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Eden's Memories

by Rory Kranz

We are not made of flesh and bone like the ones in the New Place who live and die with terrifying speed, spilling their blood into the ground as though watering the ground with their insides would help the plants grow. We are something more permanent. We are spores and sinew, hunger and memory. We are both inhale and exhale.

If you were to ask I would tell you, in terms you could understand, that we are the dew that collects on the brow of a dead man, the black mold that traces maps on the wet log in your backyard, the ant that makes home in the skull of a felled deer. We are not anything that you have not known before.

I land here, in the New Place, alone. The collection of spores that holds the memories of Home tells me that I am one of the first. I am a pioneer! They tell me. I am an explorer! They say. A conqueror! A scholar of the highest esteem! These high-flying phrases dance around the spores that hold the truth: I am an exile.

I wander for a while, timeless and formless. I drift as spores on the breeze and learn what I can of the strange land where they have sent me.

In the New Place the day does not sleep. Instead it scatters and collects in small containers that line the streets and hang by doors and peer from inside windows. The shuddering beasts that rumble down streets have stolen them for eyes. Is this how they live? Trading in captured daylight? I wonder at a race that has made the sun their slave. They hold it in their hands and throw it around as if it is nothing as the stars are snuffed one by one. I can only assume they have captured these too. Shining their beacons into the sky, they go fishing for stars.

In some grassy, boxed-in place behind a dwelling I watch a figure holding in his hands a shard of moonlight. He takes the precious shard and thrusts it inside the body of the second figure. The ground is watered with red. The second figure collapses while the first disappears into the night.

As my spores ride the wind across the grass, I brush into a pocket of warmth. It is the woman's soul, or most of it. Ripped from her body in an instant and cast into the night air, it is confused. It does not know where it is.

In words that are not words, it asks me what has happened. I soothe it best I know how, and send it a lullaby we sing to the dead in my homeland. I tell it that it has finished with this dream and now it is time for the next. Then I move along and the soul drifts off to find its next dream.

The body is still warm when I come to it. I sink into a patch of exposed pink skin, just under the jaw and spread myself through its form. It will take time before I have fully acclimated to my new body, so for now I lie dormant.

I spend my time wandering through the vestiges of memory that still linger in the cells of the body, trying my best to honor them, learning who I once was and still am. I write the details of these memories into my spores, and they become a part of me.

She—I—liked to sit in the sun on crisp fall days when the scent of apples and cinnamon were never far away. I loved the autumn leaves that came tumbling down from the oak tree in the front lawn, painted brilliant shades of orange and red.

I remember when my mother died and how big fat tears, fatter than I thought possible rolled down my cheeks. I do not understand the sadness, but I can feel it as though it is my own.

Another glimpse of feeling—panic—as water fills my nose and mouth. My sneaker is caught on a branch underwater and I can't reach the surface. I would have died then if that hand hadn't grabbed mine and pulled until I broke free.

A face rises to the surface of all these jumbled memories. A man, with soft chin and flint eyes. *He is important*, the body tells me. *Do not forget him*. I take careful note of this memory.

When I finally wake in my new body, I feel strange. My skin feels...I realize I do not have the word for it. It is as if loneliness were a sensation, cocooning my skin in a horrible numbness. Cold, the memories tell me. This is cold.

I am barraged by images of frosty breath under a street lamp, snow covering an empty street in silence, and, oddly, a big-bellied man in a red suit. I have not lived in a place with cold in a long time, and the way this body experiences it is different from anything else I have known.

As far as I can tell, I am lying in a box. My limbs cannot move more than a hand span in either direction and when I try to sit up my head bangs against a ceiling that makes a metallic clang. Then footsteps approach, and I am yanked out of darkness into a blazing light.

After a moment the light softens as my eyes adjust and I can see the human that is leaning over me. He has a face that is both plump and haggard at the same time, apple cheeks paired with sallow eyes that have clearly seen more things than they would wish. The eyes dart back and forth across my form.

