls down here."

She regaled me with tales of treasure hunts through unorganized piles and mazes of tenuously separated booths. It sounded hellish, but I listened closely. This was the kind of thing our agency's hotspot app was missing out on, even though it's exactly what it's designed for. "Not advertising" is a long way from secret, as Payton's openness evidenced. Why weren't the anonymous reviews and GPS tracking pointing me towards little pop-up markets? Even if only a small subculture was interested in them, I had figured out that the app took interest in just about any unusual rise in density in an area, however slight. As we paid our bill and left my mostly untouched eggs behind, I was already forming an extra report in my mind on the subject of these unsanctioned markets.

It was a long walk to the bar, but Payton was opposed to ordering an auto, even though I offered to pay. She pulled out her tablet, an old bulky monstrosity, and studied the local map rather than requesting directions. She was uncharacteristically obscure about her reasoning, saying only that it had "the added bonus of giving me more time to talk at you." I noted her reluctance and let it go. I had nothing against spending more time alone with her, and she was proving to be the fountain of information that my manager hoped I would find out here in the city.

The bar she brought me to was in a squat two-story building surrounded by the city's more typical towers. When I marveled that the place had been preserved for so long, she told me all about the owner's fight to hold onto his space. He lived in the apartment above and worked the bar below. The price of refusing to sell the building was that, despite being an employer, he was never invited to interview graduates. All of his employees had another job, or had rejected their assignments.

Back at training, there had been a seminar on domestic terrorist breeding grounds. This bar could have been the basis for our textbook's description of an anarchist recruitment site. It had the mismatched chairs and chipped bartop, the low menu prices and cash-only policy. The smoke and sweat in the air meant the owner had some boycott against ventilation going as well.

I was sure Payton was testing me, but I forced myself to relax as she guided me to a huge round booth in the back. She introduced me to four scowling punks, each with asymmetrical haircuts and patched leather jackets. Almost exactly like the seminar's cartoonish illustrations. One of them was her roommate. The others were friends of his.

"If you like this old bar, you are gonna love our place," Payton said, pulling me into the booth next to her.

One of her roommates snickered. "You handing out invitations to just any pliant fangirl?" he said, pointedly not looking at me. A prickling blush bloomed across my face.

The table jumped, the roommate yelped.

"Don't be a dick, James," Payton said and kicked at him again. "You know, she isn't even carrying a tablet. She's less plugged in than me." She stuck her tongue out at him and we all laughed.

It wasn't any effort at all to hide my disdain for them. I kept my focus on Payton, not an unpleasant distraction, and I'm sure my face remained a perfect image of the contented, if disoriented new kid. I considered feigning interest in popular antiauth vloggers and lit, but buying their approval seemed more straightforward. I bought the next round, and another. I vaguely remember Payton's roommate getting the next.

There was steam on the glass door. Payton took my arm and shoved the door aside. The bar was behind us and all I could think was that I wouldn't have minded staying in there forever.

“Where to?”

I almost didn't respond. I was almost terribly rude, rude enough to ignore her.

“I'm sorry,” I said with as much seriousness as I could muster. She didn't deserve any rudeness.

She stared me in the eye and bit down on a cackle. I wished she'd let it out. I could have danced to her laugh.

She cocked her head. “Yours or mine?”

A blankness.

“Zoey?”

“Oh god I have no idea what you're talking about I'm so sorry.” I couldn't tell if it was the hot steam from the bar grasping at my face or tears.

“Oh girly, hold on, hold on.” She hugged me. Payton's arms were around me and I couldn't think of what to do next.

“Your place or mine?”

“Oh,” I managed to say.

“My place is gross,” she said, propping me up with an arm under my shoulders. “Why don't you put your address in my tablet and I'll get us there?”

Nothing had ever sounded easier.

* * *

It was silent, and then I was home. The streets were as empty as when we left the bar but the sky was lighter. Payton was leaning against the elevator doors like she'd been waiting for a long time.

"You ready yet?" she asked when I wandered close enough to wonder if she could smell me.

"This is my neighborhood," I said, though she made a face like she didn't understand me. She took my hand and put it on the elevator's scanner. And we were going up. Payton stumbled and laughed when the elevator jerked to the left on its way to my apartment.

"You could have warned me," she pouted, purple lips stuck out and grey eyes huge. A familiar stab of panic wooshed by me, missing me by an inch like I was a swirling image it couldn't quite make out. I didn't want her upset, but my heart wasn't clawing its way out of my chest.

"I'm so sorry," I said, offering a hug. Her laughter shook the walls. I could almost see the vibrations in blue and pink reaching through the walls towards my sleeping neighbors, each one of them getting a single note as we passed. Only I got the whole song.

"I'm sooo sorry," she said, doubled over. "You don't have to be sorry. I'm impressed, really! Stinkin' drunk and you still braced yourself. This is your space, ain't it? You're losing that deer/headlights look the closer we get."

As the elevator slowed and I turned towards where my kitchen would soon appear, she cocked her head and studied me. I know I was smiling wide at the attention.

"I like seeing you all comfortable. Sorry my friends are jerks."

“They were fine. Very interesting.”

My front door slid open and a little pile of cardboard boxes tumbled into the elevator.

I braced myself against a rush of shame, but it seemed to wash around me without making contact. I shrugged and kicked the boxes back into my apartment. Payton followed, doubled over laughing.

“Let’s stay here all weekend. This is comfy.” She kicked off her shoes and gently pulled me onto my bed. She talked about privacy and my cave and something stirred and I tried like mad to think back over what she just said to see if the innuendo I so desperately wanted was really in there.

But Payton didn’t slow down. She asked questions and put her ear on my chest as I answered. Steely light dripped through my blinds as I spoke. My hand on her cheek; I felt her jaw tensing and relaxing and tensing again. I fell asleep to the rising light and her jaw and my own swirling image dodging all the spears of fear that, for once, couldn’t touch me.

She had said she wanted to stay in my apartment all weekend, but after a full day of rolling around my apartment, ordering our meals and screwing around online in bed, we were both restless.

By lunch, she was googling movie showtimes. The hotspot app flashed in my memory like a flirty wink. Maybe I could be the hip one tonight.

I waited for her to go to use the bathroom and quickly scrolled through my options. I had reflected in my reports that Friday nights were the only safe indicators of the following night’s crowded places. The stars aligned. A drag show had premiered last night and received a wide

swath of praise via anonymous snatches of conversation. The glowing reviews wouldn't hit the blogs till well after tonight's tickets were sold out. Tomorrow night, it'd be old news. I bought two tickets and closed the hotspot app, replacing it with a compilation of cute animal hijinks. I shared that with Payton when she came out and saved the tickets as a last minute surprise.

"We should figure out what we want to see," she said when sundown rolled around.

"Oh, *thaaat*," I said in a half-assed imitation of a cartoon we had watched earlier.

She giggled but didn't stop scrolling through the metascores of the current blockbusters.

"You know," I said, curling around her, "You sure like that mainstream stuff a lot for such as forward-thinking girl."

Her face scrunched up rather hideously.

I had scooted down the bed. I looked up at her with eyebrows cocked. I tried to retain a certain swagger in my expression, but she was sure to notice the doubt bubbling up between my eyes.

"Are you..." she was squinting at the ceiling. She looked down at me, face still contorted in thought. "Are you trying to talk me into something?"

Blank white cleared my mind of all my smooth ambition. Just as it started to start burning, her expression broke into a wave of sympathy.

"Oh, sweetie," she cooed, "You don't have to impress me. But what are you thinking of? I'm not bored of you, if you want to stay here all night, that's fine." She scooted down the bed so we were both horizontal. "I'm sure we can entertain ourselves."

The white fire was quenched and a certain rock-hard confidence propped me up. If she felt the need to tell me that I was enough as-is, this was the time to be a little bit *extra*. Propped

up on my elbows on either side of her hips, I asked if she was willing to go with me without knowing where we were headed. She was shaking her head ‘yes’ and practically squealing assent before I finished my proposal.

“I have tickets to something real, real new and real, *real* great,” I finished up.

“I’m so *very*, *very* *intrigued*.” Her voice swam through a warm, sunlit ocean.

We were well ahead of the opening act, so I had no problem with walking the whole way there. Payton noted that I didn’t ask about an auto in a way that shined with approval. We walked hand-in-hand across half the span of downtown. I knew from the audio clips in the hot spot app that the location was disarmingly non-descript. Again and again, the tablet mics of dozens of happy patrons had picked up on mentions of the performers “doing so much with so little” and the burst of color and sound from a venue that was so unassuming on the outside.