I am in a room filled with metal tables and strange tools and liquids. Bands of fluorescent lighting stripe the ceiling and air conditioning vents spill out cold, sterile air. I lie still as the man leans closer yet, until I can feel the heat of his breath on my forehead. It smells sharp—mint, say the memories. It stings my eyes and I blink.

The man jolts back with a yelp and makes more sounds I don't understand. The memories did not give me his language, and although I try to speak to the man in words that are not words, he seems to have forgotten that language. I sit up and the man backs up further. He reaches for a device that sits on the counter and presses it to his ear.

This does not seem safe. I retreat into the body, lying dormant once more and taking this time to learn what I can of the unfamiliar language.

#

Hushed voices.

"...No heartbeat."

"...Never seen anything like it, where'd it come from then you s'pose?"

"Couldn't say. I know just as much as you, Roger."

I wake once more in a blank room, sitting in a wooden chair. The voices go quiet. There are shackles around my wrist with chains that are hooked to the floor. I have seen these rooms before in cop procedurals. I-that-was-she used to watch them religiously.

In front of me is a table. A large mirror fills one wall, and I can see myself in my new body for the first time. I am a woman, dyed red hair loose around a pale face. On one cheek, dirt from where my face pressed to the ground in death. I reach to brush it away but there is a clang as the chain pulls taught.

The door swings open and a man walks in. He takes the seat opposite myself but moves the chair as far to the wall as he can. He is dark skinned with salt-and-pepper scruff and his eyes are wary as he looks me up and down.

"You speak?" he asks. I open my mouth but nothing comes out except a faint croaking.

"I'm guessing that's a no, but you understand me then?" I nod my head and the man continues.

"We paid off the coroner, he'll keep quiet for now. Buy us some time before the big wigs get wind and fly in from D.C. or wherever the fuck. For now, it's just you and me. So let's get to know each other alright? My name's Jay, Officer Watkins to you."

I nod.

"Good," he says. Jay sighs and takes out a notebook and pen. "So what are you? Not Eden, right?"

I stare blankly.

"That was her name, the dead woman. Eden. We did scans while you were sleeping, apologies. We know that there's something in you that's not human, so no use pretending. You from round here?"

No. I shake my head.

"You Russian? Some sort of weapon? Nanotech?"

No.

"Where you from then?"

I do not know how to explain, so I do nothing. The man pulls a paper from his pocket and unfolds it, leaning forward to place it on the table. It is a map of the New Place, the land portioned into neat little sections, colored and labeled.

"Show me where."

I slide the map towards me, then place my finger several hand spans away from it on the bare table. The door opens with a bang.

"I told ya! Alien." A younger man burst into the room. He has a mop of brown hair pulled back into a half-pony and a gleeful grin on his face. "Pay up."

"Roger, now is not the time."

Roger sobers up. "Right, yeah, sorry." He tips an imaginary hat at me. "Mr. Alien sir. Meant no disrespect. Honor to meet you." He turns to Jay. "Can I stay, sir?"

Jay eyes him up. In the silence, I hear a low humming coming from walls and somewhere in the distance, under the trees and sky, a bird chirps. I envy it. From what I knew of birds, I doubted they chained each other to the ground under too-bright lights in a too-cold room. Jay tosses the younger man the notebook.

"Observation only, understood?" he says. "No talking. Take notes."

"Aye aye, Captain." Jay turns his attention back to me.

"So. Did you kill her?"

No.

"How'd that get there then?" He nods at the dried blood still crusted on my shirt. I consider how to explain the shard of moonlight and the man who held it. The white light from

the ceiling is close enough to the moon. I point at it, then press my palm against the wound. *The moonlight pierced me here.* I point at him. *A man, like you.*

"I didn't do it, if that's what you're saying."

No. He does not understand. I point once again at the light.

"The light?" He scowls. "The light what?"

I cup my hands as though I have captured it, then press it again to my chest. *The light was taken in hands and used against me.*

"Maybe it's dumb," Roger says. He slows down his speech, making it long and sticky like molasses. "Arrr yooo dumb-uh, Mr. Alien siiiiiir?"