As we crossed at a crosswalk and stepped onto the block that was supposed to house the drag show, the total emptiness of the street hit me like a polished stop sign.

I stood gaping on the corner, calculating the cost/benefit of asking Payton to pull out her tablet and look up the venue’s location.

“Oh *damn*,” she said. “Look. At. Them.” She nodded towards a trio of tall, sparkingly bodies strolling towards us.

One of them gestured wildly as the other two, flanking their god, listened with their immaculate hair tiled thoughtfully. The trio didn’t notice us. They swept sideways into a blank, black-painted door in total synchronicity.

It had to be the right place. I assumed the square shoulders of a confident mate and took Payton by the arm.

“I know, right?” I said as I guided her to the door.

There was a reason the anonymous reviews repeatedly mentioned the burst of sensation on the other side of that black door.

The music was pure, pure bass. Everything in there, if it wasn't glowing, then it was pitch black.

Only the highlight of neon or white showed under the blacklight. And the decor made the most of it. As Payton danced in place, squeaking with delight, my gaze involuntarily followed flowing orange and purple lines up one wall, across the ceiling and down the far side of the long entrance hallway. Only upon a second study did I realize that it was the most perfect line of calves and thighs and hips and breasts and shoulders. It ended, glowing and so very perfectly proportioned, with the ticket booth where the head should have been.

I marveled at the blend of delightful aesthetics with precise, studied marketing. If we had wandered in without a thought of the show to come, *not* approaching that ticket booth would have still been impossible.

As we sidled up to the short line, Payton had started rambling again.

“Ok, ok, it's manipulative but it is. Flawless.” She pointed out the amorphous people leaning against the walls in such a way that they didn't obscure the purple and orange mural. “They're the most nonchalantly beautiful things I've ever seen, but they're all different. My god. The focus groups that must have informed this place.”

“It's an effect of the environment. It has to be. They're pretty but--”

“No, they’re plants. They’re paid,” Payton said, nodding sharply. I searched her voice for a trace of resentment, but I only heard admiration. “So, we’re already in line and eager for tickets. What else do they want from us, past this entrance?”

The app’s wisdom only showed when it was truly needed. I cleared my throat, mustering an unassuming tone. “Oh, we’ve got to tip. Every performer is their own little business.”

“Even after the tickets?” Payton had the grace to whisper this under the music as she clung to my shoulder.

I leaned my mouth to her ear. “Oh, the tickets weren’t much. I’ll get us cash. Tipping is part of the show, you’ll see.”

She looked up at me with concentrated curiosity. “What have you brought me to?”

“You’ll love it,” I said. It was our turn in line. The ticket-taker seemed relieved when I said our tickets should be waiting, and they were happy to charge my card and give me a stack of cash fives. For all the underground feel, this whole project had a professional quality that I would have missed otherwise.

As I split the stack of fives with Payton and ignored her blush, the next couple in line started raising a stink about not being able to get tickets.

“We’ve been in line for like twenty minutes,” the boy said in a grating, falsely high voice.

“At least like, put up a sign or something!” The other one stomped her foot and stared at the ticket-taker, mouth hanging wide.

The ticket-taker reached a limp hand toward a handwritten sign that said “Sold out, sorry!” and the indignant couple cried out in unison. Their unity went jagged as one started demanding a manager and the other questioned the ticket-taker’s intelligence.

Memory of my mom’s deep, muffled sobs came out of nowhere. Payton was loudly telling me what pricks the pair were, but I couldn’t really hear her. Instead, I heard Dad sympathizing, telling Mom it was *them* not *her*. That they were assholes their whole life and deserved pity for the hellish skull they had to see the world through. Mom’s disbelieving bursts of pained laughter echoed my pulse as I put a hand on one of the couple’s tense shoulders.

I opened my mouth and Payton spoke. She had both arms around my hips and her head propped on my shoulder.

“They’re here tomorrow, totally worth the wait,” Payton said.

I glanced at the ticket-taker. Their eyes were wet with gratefulness.

One of the dickish couple cocked her head and clucked. The other rolled his eyes, looked us up and down, and finally decided to speak to us. “It better be,” he said. He turned to the ticket-taker. “You have any for tomorrow, huh?”

“Oh *yes*,” the ticket-taker said. “Any seating you want.”

With that settled, Payton and I strolled through an archway with hanging, opaque white plastic flaps. The entrance looked flimsy, but it had managed to hold back a thick, sweet smoke. The scent was intoxicating enough, but we were still drawn to the bar along one side of the huge warehouse of a room.

We were both charmed by the bartender duo that made each drink together, snapping little directions and insults at each other with wide smiles.

Double cocktails in hand, we found our assigned seats. Not the front row, not the nosebleeds, we had a good view of the stand and a perfect view of each other.

Payton stirred her drink with its little black straw. “Don’t think I’ve seen you mad before,” she said.

“Oh those jerks,” I said, glancing at around to make sure they weren’t somehow within ear shot. “I don’t know, just hit a nerve.”

“Which nerve?” She sipped her drink, straw between her long fingers.

“Oh, you know,” I started concocting a story, but she eyed me in a way that made a pleasant lie seem hateful. “Mom and Dad both worked jobs like that, taking that sort of shit all the time. Really fucked with ‘em.” I gulped a third of the drink at once and started gauging when would be an acceptable time to get a second one.

“Yeah, that’s how it is,” Payton said. “It sucks but it’s true. Gotta have some personal connection to realize just how much it sucks for random strangers to be yelling at you.” She sighed at the empty, darkened stage.

“Well, anyone could see they were being assholes.” I took another third of my drink, figuring that the bartenders were too busy to judge who was drinking a little too quickly.

“But to get *mad* about it, rather than just shaking your head, that’s good. That’s *hard*,” she said, hooking me into a bright eye contact. “I’ve just got a little Service Industry experience. Quit that shit quick, but it wasn’t my assignment so I was ok with dropping it.”

Sipping the last third of my drink, I tried to think of a graceful way of finding out what her assignment *had* been. Then the show started. One perfected body after another, impossibly accurate impersonation after impossibly accurate impersonation, it was a gorgeous blur. I

refreshed our drinks between every few acts, and was forced to notice that Payton was drinking a lot slower than I was. It didn't quite matter. Every song was a whole new world encompassed by one precisely animated, painted face.

"The bald one got creative" Payton said as we exited. "He wasn't so bad."

"*She*, Payton," I hissed. The crowd flowing out of the venue was sure to hear her.

"*She* is out of costume by now. Untucked, he's a *he*."

"I don't think, we'll, even if that's how it works--"

She kept talking, right over me. "But he's got to be partial to one or another. Some of those ladies are probably 'she' with or without makeup. The bald one though, he's a performer."

"I don't know," I cut in. "I think they could be one thing in one place, another in another. The lines can be stark and still be beautiful." I felt positively poetic, sure that she'd see my point and stop her border-line offensive rambling.

"How terrible though! Being two people."

"Everyone's got lots of roles."

"But not multiple personalities."

I scoffed. What utopia was she living in? To be a person, you have to be lots of people. Different settings, different authorities with often starkly different expectations. Wanting someone to be the same all the time, it was a crazy kind of demand. To expect a person to find a single personality, fit for any situation, well, it was absurd. Bigoted, even.

Clearing my throat, I said "You don't want people to be free to change." I meant it as a question, but my tone fell flat.

Payton was staring at me awkwardly out of the corner of her eye. As we walked, I thought she'd bump into a recycling compactor or a street lamp. A clump of old folks were coming our way along the sidewalk. They tittered away in their primary colors and tall hair. Her attention heavy on me, I was sure Payton would plow into them. But she didn't stumble as we parted, our sweaty palms sticking together for an extra moment, and we let them roll on between us. When we came back together on the other side, Payton was grinning.

"That's sweet," she said, taking my hand again and swinging our arms. "You want it to be easy for anyone to be anything. If only switching between masks could be painless."

"It's not a *mask*, Payton, jeezis. It's who they *are*."

She sighed dreamily. "You know what I mean." She gave me a little peck on the cheek as we paused at a crosswalk.

I hoped to god I was misunderstanding her. I let the subject drop and held up the question of where to eat like a peace offering. Payton accepted. We argued playfully over Thai versus Japanese till we came upon a burger joint that advertised house-made veggie patties and the whole debate was moot.

As we rose in towards my apartment, Payton made a show of bracing herself at just the right moment.

"You picked it up quick," I said, all slurred but all smiles.

"Quick learner," she said, hugging me from behind as we waddled into my kitchen.

"Always will be," she practically whispered.

I thought it was an attempt at coming on to me, but when I turned around, she was frowning at her shoes. I reached out for her hand, struggling to think of what could have upset her and how I could make it better. My hand hovered just beyond hers as I mentally floundered. Apparently, that was enough.

She grabbed my hand and yanked me to bed.

Sunday morning was a white blaze through the wide open windows. I asked her what she wanted to do and she quoted some old cartoon and cackled. We lost another hour or so looking up clips from that cartoon about a pair of mice with outsized egos, laying in my bed with her ancient tablet propped up against our knees.

My stomach rumbled and she leapt out of bed. In two long strides she was in my kitchen and wielding a plastic spatula. She pointed it at me, shouting “I shall end thee, oh growling beast!” Then she set about making sandwiches with fried egg and cheese. It was about the fanciest thing possible with what I had on hand. I just stayed in bed and watched her work, her t-shirt not quite hiding everything. We ate in bed, crumbs be damned.

We were watching a video of a crowd laying flowers at the site of a terrorist attack, and Payton was trying to convince me that most of it was staged. When the alarm went off, at first I was just grateful for the interruption.

“What the fuck is that?” Payton blurted.

“Fire,” I murmured, my voice already shaking. The alarm was a single high pitched note every two seconds, so it had to be a fire alarm. Earthquakes were rapid beeps, and lockdowns would be lower pitched and slower.

She hopped up and scurried to my front door. I figured she was ready to exit, as was reasonable. I couldn't shake the feeling that white flames were already licking the back of my skull. I quickly got up and got dressed, found her pants. I held them out to her but she ignored me. She was sniffing the mail slot. Like a bloodhound. Nose right up in it.

I gave her a moment before asking "What the fuck?"

She stood, all smiles. "I don't smell smoke." And she skipped past me to crawl into bed. Patting the empty spot beside her, she turned her attention back to her tablet.

"We have to exit the building, Payton." Oily smoke clogged my throat. The clear daylight in the room seemed absurd.

"Oh come on. If it's not a drill, the fire isn't anywhere near us. This monstrosity is solid concrete. We're probably safer in here than shivering on the street."

"We have to exit the building. Everyone else is well on their way out."

"Good little mice."

I didn't want to figure out what she was rambling about. I was not about to risk my life based on Payton's sense of smell, just to puzzle out another riddle. I grabbed a winter coat from my closet and threw it at her, along with her pants.

"We have to exit the building," I said again.

She glared at me. Not a cute glare. A calculating one. It cut through the smoke and flames between my eyes and skull. It was a familiar look but I couldn't remember seeing it on her before. Surely, I'd remember a glare like that.

But she got up. Made a show of slowly getting dressed. Zipped the coat all the way up and went to my dresser to get a scarf. She tucked her tablet into her pocket and retrieved my dead one from the desk.

“We shouldn’t be taking time to grab personal belongings,” I said, having flashbacks to kindergarten fire drills. I suddenly had great sympathy for my old teachers.

“If we aren’t safe, neither are our valuables,” she said, wrapping the scarf around her face. “Any sentimental trinkets you’d be sad to lose?”

“Not really.”

“Well, that’s sad.”

Finally, she went back to the front door. The elevator call button was ringed in red. The door opened instantly when she pressed it, but it didn’t open into an elevator.

We were on the edge of a dim hallway stretching with a slow curve out of sight in both directions. The floor was smooth white metal, same as the walls, and a rail ran along the ceiling. Other corridors split off up and down and reaching deeper into the building. It wasn’t a place built for people.

Payton stepped out and red glowing arrows sprouted up along the floor. They guided us to a corridor that curled downwards with stairs along one edge. It spiraled around and around, red arrows slowly pulsing out of sync with each other. Between rings of the alarm, I listened for the sounds of fire. In movies, fire roars. I listened for crackling, watched the red light for signs of flickering. I didn’t realize I was shaking till Payton grabbed my hand.

“This might actually be fun,” she said, and kissed my cheek. Without another word, she let go of me and jumped onto the slick floor. She slid down and out of sight in seconds. Her

laugh echoed back up to me like an invitation. After a little hesitant slipping, I was sliding down behind her. I didn't catch up, but her laughter always seemed to be just around the bend.

I landed suddenly, and right on top of her. She rolled us over and was on top of me. Then a huge yellow gloved hand was lifting her up by her neck.

"Get outside!" the fireman wailed. Payton kicked at him and he shoved her towards metal double doors. I was on her heels, and then dragging her behind me. She was spitting curses and trying to get back at him. I pulled her through the doors and into blinding daylight.

While holding the door open and shoving Payton past me, I caught one glimpse of two firemen in their thick yellow suits and mirrored face plates. One was yelling something at the other, and pointing at us. They shouted for us to come back just as the doors were slamming shut. Beyond them, a crowd of yellow figures looked in our direction in one synchronized head-snap. I moved to obey, to follow the direction of people who understood the situation and were calm and caring in the face of crisis, but there weren't any handles on our side of the door.

Payton grabbed my hand and broke into a sprint.

We ran through the oddly still crowd, zigzagging wildly. She tugged me across a street, between autos that smoothly slowed and calmly reminded us to adhere to cross signals in their monotone voices. She rounded a raised flowerbed, maybe four feet tall, and sat right on the sidewalk behind it. When I didn't immediately join her on the ground, she yanked my arm, dragging me down to her level.

I gave her a moment to explain herself, but she just glared at the ground, huffing as she caught her breath.

"Well," I said slowly, "I think I'm entitled to yet another 'what the fuck' here."

She snickered, almost laughed, then squinted at me. “There’s wasn’t any fire, you see that?”

“It’s not like we saw the whole tower.”

“That must have been ten firemen in full regalia in that basement corridor. They were standing around a systems access terminal, not helping old ladies down the fire escape tunnels. And then they recognized me.” She turned back to the ground, accusing glare renewed.

A rapid slideshow of possibilities filled my mind. I stuffed down the images of Payton-as-murderer or Payton, The Guerrilla War Mongerer and recalled the agency’s emphasis on individual judgement. Stereotypes and worst-case-scenario assessments were only good for analysis of groups. This was still just Payton, the yappy little white-haired jewel.

“Recognized you as what?” I asked, stuffing my voice with as much innocence as I could muster.

She took a deep breath. “A known loose end.”

And then two cops emerged from behind the flowerbed. Payton was on her feet, and I know she would have bolted if I hadn’t stood and taken her hand. Whatever she was wanted for, running always made the punishment worse. Half of the minimum required sentences on the books anymore were all about trying to evade arrest, one way or another.

“Hello officers,” I said, with my heart shaking through my voice.

I didn’t expect them to put us in cuffs without a word, but I didn’t put up a fight. Payton stiffened her arms at her sides and made the cop struggle to get her wrists together. They put us in the same auto, the two cops sitting across from us but politely staring out the window.

When I tried to offer some comforting words to Payton, she just hissed for me to shut up. Whatever she was afraid of, we were being taken in for questioning because we had run. We would explain ourselves and be driven right back home. She was probably right about there not being a fire, now that I thought about it. The cops were likely on high alert because they were looking for whoever set the alarm off in the first place. False alarms were another big offense. If someone pulled an alarm as a joke, or a to find a way into the building, they'd find the price wasn't worth whatever thrill they'd achieved. That fact calmed me down as we pulled into the police station.

In the station lobby, they scanned our faces, confirmed our names and took us through separate doors. I gave Payton a little wave but she focused on leaning against the officer trying to gently nudge her along.

I was instructed to sit on a bench in a hallway and was left alone for a few minutes. An officer with a beard that seemed a little on the unkempt side stuck his head out of a doorway and called "Zoey Tupper?"

"That's me, sir," I replied, and only then realized I was shaking.

He disappeared again, and another officer came out through the same door. She leaned against the wall across from me.

She sighed and said, in one long breath, "Ms. Tupper, can you tell me, in all honesty, that you are sure that neither you nor your friend had anything to do with the false fire alarm in your apartment tower?"