I am speaking to you now yet you are too blind to listen. You are the one who has forgotten how to speak.

"Roger, come on now, what did I say?"

"I think it's dumb. Did you see the way it just stared at me? I don't think it understood the question."

"It's too early to say."

"No, I'm serious! Can you imagine? All those alien movies warning us about advanced species and all, and when we finally get one it's dumb as a dog. You know how you can tell a dog anything and as long as you say it in the right tone it thinks it's a compliment? I bet it's like that." He turns to me, bending down so our faces are level, and says in a sickly-sweet falsetto, "You're a horrible little thing aren't you? Don't you just smell like rot? Makes me want to vomit, yes you do!" He smiles encouragingly.

I don't know what to do. I smile back at him. Roger laughs heartily.

"That's enough," Jay snaps. "Out."

"Noo sir," Roger whines. "Sorry, I'll behave, I promise. It was just a little joke to lighten the mood."

"I said out."

Roger slinks out the door, tossing the notebook on the table. Before Jay grabs it, I see the notes, scrawled in a sloppy hand:

-Alien.

-Smells like shit.

-Probably dumb.

-Perversion of nature.

-Killed Eden??

"Sorry about all that," Jay says. "He's new." He writes something in his notebook. "Now before we continue I've got something I want to say to you." He lowers his voice, leans in. "This is a small town. I know what it's like to be an outsider, to speak and have people act like you're speaking gibberish at them. What I'm trying to say is, I understand. I don't think you killed her, I'm on your side. I'll do what I can to keep you out of harm, make sure they're treating you alright. But I'll tell you another thing." He reaches to his side and pulls out a small revolver. "I don't like to use it. They've done enough harm to this country, in my mind it's a last resort. So I'll be on your side for sure. But if you ever show the slightest hint that you'll be a danger to the people of this town, you best believe I'll be the first to pull the trigger. You get me?"

Yes. I nod. The temperature in the room has not changed and yet I feel cold.

"Glad we're on the same page. There anything I can do to make you more comfortable?"

I lift my wrists and the chains clang. *I do not see why I need these.*

"Can't do that, sorry. Anything else?"

The captured light in the ceiling, set it free. I look up at the ceiling.

"Turn them off?"

Yes.

"That I can do." Jay stands and closes the notebook. "If I'm right and you didn't kill her, that means you might be our only witness. You know what happened to her, don't you?"

I nod. *Yes. I tried to show you before.*

"Then I'm sorry for what's to come. I doubt it will be pleasant." With that, he pushes in his chair and leaves. A moment later, the lights click off and the room is thrown into darkness. In this moment, it is just me and Eden's memories.

This body wants them to know. There are stories written in the cells, etched in the bones, echoes of thought and feeling stored in the decaying tissue. They itch, crawling like ants within me. Anguish at a life cut short, the injustice of it. I would tell them, I would set these stories free. But I do not have the right voice and they do not have the right ears.

I have lived several lives. Far away and long ago, I was a deathless tree in a forest of water, a being of an endless Now and Before. I knew not, and cared not, what was to come. In yet another life, I was a horned beast with fur on my chest and fire in my lungs. I traveled with many kin through caves that dripped honey, swam across lakes that breathed like any animal, and forests that grew down from the sky.

My kin too spoke the language without words and so I shared the wisdom the body had left me. They mourned their lost companion but took me in and did not falter when my horns rotted and fell, when my legs, riddled with decay, could no longer hold the weight of my great

body. They stayed with me as my body failed and when I was finally forced to leave, they sat vigil as my spores rode a volcanic wind up into the stars.

In all my lives, there was sadness in death, but never fear. Not like this. I search for answers from Eden and am shown children weeping over the body of a mother, of a tall blackened figure with a scythe creeping down a hall towards a sleeping man, doctors in hospitals fighting tooth and nail against death like it is the enemy, of war, endless war, and massive rocks covered with the names of those who never came home, who died in fights without meaning.

I think I am beginning to understand.

#

“You have visitors today,” Jay says, sitting across from me. “Eden’s family. This’ll be hard for them, okay? I’m going to let them in now.”

He sticks his head out the door for a moment, speaking softly to people I can’t see, and then into my space walks a stone-faced woman and a small curly-haired child. The child cries out and tries to run to me, arms outstretched, but the woman grabs her roughly by the arm, holding her back.

Inside me the memories ignite, electric. They race through my veins and I am overcome with the urge to reach out to the child and bundle it in my arms, to take the woman round the waist and press my lips against her. I am Eden and she is me and these are my people.

I try to stand and the chains jerk me back down. The child whimpers and the woman’s mouth is set in a thin line. I look at the child, peering at me with wide watery eyes from behind her mother’s arm.

Do not be afraid. I am not your mother but her memories live within me. I would never hurt you. I love you as she did, I promise.

The child looks startled, but then there is a hesitant, slightly broken response. *You...not mommy?*

Elation! The child speaks the language without words. I curb my excitement to reply: *No. But I have met her briefly.*

How?

I met her soul as she died.

Tears leak down the child's reddened cheeks. *Dead?*

Yes. Shush shush now, it is okay. I silently sing her the same lullaby I sang to her mother's soul and the tears slow. I send her images of meadows and wildflowers swaying in a gentle breeze. A hesitant smile spreads across her face.

The entire conversation happens in an instant, in the time it takes Jay to offer the woman a seat that she refuses. Instead, she stands in the corner as far from me as she can.

"It's not contagious?" She speaks in a low, soft voice that is achingly familiar to this body.

"No, no," Jay reassures her. "Perfectly safe. Whatever it is, it's contained to the body."

"Does it speak?" I do not like the way she looks at me. Revulsion. It is written in every line in her face, in the slight hunch of her shoulders, in the way her lips form the word it. I disgust her. It makes me sad. Eden did not want this.

"It seems to understand what we say, but as far as we can tell, no, it doesn't speak. It does try to communicate, but anything more complex than yes or no and it's just gibberish."

"Did it kill her?"

Jay hesitates. The woman's lips purse and she clutches the child tighter.

"I signed all your forms," she says. "Tell me."

"We don't know," he replies. "Now personally, I don't think so."

"Why's that?"

"Just a hunch. I've spent some time with it so you can say I know it best outta anyone here. I don't think it's capable of something like that. Physically, emotionally, however you wanna put it."

"Officer, you have to understand, we want to have a funeral. My wife is dead and my family wants to grieve. Whatever this is," she waves a hand in my direction, "I don't want it. Can you get rid of it?"

"We don't know."

"Then what do you know?"

"Well, we know that if it didn't kill her, it's the only thing in the world that might know who did." Silence. It seems the woman did not consider this. After a long moment, she turns her attention to me.

"Do you?"

Yes. I nod.

"It wasn't you?"

No. Never. I do not kill.

There is a knock at the door and someone pops their head in, face out of view.

"Jay, they want you in the lab," the person says. "I can take it from here."

"You sure?"

"Why don't you escort the lady out and I can ask a few questions. I got a minor in linguistics, you know."

"Yes, please," the woman cuts in. "I don't want to look at it anymore."

“Of course,” Jay says. “My apologies.” He slides out of the chair. As they depart, the child turns and flaps her hand at me. *Goodbye, not-mommy.*

Goodbye, little one.

The new person holds the door for them, then takes Jay's place in the chair and scoots it close. He places his long-fingered hands on the table, knitting the fingers together. Under his uniform he wears a neat button-down with the top button undone and I catch a whiff of cloves and musk.

I see his face clearly for the first time. There is a weak chin framed by day-old scruff. His hard, flint gray eyes meet my own and he smiles. I know this smile, I know those hands. If my heart were beating I know it would beat hard enough for the fish in the sea to feel its vibrations in the water.

A man, like you. The light was taken in hands and used against me. The fear in me is not my own yet it wells up into my eyes and sends trickles of wet down my cheeks.

“I've turned off the mics,” he says quietly. “No one will hear this conversation except you and me.” He reaches forward and I jerk away. But I cannot move far away enough. He presses a finger to my face, swiping one of the tears and examining it.