I inhaled, exhaled, and couldn't catch my breath. I felt insane. I knew we were both innocent. I had nothing to fear! But I hadn't ever had to talk to a police officer like this before.

Authorities of every type either ignored me or took a shine to me. I never had to explain myself.

I never had anything to explain!

The officer sighed again. “Ma’am, we have every reason to keep you here until this situation is cleared up. As I hear it, your friend is giving my partners a hard time.”

“She doesn’t like being told what to do,” I blurted.

She grunted an acknowledgement. “Look, I can tell you two will be more trouble than it’s worth. But I need you to assure me that you’re not the folks we’re looking for today.”

Before I could answer, the bearded officer called out from the office. “Feed’s up!”

A third sigh, and the officer in front of me gestured for me to follow her into the room.

“We didn’t have anything to do with the alarm,” I managed to mumble as I followed her.

“Good. That’s all I wanted to be sure of,” she said, guiding me to a seat at a desk. “Cuz we have to find someone for this mess soon. I don’t want to keep searching when we had the culprits under our nose.”

“I assure you, officer, this isn’t your girl.” The voice came from the screen on the desk.

Recognition hit me like a floodlight. It was my manager. I started to blurt a greeting, then I realized, for the first time, that I had no idea what her name was. Another wave of panic hit me.

“Zoey, sweetheart, calm down. Remember that these officers are your coworkers, and they’re prepared to treat you as such.”

Both officers left the room. The bearded one closed the door and waited out in the hall. The woman went off towards the lobby.

“Work *with* them,” my manager continued. “This can turn out to be a good thing.” Her toothy smile flashed once and faded into a sympathetic smirk.

“How can this be good?”

“You were only arrested because your new friend was on a watchlist and acting suspicious, and violent, I might add, in the middle of a potential crime scene.”

“She gets so startled. That fireman just picked her up and--”

“I know, Zoey. I know. I saw the scene from the point of view of several of their helmets. Payton isn’t the reason you’re *here*, however.” On the other side of the camera, she gestured towards the space around us both.

I looked around my room, taking it in for the first time. It wasn’t a cell. It was an office, and not a bad one. The desk chair I had been given was quite soft.

My manager continued. “You’re in here because you’re on another sort of a watchlist. The officers that checked your file can’t read it. It’s entirely confidential, which probably came as some surprise for such a young woman,” she said, that motherly pride swelling in her voice. “Therefore they can’t be sure that they’re not interfering with your assignment. That’s why they arranged this little conference for us. If I give my approval, you and your friend will be sent right home, no questions asked. And I’m prepared to give that approval.”

The relief that cooled my spine must have been visible on my face. I leaned back and caught the glance of the officer waiting outside. He nodded with a friendly smile. My manager let the good news sink in and then continued.

“So, a few questions. First, why were you with Miss Payton this fine Sunday afternoon?”

The silence wasn’t *too* long, I hoped. I had no intention of lying. I just needed to formulate my report. “She’s exactly the kind of person we need to get to know. She’s

knowledgeable about antiauth cells and their habits, and open to talking about them. I've learned a lot from her already, and she doesn't seem to be much of a threat herself--"

"That's not for you to judge," my manager cut in, and smiled wide again. "Not yet, anyways. Soon though, maybe! Are you aware of her history with the agency?"

A hot white blankness. Perhaps she was referring to Payton being an agency target? If she was on a watchlist, it stood to reason that she was one of our typical points of interest. Perhaps I had even tracked her myself at some point. The anonymous format of my low-level analysis software made that a distinct possibility.

When I didn't respond, my manager sighed. It was almost exactly the same way the office had sighed out in the hallway. My manager's face disappeared from my screen, but her voice continued. While she spoke, I watched folders open and photo and GPS data display itself. I figured I was watching my manager's desktop as she navigated.

"Payton was a promising student of social construction." Transcripts and test scores swept across the screen. My manager sounded mournful. "We're always on the lookout for people with high-level empathy. It's something that can't, despite our best efforts, just can't be taught. People like Payton can read motivations, desires and fears over coffee. They can make snap judgements that turn out to be roughly as reliable as a formal interview with a psychologist. Sure, informal analysis like that wouldn't hold up in court but they can provide just a little guidance and prevent a lot of wasted resources down the road.

A picture of a young woman opened on screen. It took me a moment to recognize Payton. She had short black hair and wore a smart tailored shirt.

I could almost feel my manager shaking her head on her side of our feed. “She excelled during training, but within days of her first assignments, her managers saw signs of trouble.” My manager’s face returned to the screen. “She was assigned to meet a small cell of suspected antiauth dissidents. We couldn’t trace some particularly inflammatory writing to its authors, and Payton was to determine if their worldview and speechpatterns matched the writing in question.

“Her reports were purposefully vague. Her final official opinion was that these were antiauths in style only, and of no particular threat. With the help of police, we were able to find reason to raid one of their apartments. We found early hand-written drafts of the articles in question. When confronted with this failure, Payton showed both defiance in the face of her superiors and sadness at the news of her targets’ arrests. All of the time and effort we had put into her, and she was more of a threat than some of our known targets. Her empathy made her susceptible to falling into the patterns of thinking she was to analyse objectively.

“She was dismissed from the agency and she promptly turned down her replacement assignment. She moved to this city from the capitol and has been somewhat hard to track over the last year or so.”

My manager paused as if I might have something to add. She must have noticed me twitch, though I kept as still as possible. She leaned back and continued.

“We still need people with skills like hers, but she’s far from the only example of a poor recruitment choice. I’ve made it a personal project to build a set of profiles that can guide our recruiters between fool’s gold like Payton and,” she trailed off, studying me through the desktop camera.

“And people like me?” I asked, hope clogging my throat.

My manager's smile returned. "Yes, I think so."

"I think I can help with your project, ma'am."

That wonderful grin widened, and she straightened her shoulders. The wistfulness left her gaze and she was right back to business mode. "Alright, so she sounds like she's worth our time after all. I will need you to start putting in reports on her specifically. I can see how some of your extra reports lately have been influenced by her, but I want you to add some color to her file. A description of mannerisms, favored turns of phrase, things like that. Notes on what offends her and what impresses her are hard to pin down, but highly valuable. This can be an ongoing report, even informal. Add to it as you see fit."

"That sounds good, ma'am," I said. We exchanged a few pleasantries, mostly her asking about the new movies I've enjoyed, while she put in the order to have Payton and me released. Before we disconnected, she advised me to not let Payton know how I got her out so quickly, as if I needed reminding. If anything, I considered asking her to let Payton stay overnight. The fact that I had been arrested without any fault other than being around Payton was beginning to sink in. If I didn't have my manager behind me, this could have ended up blackening my record for nothing.

My record is spotless back through preschool, except for one referral that was the result of a lying classmate. The memory clouded my mood as I waited for Payton in the front lobby. A class bully had beat up on a friend and I scared him off with threats of telling the teacher. He went to the teacher first and claimed that I had hit him on the waist with a stick. His proof? A red mark that even I, at age ten, could see was the result of his underwear being too tight. The

indignity of it all, and the lack of recourse once the referral had been put on my record, still haunts me.

My knuckles were white as I clutched the armrests. Payton came through a different door than I had, and I noted that I should get an idea of the conditions she was in before coming up with my own story. She walked slowly, taking time to glare at every officer around her. She spotted me, and I saw a flicker of relief, but she sparred a few more glares before approaching me. She grabbed my arm and walked me out of the station. There was a private auto waiting for us, but of course Payton would have none of it.

“So we’re walking the what, four miles to my place?” I asked.

“No. First, we’re getting drunk. Very, very drunk.” She pulled out her clunky tablet and, after inspecting it for damage at the hands of cops and finding none, she picked out a bar a few blocks away. And so we got drunk.

She never even asked what I went through at the station. Maybe she didn’t care, or maybe she didn’t want to know. I remember getting out of an auto and laying on the cement with her. I remember her hurting my arm as she pulled my hand up to the elevator’s scanner.

It still kind of hurt the next morning.

My computer chimed, and fear cut through the dull ache of a hangover dream I was trapped in.

Feet on the ground, yesterday’s socks in hand. Payton yawning.

“Oh god.”

“What’s wrong?” She hadn’t even opened her eyes.

“Oh god oh god I gotta log in in like five minutes--”

“Jesus, your alarm on goes off five minutes before you have to be at work? Why would you do that to yourself?”