“You know me?” he asks.

Yes. I point to him and press my palm to the wound. *You did this to Eden.*

“Well, I'm Silas. Good to meet you too.” The man sighs. “I don't really know what you are, and you know what? I don't really care. Plant, alien, zombie, freak-of-nature, whatever. Stranger things have happened. But all the rest? The public? They won't see it that way. I feel sorry for you, I really do. You were just at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

I do not understand why he is telling me these things. I do not reply, and Silas continues.

“I feel sorry for you because no matter how hard you try, they’ll never believe you. They’ll always be afraid and they’ll never trust you to tell the truth. You’re not from here. In fact, you’re the farthest thing you could be from ‘*from here.*’ They’ll want a reason to fear you. We got so much of that fear and it needs somewhere to go and you’re the easiest scapegoat there ever was. Watch this.”

In an instant, he snatches my hand and drags the unkempt fingernails over his arm. Three red scratches appear. I jerk my hand away. *Why?*

“Roger!” Silas yells, clutching his arm. “Get in here!” Roger bursts through the door.

“Sir?”

“The damn thing scratched me.”

I did not. That was not me. My words fall on deaf ears.

“I’ll grab the first aid kit.”

“Nah, it’s okay Roger. I can take care of it.” He rolls down his sleeve, covering the scratches. “I don’t have a good feeling about this thing. I don’t think it’s friendly.”

“I felt the same way sir, if it were up to me we woulda killed it back when we found it.”

“That’s the smartest idea I’ve heard all day.”

Roger straightens, chest puffing slightly. “Thank you, sir.”

“Tighten those chains, would ya? Can’t have that happening again.”

“Course, sir. Right away.”

#

In a quiet cafe several blocks from the police precinct, the coroner sits in a booth across from the briefcase man. The man has no name, at least not one that he will give the coroner. The clothes he wears—brown jacket, flannel, workman’s boots—all give him the appearance of a

standard midwestern small-town man. It is only if you looked closely that you would notice the asynchronous details. Then you'd see the pristine, pressed nature of the flannel, or the lack of dirt on the boots.

He is the result of an email sent to the coroner's cousin who used to be a military sergeant, and a phone call from the sergeant to his old friend up in D.C., and then several since-deleted messages between the friend and his colleagues in departments that, according to public record, don't exist.

The coroner is not usually a nervous man, but since last Thursday he has developed a tic where he taps his wrist three times and then mumbles a prayer under his breath. The briefcase man pretends not to notice. He wafts at his untouched black coffee and straightens a napkin on the table.

"You have the evidence?" The man asks.

"The, ah, security footage, yes." The coroner rummages in his bag and produces a thumb drive which he slides across the table. The man picks it up and places it discreetly in a ziplock bag before slipping it under his jacket.

The coroner continues, "I have the scans as well, just as you asked."

"Thank you." The man takes the file and deposits it into the briefcase. The coroner manages to catch a glimpse of the inside and is surprised to see that except for the newly added folder, it is empty. Only a smooth black interior.

"What happens next?" The coroner asks. "Do you...know what this is? What it means?" Since Thursday he has had certain compulsions that his wife calls paranoia but he insists is just healthy caution. Boarding up the bay windows, new locks for the doors, moving the cradle to the

master bedroom. Just yesterday she caught him smuggling a gun into the safe in the office and smacked him right across the cheek. It left a red mark that still smarts to the touch.

The coroner looks to the man for answers. He wants to be told that this was a hoax. At the same time, he wants it to be real so that his feelings are justified. So that he can go home to his wife and tell her he was right all along, and then dig up the gun from where she made him bury it in the yard. Maybe put it under the bed this time so they couldn't be caught unawares.

"Take care," the man replies, and passes the coroner a thick white envelope. He pats the coroner congenitally on the shoulder before picking up the briefcase. The bell on the door jingles on his way out and the coroner watches him until he disappears around the corner and out of sight.

The coroner is left with a hot coffee and none of the answers he had hoped for. He taps his wrist three times and mumbles a prayer under his breath, then slips some of the cash out of the envelope and leaves it on the table. He tells the waitress to keep the change.

#

The chains, tighter than before, pin my wrists to my side. My flesh is softer than it once was and I can feel the metal digging into the skin. I can prolong the decomposition process but I still do not heal like the living. My cells do not regenerate and I lose small pieces of myself everyday. These marks will stay with me until this body's final moments.

I am forever dying piece by piece. It is a beauty they seem not to understand. I honor this body, I cherish it. I pass on its stories so that its memories live forever. Long after it is turned to dust and dirt, I will tell creatures far away of Eden and her autumn leaves.

It is Jay alone who comes to me today. He sets a large bag down and passes me a pen and paper.

"Can you write?" he asks. I don't know. I pick up the pen and try to form letters. My muscles do not have the fine control I need. The result is a vague scrawl on the paper that communicates nothing. I set down the pen.

"Well," Jay says, "It was worth a try. Don't worry, I've got something else." He pulls a strange device from the bag. It is a board with many colored buttons. Each button has a word on it. I see "tall" and "short" and "brown," and many more.

"This is for you," he says, setting it on the table in front of me. "You press the buttons, see—" he presses a button.

"Hair," says a robotic voice from the board. It sounds cheerful.

"It can speak for you."

I look over the buttons on the board. There are many words, and yet still not enough. I press several buttons in rapid succession and out comes a faltering sentence: "I See The Man," it says. Jay leans forward, suddenly intense.

"The murderer?"

Yes. I reach for the buttons once more: "Here."

"I don't understand. Yes, you saw the murderer in this town."

No. I try again: "Man. Here. Now."

"I told you," Jay says, "it wasn't me."

No. I shake my head. Why must I use his language? It is so slow. If he learned mine I could explain all in an instant. Jay seems to sense my frustration and when he speaks next his voice is soothing.

"How about this, I ask you questions and you answer. Easy, right? Okay, can you describe who you saw kill Eden?"

I look over the board and choose my words: "Tall Man. Brown Hair. Gray Eyes. I Know. You Know."

"Know what?"

"Know Man," the board says. Jay considers for a moment, then begins writing in his notebook.

I must tell Jay of what Silas has done. The pieces of Eden still in me want them all to know. I try as hard as I can. I yell in the language without words:

Jay, hear me. Silas is the man you seek. He is the one who left this body in the dirt. He made this wound and released Eden from this form. I send him the images of the man slicing Eden in the night again and again.

Jay swats at the air near his ear as if there is a pesky bug. That is something. I try again. *Listen. The man, the man with the moonlight is here.* He looks at me, curious, and for a moment I think he has heard.

"I've had a thought," Jay says. "Are you saying that this man is someone we both know?"

Yes! Yes. I nod emphatically.

"So he's from round here? In town?"

Yes, but more than that. He is from Here. I press buttons: "Man Here. More Here."

"Sorry, not sure I quite get that."

I search for words on the board that would better explain what I mean. There are none. I clench my hands in frustration. My nails dig into my palm, stinging.

"Hey, hey," Jay says. "Calm down. Listen, would an alphabet help? You could spell it out for me."

Yes.

"Alright then." He constructs a careful grid on the notebook page, putting a letter in each square. When he's finished, he slides it in the center of the table so we can both see. I begin pointing. M-A-N. Pause.

"Man," Jay repeats. "Got it."

I-S. Pause.

"Uh-huh."

S-I-L-AS. I sit back. Jay begins to sound it out and then stops abruptly. His face grows stony. After a moment's pause, he gets up and sticks his head out the door.

"Roger, could you turn off the mics for a minute? I need to say something off the books."

"Yessir," comes Roger's muffled voice.

"Make sure no one comes in alright?"

"Alrighty."

Jay slides back into his seat.

"I just want to confirm," he says, voice quiet. "You're saying that the person who killed Eden is Silas? The officer?"

Yes. I press the buttons again: "Man Here. You Know."

"That's a serious accusation. Are you sure?"