My ribs clawed at my lungs. *Because it's a four-foot commute.* “It’s a quick jog down the block,” I said as evenly as I could. “Usually I wake up on my own.”

“Still, I expected bells and whistles to go off hours before you had to head out.”

I pretended not to hear her. I struggled to focus on getting dressed. She was standing at my front door before I had my shoes tied.

“Well, raincheck on pancakes then?”

“What?” I blurted, knocking over some boxes and slamming on the elevator call button.

“You said you wanted to make me pancakes,” she said with her fake little pout.

“I do, still, um...”

We were standing silently in the elevator and I needed to log into my computer like *now*. I almost forgot why I was going down with her. I was scanning back over everything I had told her about my job, trying to prep for keeping my story straight.

“Girly, you ok?”

“I’m all good.”

“You’re still a little buzzed, aren’t you?”

Not enough to dodge spears. “I’ll be ok.”

“I just hope you don’t get in trouble at work is all. I know it’s real important to you.”

“No one will notice.” No one but you will see my slack jaw and bleary eyes.

“Even your watchdog of a manager?”

“It’s not like she really looks me in the eye.”

That seemed to satisfy her. Standard anti-authoritarian complex. Talk shit about your superiors and she’ll kiss your hand. For a moment, I remembered what she was.

We hugged goodbye in front of my building. I hesitated long enough to see which direction she was walking, and I went the other way. As soon as I turned the corner, I broke into a sprint. I made it to the far side of my apartment tower and into the other entrance. The elevator jerked in the opposite direction than I expected and slammed me against the wall. Painful swelling on my forehead as my front door slid open.

I was a full three minutes late logging in. The elevator could have dropped me thirty stories and it would have hurt less.

The workweek was a balm. Tracking anonymous targets let me fall into a zen of pure puzzle solving. Dots on maps and distant streetcams, snatches of conversation muffled through pockets, crossing paths and needless detours: it was all so simple. The reports wrote themselves.

I messaged with Payton like usual, but all the anticipation of it was gone. It was all work now. I asked more questions than usual, with suggestions from my manager, and that seemed to make Payton happy. I got official chunks of times away from the usual analysis to facetime with her. I told her I had been granted a longer lunch break and wanted to use it to talk to her. That laugh and the bounce of her curls was a bonus.

She invited me over to her place that Friday. Her roommates were throwing a party. It was rumored that the creepy singing girl in the attic might show up. How could I say no? Right after that chat, my manager’s face popped up. Seeming a bit distracted, she told me to take my

tablet with me to the party. She quickly returned to her own work, so I didn't have a chance to ask if there was anything particular she wanted me to do with it. I considered taking a few pictures, but I couldn't quite figure out the risk vs reward. There was a high chance the antiauth freaks wouldn't like the new girl making a record of their living situation. I made a note in my schedule app to ask for my manager's advice. There was already a note in there reminding me to ask her name which had I ignored all week. I would probably continue to ignore it. Maybe she'd see it in my schedule and find a graceful way to slip her name into conversation.

Payton wouldn't send me her address. She asked me to meet her at a street corner in the suburbs that I'd never visited before. I ordered an auto and started to worry as the building I passed shrunk from towers to little apartment complexes and strip malls, and finally to endless rows of identical prefab houses. These neighborhoods had been built all over the country in the space of less than a decade. When the employment assignment programs had just been established, the large poverty class was expected to move into middle class lifestyles in a single generation. It was assumed that suburban households would be in high demand. Turns out, if you give an eighteen year old the choice between a job with a studio in the city and a similar job that came with a house in the suburbs, they chose the cramped but exciting city life. With housing tied to their career, a couple was more likely to combine their stipend and apply for a larger apartment in neighborhoods they already knew.

And the assignment programs weren't as instantly successful as the state had hoped. A significant percentage of primary school graduates rejected their offers. They depended on group-living and low-wage jobs to support themselves. They found that the suburbs, while

underdeveloped, were cheap enough if they pooled their resources. These neighborhoods became ghost towns with pockets of off-the-grid merchants and community projects. They tended to put on airs of self-sufficiency and never failed to show their disdain for visiting assignment workers. The divide was stark. My auto sped through the wide, empty streets.

It dropped me off at the corner where Payton was already waiting. For almost an hour, she guided me through the mostly-abandoned and stubbornly complicated and curling side streets. We were in a particularly undeveloped area. The dominant prefabs were interrupted by the occasional old house, each a survivor of a different era. Payton's house, of course, stood out more than most. I could hear it before we within sight of it: a low bone-rattling bass was the only sound in the area. It was a decrepit Victorian with a tiny tower and elaborate railing on the wrap-around porch.

We were greeted at the door by James. He handed each of us a water bottle full of vodka. He briefly mimed and grunted "Chug chug chug!" in a limp but enthusiastic attempt to encourage me to drink the entire bottle of vodka at once. He never looked me in the eye as he was drowsily focused on an audience of three or four semi-conscious punks giggling on the livingroom couch. Their attention was quickly sucked up by two skinny boys dancing around each other in the livingroom, and James's need for the spotlight drove him to make it a gyrating threesome.

Payton read my blank stare and lead me to to a door under the stairs. It opened directly onto a steep flight going down and turning at a sharp angle. A sickly sweet smoke billowed out around us.

“Leave the lovebirds to their mess,” Payton said, mostly past me at James’s little clan. One of them tossed a pillow at us, hitting the back of my head without force. Payton snatched it up and chucked it back at them. A faint mewling of feigned pain spiked the upstairs music as we headed downstairs.

The basement was one room as large as the footprint of the entire house. Thick wood supports hardly broke up the space. A few mattresses and mismatched cushions lined two walls. Opposite from the stairs, behind some makeshift curtains that did little more than prove someone’s desire for privacy, one wall was lined with a long workstation cluttered with tools and bottles I couldn’t identify at a distance. I resisted the urge to reach for my tablet in my coat pocket. If there was anything worth photographing, it was that area, whatever sort of work was done there.

Payton grabbed me around the shoulders with one arm. “Everyone! Zoey’s here,” she said to the ten or kids dotting the seating area. “Say hi!”

I sipped my vodka bottle as she introduced me. Each person responded to their own name with a nod or wave and friendly apathy that had to be practiced. The barest formalities satisfied, we sat down among a semicircle around a two-player board game I’d never seen. The board was obviously mass-produced but the pieces were roughly hand carved figures and mismatched toys. The players were a girl with truly the maximum amount of black eye makeup and a man older than most at that party. He was round and obviously hadn’t given his scratchy beard a single thought in weeks. He contrasted against all the precisely expressive™ antiauth punks so much that I was self conscious *for* him, but he laughed like milk boiling over and narrated his game choices with an astonishing confidence.

I didn't want to make my alien status too obvious, so I didn't ask about the game's rules. I watched them react to the dice with astonished disappointment or overwhelming glee and listened to them discuss their plans after each roll. The two were playing characters, referring to each other by ridiculous names and occasionally speaking in voices. They weren't competing, which I found somewhat fascinating for a two player game. They were working their way along the board's colorful path, pausing on certain symbols to draw cards and "fight" monsters. There had to be character stats recorded somewhere, but I found it increasingly likely that those rules were only in the minds of the players. In short, it was baffling.

The watching audience reacted along with the players, Payton perhaps the most enthusiastic of them all. I joined the cheers when the dice seemed favorable and otherwise kept quiet.

The other partygoers were standing standing around a table in the middle of the room. From the ground some yards away, I couldn't see what was on the table, but the group was surprisingly focused on it. They were quieter, only murmuring in pairs. Payton noticed me looking in their direction.

"Quincy made this map program. It's a hoot," she said into my ear, as if to not disturb the game. "This round is almost done, then we'll go check it out."

Almost on queue, the girl flipped over some key card and, amid startling cheers, both players skipped the last leg of the board to the end. The bearded man pulled a little toy iguana out from behind him and placed it on the edge of the board. They carried out a longer fight, both apparently dying in the end. The iguana was praised as victorious and quickly taken out of play as the board was reset for another round.

Payton stood, I followed, and took a moment to whisper a solid “What the fuck?”

She laughed too loud. “Chris invented that game. He’s still balancing it, but it’s getting really good. He brings it to every party.”

“And people like watching it? Wouldn’t they rather play?”