"Gray Eyes. Brown Hair," I make the board say.

"Okay." He lets out a long breath. "Okay, I'll look into it. Eden and him dated way back in high school you know, before she came out. From what I've heard, I thought they were on friendly terms but, now that I think on it, I suppose Silas's been a bit prickly about her. Listen, I'll do what I can but chances are you might be mistaken."

No. I shake my head.

"There's a lot of brown haired men out there, you never know." Just then there is a knock on the door and before Jay can say anything, it opens.

"What's this about off the books?" Silas says. His gaze flicks over the board on the table and the paper alphabet.

"Oh I was just roughing it up a bit, seeing if that would help it talk." Jay's expression is neutral.

"Learn anything interesting?"

"We just started, so no. It doesn't seem very smart." Silas nods, seemingly satisfied with this answer.

"Well alright then," he says, "but I'm turning the mics back on. When this blows up we can't have anyone blaming us for anything untoward, you get me?"

"Of course."

"Right then." Silas glances once more at me before closing the door behind him. Jay watches him go, then writes something in his notebook and turns it discreetly towards me.

I will look into it. Patience.

#

The next day Jay tells me the speaking board has gone missing. Silas joins us and together they ask me the same questions I have already answered. I notice Jay watching Silas with eyes that miss nothing.

A ringing noise from Jay's pocket. He pulls out the phone and has a short serious conversation. He hangs up scowling.

"Goddamn," he says. "It's the feds."

“We knew it was only a matter of time. You think something this big could be kept quiet for long? Nah. Somebody had to talk.”

“Who?”

“Does it matter?”

“Suppose not.”

“When?”

“Twenty minutes. They’re coming to pick it up.”

Within the hour I am taken by a group of humans in giant yellow costumes with glass masks and put in a rumbling metal beast. Then I am carried, wrapped in a thousand restraints, down a long hallway to a plain white room.

There is a box with a screen in the corner—a television. The lights are once again far too bright and these humans are rougher than the last. They seem not to care if I am comfortable, only that I am contained.

#

Day blurs into night in the small room. Sometimes pain is dealt in small manageable doses—a needle pricking my finger for every answer I give that does not satisfy them. Other times it comes in a tsunami. In a past life I was a fish-like thing on a planet of tsunamis. I remember the joy of riding a heaving wall of water tall enough to touch the sky. I pitied the small things on the rocks that were not built to withstand the force of an ocean.

Now it seems I am one of those small powerless things, destined to be dashed against the rocks by forces of nature larger than it could ever comprehend. My force of nature comes in the form of white-garbed men with slivers of steel. They strap me on a table and cut me open. They

poke around my insides as if that will give them the answers they seek. I am once more dashed against the rocks.

My one solace is that one of these men did not notice one of the knives fall from his garb and under my chair. I carefully hide it under my foot.

Eden's memories teach me of the human fallacy that if a thing cannot tell you it is in pain, it does not feel it. They used to operate on babies without anesthesia because they believed they didn't feel in the same way. I wonder if this is the same fallacy they have applied to me, or if I am simply not human enough for them to care.

Occasionally they will turn the television in the corner of the room on and I will see the riots outside the building, the people with signs of a large headed silhouette with a red X through it or just simply, *Euthanize It*.

They tell me I am a monster. That is what the news says. They think I am here to enslave them or experiment on them. I feed their nightmares and with each passing day the nightmares grow stronger.

I don't have the words to say otherwise. I wish I could say *please, I am just a few spores in a decaying body. I can do you no harm. I can only tell stories. I could tell you so many wonderful stories.*

I have lived many lives but I believe this is the first in which I have truly hated. I hate the masked humans who bring only pain and punishment. I hate the lights above me which are forever bright and numbing. I seethe at the thought of my Home World, at those who thought this planet fitting punishment.

Today I am made to swallow a pill that makes strange visions appear and then asked impossible questions. I would try to answer, except the red-wigged creature in the corner of the room tells me not to. He presses one long finger to his white lips and says *hushh*.

I do not know how much more of this I can withstand. There is no end in sight, no solution which satisfies them.