“It’s got real short rounds like that. Good for switching people in and out. If you know the rules, it’s blast to watch. And I think he’s really trying to promote it. Once it’s done, he’ll probably start selling copies online.”

I couldn’t believe that a market could exist for something like that, but I kept my doubts to myself. We were now standing at the table. A projector propped up on a pile of books hummed at one end. Neatly braided wires wound around the 3D image in the middle to a keyboard at the other end. The image was a first-person view of a city street. The mousy girl at the controls walked through it with severe concentration. Every so often, she stopped and spawned objects at points of indeterminable significance. She made rough sketches of scenes, half-formed human shapes moving in short, chunky animations. She finished each tableau up with sprays of abstractions ranging from sharp spikes radiating from one figure’s blank face to a rain of colorful glitter. The audience around the table was silent except for polite little reactions, mostly to their flourishes.

I have to admit that, even without understanding what I was seeing, the girl at the controls was skilled at evoking emotion with these little scenes. The figures took on personality quickly, and I found brief but pungent feeling creeping up as she completed each scene. The abstracts completed the effect in predictable, satisfying ways. I didn’t want to interrupt the group

trance. So I sipped my bottle and enjoyed how Payton held my hand, varying her grip as she reacted to the projection.

The artist working this, whatever it was, eventually guided the view into a building and wrapped up with one last scene of a single figure in a perfect image of cozy isolation. It was somehow everything good about coming home. She flicked off the projection and started breaking down the setup without ceremony. She blushed at the flood of compliments from her audience.

Taking another warming sip of vodka, I snatched an ounce of initiative for myself and guided Payton towards a relatively empty pile of cushions.

Sitting down with her, I smiled wide. “Ok I liked that one, but still, what the fuck?”

Oh, that liquid gold laugh. “You know like, memory palaces?”

Blankness. “No.”

“It’s a thing geniuses talk about all the time. The idea is that you imagine space because brains are made for that and that makes it easy to remember anything, if you arrange it in that mental space.”

“Maybe I’ve heard of that?”

“Yeah probably, but who can do that? Quincy’s thing is that you can make external palaces. She was making that whole thing on the fly. It was like, a memory of a single day. So now she can go back and relive that day any time. But it’s abstract so it’s still kind of private.”

“We all got something out of it, but only she knows what really was said, what happened.”

“Exactly.”

Possibility flooded me with a sudden excitement. The only thing Quincy's audience knew for certain was how she felt about whatever had happened to her on that day. It was a perfect reverse image of what would be recorded by, say, GPS and voice clips. If journal programs like that gained popularity, an entire dimension could be added to the agency's knowledge of an individual. We could come close to a complete profile without ever studying them directly. Who they talked to, where they went, and now, or sometime soon, how they felt about it. What a goldmine.

Payton seemed content to lay next to me in a similar thoughtful state till well into the early morning. The water bottle's worth of vodka was gone, and the mood-map demonstration seemed to be far from everyone's mind but mine. As Payton lead me upstairs, I asked a few technical questions of the mousy artist behind the projections, but she didn't seem to understand me.

It didn't matter. We were up in Payton's room and nothing else mattered. We tiptoed in the dark over unorganized piles of journals and papers and collapsed into her bed.

I think it's safe to say that that was the only night Payton and I fucked. The nights at my place had their fun, but they faded in and out of pillow talk. For once, all the talking could wait. I was surprised to find that I didn't enjoy the sounds she made, though she clearly enjoyed herself. And it's not like I didn't, but I don't think I made a sound. I had too much on my mind to let myself go the way she did. We flipped each other around her bare mattress, tangled up in on huge wool blanket. There was a little not-so-playful fight over the two flatish pillows when we were finally done. Having settled separately, I was content to listen to her breathing slow.

But as I started to approach sleep, of course she couldn't keep her mouth shut.

“You think you’ll have kids?” Payton asked out of the deep blue of her darkened room. She sounded miles away, though I could feel the slight warmth of her skin just a few inches across the bare mattress.

“Yeah, probably. One or two.”

She rolled over to me, and I could see her face clearly in the moonlight through the open window. She had this look that I can only describe as spousal: trusting, adoring. That look made it very easy to imagine us living in some *proper* suburbs with a toddler in her lap and a dog in the backyard. If I kept up my pace of promotion, it wouldn’t be too long before I could support a family like that all on my own. She could stay at home, raise kids, maybe write sometimes. But she’d be the greatest threat to a life like that. Maybe somewhere in the back of her mind, she thought I could protect her from her own past. Even if she truly hadn’t let herself see what I did for a living, she probably knew that a respectable, worker drone wife would make her life easier. A bitterness filled my mouth. She’d made her choices. She already damned herself. It was insanely selfish to want to cling to someone else on her way down. No matter how much fun she made the trip.

“Why’d you pick me out of the crowd?” I asked her.

“What? You bought *me* coffee, remember?”

“Oh right, like you didn’t sit right in front of me and pose so perfectly on purpose.”

She laughed that siren call. “I really didn’t! I mean, I noticed you, yeah. You’re cute as hell and you had that adorable deer/headlights look, but I was just thinking of doing some sketching or something.”

She dozed off. I couldn't sleep just yet. Careful not to touch her, I slipped off the mattress and fumbled in the dark for clothes. I found some boxers and my coat, good enough. I went downstairs, unsure of what I was looking for. I stepped over a lump at the foot of the stairs that seemed roughly human-shaped. Through the tall windows in the frontroom, I could see a lanky silhouette out on the porch. I opened the front door slowly, quietly. I paused in the doorway, watching the shadow that was apparently unaware of me.

I could hear that they were humming. Not so unusual for some drunk kid enjoying the night, but the thought that I was meeting the fabled singing roommate made me freeze. She sounded like a rather unstable kind of person. I didn't know how to talk to someone like that. Maybe she could hear my heart race. She turned towards me, and I bolted back upstairs. It was like being afraid of the dark. I just didn't want to see her face, and I can't tell you why.

In a few long strides, I was back in Payton's room and crawling under her wool blanket. I ran through some breathing exercises to calm down, Payton snoring loudly beside me.

We woke about the same time, sunrise stabbing at our eyes. Without a word, she tugged my arm and brought me out through her bedroom window onto the roof. I kept looking towards the city to avoid eyeing the yawning horizon all around us.

"On top of the world!" Payton sighed, staring at the squat, abandoned two-bedroom prefabs all around this rickety old Victorian house.

"Middle of nowhere, more like," I said.

"Oh come on. Isn't this nice? No one else around. Seclusion. Just you and the people you *sought* around you."

“No where to eat.”

“We have some real amazing ingenuity going on in this house. We have, get this...” she trailed off and it took me far too long to realize she was looking at me, waiting to meet my eye. Hot iron prying my ribs apart. “Food,” she said. “In. The kitchen. Ready to be... *cooked*.” She laughed and cold water soothed every strand of every muscle.

We climbed back into the bedroom and Payton pulled a summer dress over her head. For a moment, retroactive shame flooded me. I had been out in public air with nothing but someone else’s boxers on. I snapped my bra on and pulled my long coat tight around me. I felt my tablet and paycard in the inside pocket. Everything I really needed. I thought of bolting straight out of there and calling an auto and being able to bury my head in my bed, my bed with *sheets*, within half an hour.

But then she was tugging my hand and guiding me down the creaking stairs. Morning sun peeked into the livingroom where bottles and clothes formed an alien topography. We tiptoed over a bundle of three or four sleeping bodies wrapped up in a gigantic heated blanket and stepped into the kitchen.

It was the size of my whole apartment. The fridge was as tall as a doorway. The stove had four raised burners and a huge oven underneath. Counters and cabinets curled around three of the walls and, as if that wasn’t enough space, a wide counter was sitting in the middle of the room with even more storage under it. Payton stepped to a wide window over a metal sink deep enough for a toddler to bathe in. She opened the window by fussing with a lock and then physically shoving the bottom half up. And I’d thought the nonauto-doorknobs in this house were cumbersome.

“Am I right in thinking you don’t actually know how to make pancakes?”

Memory ratcheted backwards frame by frame, clicking through every conversation till I figured out what she was talking about.

“Oh yeah. Drunk me. I mean, I do *want* to make them for you but... maybe I can figure it out?” I pulled my tablet out of my coat and googled *pancake recipe*. The top result rated pancake’s difficulty at one of six stars. Confidence flooded my chest with gold warmth. “Yeah, I can totally make you pancakes. Do you have flour here?”

Payton stared at my tablet. She chewed her lip where purple lipstick still clung in thick chunks.

“Um,” I said with as much bass in my voice as I could muster. Her eyes flicked to mine and back to the tablet.

After a long breath she said, “You have net on that thing?”

“Um,” I said, with purposefully less bass. I couldn’t place why this was a problem till I glanced out of her kitchen window. This was the middle of nowhere and I was standing in a nest of antiauth creeps. Of *course* they didn’t have wifi. “Always connected to the work-line. Perk of a normie job.”

Payton turned on her heel and crouched to open a cupboard. She set a heavy bag on the counter and went to the fridge. “Big expense, satellite connections. They must really like you.”

The sour taste of sarcasm welled up and I failed to brace myself against it. “They want me to be able to make pancakes at a moment’s notice. They know it’s a primary mating ritual and The Man wants nothing more than another generation of worker bees to fill his cubicles.

You know how they always look to the quarter after next when budgeting. A dedicated satellite connection today, another willing slave tomorrow.”

Payton didn't so much as glance at me. She was setting out ceramic jars and cardboard cartons of various shapes. I let her move around her kitchen without comment. When she looked over her assembled culinary army and opened her mouth to speak, I cut in.

“You gonna tell me what you're doing?”

She closed her mouth, looked at me, and put her hands on her hips, glaring from the other side of the kitchen island. “Flour, milk, eggs. Butter, sugar, salt and baking powder.”

I glanced at my tablet. “Well thank you. I'll get to work!”

“What are you going to cook them on?” she said, cocking her head at a violent angle.

I scrolled along on my tablet. “A pan. On the stove.” The last gasps of warm confidence faded as I look at Payton's weird stove with its raised wire burners. I studied the white metal monstrosity for a touchpad and found nothing. “Just tell me how to turn it on.”

“Look up ‘gas range.’ You'll find a guide,” she said as she stalked out of the kitchen.

Of course, that didn't tell me anything about finding a pan in this cavernous Victorian antiauth den. I opened and gently closed almost every cabinet in the room before finding a pan, thought I did come across plastic mixing bowls and huge wood spoons in the process. The recipe was straightforward enough right up till the instructions about flipping the damn things. Lots of talk of *when*, absolutely none about *how*.

The mangled flapjacks I ended up with were saturated with butter and crispy along the edges. But they smelled good. I plated and admired them. I scrolled through the end of my recipe

and found a comment string discussing toppings. Of course, Payton hadn't set out the most important part: Syrup.

None in the fridge. I reexamined the depths of every cupboard. Nothing. There was some room-temp jam in one corner, but the comment section almost unanimously rated jam as one of the least appealing toppings. The one half-heartedly upvoted comment commending jam only made me think of Payton's roommates sprawling in the livingroom. They made such a show of themselves, but how great could they possibly be with so few among them?

Of course, Payton would probably choose the least popular option in any setting. So I emptied the jar of jam on Payton's cakes. I left mine plain, grabbed forks and carried both plates upstairs.

She was out on her roof again. I could see her tanned back through the lightly stirred curtains. There was nowhere to set the plates in her bare bedroom. The floor was covered in clothes, ragged journals and scattered paper. She had to have half the city's remaining physical books piled in the corners and spilling out of the closet. Balancing the plates and standing on one foot, I kicked at some sweaters and socks to clear a spot on the carpet. I set the plates down and sat on Payton's mattress. Loose pages crinkled under my feet.

They were thin paper with light blue lines, covered back and front with penciled scrawlings. Payton's friends had called her "the scribe," but I hadn't taken it literally. I had vaguely figured they were referring to her blog or tendency to ramble for hours on end. But here were unsorted pages of *handwriting*, something I hadn't seen since elementary school. At least not in person. Artsy vloggers and period dramas luxuriated in the wastefulness and *personal* touch of pen on paper. Handwriting came with a wistful streak of eccentricity, giving endearing

weight to the simplest of sentiments. But seeing so much of it all at once, curling up under my toes and, now that I looked, peeking out from under the piles of books and the mattress itself, the nausea of overly fragrant food shoved my stomach against my throat.

And again, I remembered why I was there. Sickness deserves treatment, but first it must be diagnosed. I picked one page at random, read from the middle, and checked over my shoulder. Payton hadn't moved, though her baggy tank top billowed around her, hiding the empty neighborhood beyond her. I picked out another page from the mess, squinted at the unruly blue ink, and picked up another. I gathered ten or so and slowly folded them together, slowly so as to avoid the noise of the crinkling paper. After slipping them into my coat pocket, tucking them between my hip and my tablet, I picked the plates back up.

I stood, refocused and called "Who's hungry?" I struck a sexy waitress pose.

Payton's back arched, her vertebrae sticking out sickeningly. I watched her take a deep breath, straightening and smoothing her over. She turned around with a sudden grin.

"Starving," she cackled, leaping through the window and landing on her mattress with her knees tucked under her. She reached up and took the plate without jam from my hand.

"Not bad," she said, mouth full of half-masticated brown and white slop.

Maybe the rush of nausea was the hangover setting in, but I think my instincts were trying to give me an excuse to flee. I took one look at the red goop-smearied fried butter and flour mess I had made. It was all I could do to set the plate down in time to run for the bathroom.

Payton was on my heels.

I don't have hair long enough to require being held while I retch, and a part of me was irritated at the show Payton made of pulling my bangs back. Thankfully, I didn't have much in

my stomach to throw up. My gut's rebellion was entirely symbolic, and over quickly. As I sat back and considered drinking out of the dingy, manual bathroom sink, Payton was asking if I was ok now. She looked at me with motherly concern, as if she was taking care of a baby bird.

Checking on the papers with an arm wrapped around stomach, I prepared my most pitiful voice. "I better go sleep this off," I said.

"Sure, you can have my room. I'll hang out down stairs, I'm sure there's lots of cleaning to be done." She was took my arm, trying to lead me back to her bedroom.

I shook her off, maybe too vigorously for a sickly bird, but covered with another cough. Hopefully she didn't think too hard about the incongruent symptoms. "I'm just gonna call an auto. I don't want to impose."

"Uhm, can you wait a little till you can walk a bit?"

I stared blankly. My arrival to this rickety house slowly came back to me. "Oh, I can get myself out to the main road, I think."

"You sure? You don't want to retch in the streets."

"I'll be fine."

"Then you wanna finish those pancakes at least?"

"Oh god no."

"Like I said, they're pretty good. You don't want to miss out on your very first culinary master piece, do you?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Is something else wrong?"

"I'm fine," I said again, pushing past her. "I just want to sleep in my bed."

“Damn girl, slow down,” she called, trotting after me as I tottered down the stairs. “Want me to walk a ways with you?”

“No thanks. I’m fine.” I hopped over the sleeping pile. I was almost to the door.

“Uh, Zoey?”

I had to stop, for just a moment, to acknowledge that particular pouting note in her voice.

“Yeah?” Even to myself, I sounded wretched.

“Why are you being so standoffish?”

The bizarre, graceless question hung in the grey morning light. The silence of this abandoned neighborhood couldn’t quite smother it appropriately. My facade of illness may have slipped, showing the disdain underneath for just briefest moment.

“I’m just hungover, Payton. I’ll talk to you online.”

She snorted like bull. I half expected her to stomp, but after a moment of pouting at me, she just sighed. Payton reached out and tugged on the sides of my coat to pull me towards her. If she heard the papers crinkle as loudly as I did, she didn’t think anything of it. I did my best to return her kiss with my attention split between my pocket and the door. I managed to escape with a few mumbled niceties.

I kept myself slow and pitifully hobbling till I was just around the corner and out of sight of that house. It was a long walk from where the auto had dropped me off last night. I considered the direction the auto would come from, walked another block just to be sure the antiauth freaks wouldn’t see it coming, and called for one.

The papers in my pocket were calling to me before I even made it to my elevator. Those pages ended up eating my entire weekend.

* * *

Blue handwriting so irregular it took me several scans to notice the scattered doodles. One distinct image covered the back of a page: a warped city block with most buildings blacked out and a few shining over the stiff, simple human figures on the sidewalk.