My home world does have notions of insanity. Spores who have lived too many lives to hold them all in one mind. I have not lived enough lives for that, but I fear this life alone may be too much.

I am trapped in this body until it has decayed enough that my spores can no longer take hold. I want to escape. More than anything I wish to flee this place and walk under the open sky. This want, no, need within me grows stronger with each passing moment. I find myself wondering, what is the price of freedom? What am I willing to pay? In blood? In bone?

The next day, another pill, and the red-wigged creature tells me how to escape. Even the red-wigged creature speaks the language without words. *Make them fear and nothing can hold you*, it says. *In this world, fear can open any door.*

The creature speaks truths I do not want to believe. I plead with it:

Another way. Please.

Fear is the only key to your cage, friend. See how well it works for me!

The creature lunges forward as though it means to pass through me. A hoarse cry escapes my throat and I raise my arms against it. Nothing comes. When I open my eyes, it is as if the creature were never there.

The man across from me in the chair writes something on his clipboard. When he leaves, I look through Eden's memories so that they might teach me of fear. They show me nothing that the television has not already said a million times before.

My body aches. My limbs creak. My flesh is soft and loose. And yet they fear. In the morning, I will have my freedom and I will pay the price.

I bide my time until the lights in the room flicker on, telling me it is day. When the first masked human comes into the room, I wait until he gets close and then I tear my wrists from their shackles. Bone cracks and splinters—my bone. It is the only way.

The man stumbles back but it is too late. The knife I stole from the surgeon is brandished in my broken hand and I do to him as Silas did to Eden.

It was not moonlight after all, I muse.

There is a security camera on the wall which they have told me sees all that I do. I step aside so they may see my workmanship, and thus the seed is planted. Red lights flash and alarms blare as I walk through the still-open door.

Moving my limbs freely is the most achingly wonderful sensation. The pleasure at stretching my muscles makes me want to twirl and dance. But I do not, there is not time. Instead, I walk down the monochrome hallway. Those that glimpse me do not falter, they simply run.

A man in heavy gear with a gun steps into the hallway and fires. There is a sharp pain in my stomach but this cannot stop me. This body is already dead, it cannot die twice. They could cut off each of my limbs one by one and let my blood run out in rivers and I would not die. The man shoots twice more, then turns heel and bolts.

There is a red sign reading EXIT at the end of the hall. I shuffle towards it and no one else comes to stop me as I push the bar and stumble into the fresh air. I am on an intersection

near a forest. The sun is just peeking over the horizon. I inhale and smell grass and morning dew and wet tarmac. It is delicious.

A tent is pitched nearby, just outside what I assume is the main entrance. Several picket signs lean against it. There is a zzzzp sound and a young woman pokes her head out. We make eye contact. She gapes at me, wide-eyed. Then, slowly, zips the tent back up.

I move on and make my way down the street. I have almost made it to the edge of the forest when a car pulls up beside me.

"Don't move," Jay says, voice soft and dangerous. The barrel of a gun is leveled at my head. I look at him and he looks at me. His dark eyes are hard and unwavering.

"Got a radio saying you killed a man," he says. His gaze flicks over the knife in my hand, the bruises on my wrists.

"I thought you should know, I found a knife in the dumpster outside Silas's place. With any luck there'll be a DNA match and we can get this whole business resolved. You—she'll have justice."

I nod. *Thank you.*

The alarms from the building blare louder and several black-armored men charge out the side door. Jay watches them sprint off in several directions. With a heavy sigh, he lowers the gun and gives a sharp nod. And then, with a rev of the engine, he is gone.

I make my way into the forest and walk until the sounds of alarms and gunfire are a distant memory. I drop the knife into a stream. I no longer need it.

There is a large oak tree that reminds me of the one from my front yard. I sit beside it and the knotted trunk soothes my weary back. The tree is old and wise. It has many stories to tell me.

It tells me of birds in love building nests in its branches and of the squirrel that died in its trunk. I have stories to tell too.

I tell it how much Eden liked its autumn leaves.