The scrawling was, in places, incomprehensible to the naked eye. I vaguely remembered a seminar on the advanced tools available to the agency. There had been some mention of an algorithm that could read blurry text at a distance, such as through a streetcam. Perhaps that program would be of some use, but I still hadn't decided if I was going to bring these odd papers to the agency's attention. Payton's scrawlings, likely under the influence of drink or who knows what else, would likely be a waste of agency resources. I'd hardly noticed the oncoming slow, molten pain of indecision until reason began to cool it. These papers shouldn't be shoved into the busy schedules of my manager or another analysts until I could articulate something suspicious about them.

So I did my best to decipher them myself. Most of the pages were covered, front and back, in tight, curly handwriting. The words I could easily make out tended to be the less common nouns, perhaps words Payton had to slow down and remember how to spell. "Equilibrium ingratiates itself" was repeated a few times, rather ominously in block letters. There were several trios of questions, always "in/then" trios, that could be taken as one half of a sloppy socratic debate. There were snatches of dialogue, strangers introducing themselves and admiring the landscape around them.

I realized, maybe Sunday night, that I was avoiding the drawing of the city block. A sense of familiarity haunted that image. With a few shots of vodka in me, I sat on the floor and cradled the drawing in my lap. I can't say exactly where my mind wandered to, a flash of silk and silver and bare shoulders overcame me. This was one of street corners that faced the plaza where I had first met her. I was weeping, probably with the relief of a breakthrough.

I scanned the image so I could compare it and confirm my suspicions. The sketchy buildings aligned perfectly. I quickly saw that the apartment towers were the only ones that weren't blacked out. That enticing detail kept me up till my shift started Monday morning.

I spent that shift, mercifully, at home. I had my first report on Payton to compose and then did a little street-level herd-behavior analysis. A little kid had run out into the street with such speed that an auto wasn't able to stop in time. The chaos of how the crowd balanced rubbernecking with hurrying back to their own lives was a nice break from my thoughts about Payton's papers. I had texted back and forth with Payton on autopilot all weekend, but I wasn't able face her Monday night. I hoped that the break would give me some perspective on her papers. When my shift was over, I rolled out of my chair and immediately surrounded myself with those scrawlings again.

But the drawing and questions and dialogue still didn't add up to anything coherent. The undecipherable sections plagued me with promises of some unity. During the three nights I reviewed these papers, I kept coming back to the worst of the handwriting hoping for a sudden key.

I slept with them on the floor by my bed. I woke up Tuesday morning and studied them for a few moments before getting up to log in.

My manager was waiting for me, video app already running when I sat down. The way she lingered over the pleasantries, cooing over my bleary eyes and tangled morning hair, I knew she had something uncomfortable to discuss. She finally got to it.

“Zoey, do you have anything you want to add to your latest report?” Tiny claws grabbed my stomach and shook, *hard*. My manager just smiled benignly. “Anything of note that didn’t quite survive the edits?”

“What edits?” I choked out.

“When preparing reports, you spend an average of sixtyfive percent of your time editing rather than writing, usually making cuts to long stream-of-consciousness chunks of text. We appreciate your efforts at efficiency, and your edits are generally ones I would have made myself. I haven’t felt the need to check your early drafts in some time. But this most recent report has me wondering. It seems there might be more details of interest to be found. So before I go poking around blindly, do you have anything you want to add to your latest report?”

If she any attention to detail at all, my manager must have already seen the scattered papers behind me. In the little thumbnail in the corner of my screen, I could see my too-wide eyes staring back. And beyond, the crumpled white and blue papers crowded against my bed like the cliffs of an icy continent.

There was no reason to lie. “Well, I didn’t want to bother you with this until I understood it,” I said. “But perhaps you can help me figure out if it’s significant.”

The middle of the goddamned night. I shot awake and *knew* the alarm had to be the remnants of dream. It was so dark in my apartment that the red light around my elevator call

button was blinding, all the way from the kitchen. I still thought I was seeing red because of the dream. The alarm was exactly how I remembered it. In my groggy, angry half-sleep, that seemed to confirm that this was all just a nightmare crafted out of a sloppy memory. I put my feet on the ground, expecting warmed carpet, and recoiled at the crinkling of tiny icebergs. Swinging my weight, I thought my bed was tipping over. I slipped onto the floor among the papers. Payton's delirious scrawlings all around me, I realized I was probably still drunk from the shots I took after my shift. Well, just before my shift ended. I giggled, then frowned. What was that noise?

Right. Alarm. And right as I focused on it, the sound cut out. I scooted on hands and knees to get a better look at my front door. The call button was still red. I had a vague idea of waiting for the warning to go away before I went back to sleep, but then the light turned blue. And then a different alarm came on. Lower, slower. Long pauses between three long beeps. Years of drills in coreschool cut through the fog. It was a lockdown alarm.

I was instantly, if dizzily sober. Suspected terrorist activity. Someone unwelcome *in my tower*. I was standing, unsure of when that happened, and looking around the blue shadows of my apartment for some sign of what to do. I half-expected a friendly face, a teacher at least, to be waving me towards a saferoom.

I sighed. My whole apartment was a saferoom. Even if someone was in the elevator tunnels right outside my door, they couldn't get in without my permission. I steadied myself on that fact and sat on the floor.

The alarm just kept going.

Ten, thirty minutes?

I didn't try to keep track.

After who cares how long, I noticed an irregular noise between the beeps. Something slow and heavy was scraping along the corridor outside. The scratch and occasional screech of metal dragged across the metal floor grew louder. It could have been a malfunctioning or misaligned elevator, but then I heard a quick, barked curse. It had a particular note of self pity I could have picked out of a screaming crowd.

The fear slinked away like I hoped Payton would, but the stream of curses in the tunnel only got louder and clearer.

I pressed the blue-ringed button. It chimed an inquisitive tone and only opened after I pressed it three more times. The tunnels were darker than my apartment. I turned on the kitchen light, casting my shadow out onto the smooth curved walls.

“Ah!” Payton cried, exhausted but chipper. “Zoey?”

I wanted to let silence answer her. I could just make out her silhouette clambering up the downward tunnel we had slid down only a few days prior. She was lugging something big behind her.

“A little help?” She stopped tugging at whatever she thought I’d welcome into my apartment. She just stood there at the top of the slope.

“You did this?”

“Haha, yeah, just a little trick to get in. Didn’t have your officially sanctioned palm print on hand. So uh, can I get a hand?”

“I can’t be seen helping you.”

“I don’t see any cameras,” she said with a little laugh. “And even if there are any, I don’t think they’re seeing much of us.”

“That’s a lockdown chime,” I said, turning to stare at the bright light of my kitchen. “I shouldn’t even have my door open, but I knew it would be you.”

“Aw, how sweet. You’re risking *everything*, opening your door to me,” I could hear the eye roll in her voice. I flicked the kitchen light off. The blue light of the call button cast weak rays in Payton’s direction.

“I’m rethinking it,” I said. “What are you carrying?”

“Clothes, a few books.” She paused, and then said in a shaking voice I’d never heard before, “They raided my house.”

She had to have walked here from her dilapidated Victorian. Her accounts would have been shut down and any vehicles confiscated. All day and all night, she lugged her ridiculous paper books out of the abandoned suburbs and through the crowded downtown. She must have been quite the sight.

“That couldn’t have come as a surprise,” I said. It just slipped right out. Maybe it was playing my hand too soon, but it was true.

She dropped the bag she was hauling. Just stared at me through the dark. I could hear her bag slowly sliding down the ramp.

I started to see her face as my eyes adjusted, cloudy red glow filled the back of my head. It was a pleasant feeling. A powerful feeling. The look on her face was entirely uncrafted, plain horror. I guess she really hadn’t let herself suspect me.

Payton had walked miles, every little trinket she could carry weighing her down. Hours, on her way to me. If the thought that I had turned her life upside down had crossed her mind, she must have pushed it aside. The fact had come crashing down on her, right in front of me. And her

face was just a ruined sand castle gasping under high tide, tears streaming between melted cheeks and premature laughlines.

The sound of heavy boots climbing the ramp warned me to shut my door. I sat on my bed. I counted my breaths. Three, or maybe ten, and then I heard a few calm orders for her to raise her hands above her head and the curse she howled in response. A little scuffling, her stream of insults was muffled, and then silence.

I stood, smoothed my sheets and laid flat on my bed, but I couldn't settle in. I went to sit at my desk, but ended up sliding down to the floor. A few minutes later, the alarm turned off. I fell asleep there, quite comfortable under my desk.