

The Gargoyle
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Fear seemed to streamline through the tiny holes that carried out River's goosebumps. These were the same tunnels he would dread having to come to work in, and now these walls are nothing but a hallowed way out.

Hours earlier, River was doing his rounds moving luggage in and around the Denver airport. Driving with a bacon egg and cheese sandwich in one hand and the wheel in another. He heard John walkie and told everyone to head to the team lunch room for a quick meeting.

River had imagined himself on a long dreary highway, one where they build walls around so you can't see how humans have mutated the land around it. Speeding through graffitied cement, River got hit with an intense sense of déjà-vu. His brain turned sharp and as if his gut had felt as though it turned around and patted him in the back. Without realizing he had hit the illegal limit of 15 miles per hour before getting pulled over by terminal police.

The officer turned off his department store police sirens before making his way over to River. River grew impatient as the airport cop staggered his way to the left side of the luggage car. With no other cars on this mall cop highway, River wondered why out of all days today was the day.

"What made you think you could speed through here young boy? Where is your ID? Are you supposed to be down here right now!?" The officer said eagerly while frantically looking around the luggage car as if River had a load of groceries hidden under the cart covers.

River apologized and explained how John had advised them all to leave the tunnels and head to the lunch room, the officer let him go and told him.

"Be careful, you don't want to be down here with the wrong people." The officer looks around before he made it back to his go cart and disappeared into the vast linear cement

passageway that never ended. River was suspicious of what the officer meant, working here for two years and the airport being his childhood playground, he had never heard of anything so intacing.

His parents got him a job working there, putting luggages on planes seemed something he could qualify for without a college degree. Plus, his parents could be considered aerophilles; someone who has a love for aviation. Both of them lived the majority of their lives at this airport, his father a pilot and his mother a flight attendant. River remembers his first time visiting his parents at work, one specific part that would stick to his memory like gum to a shoe. When his mother explained her perspective on the large morale posted by the baggage claim he would eventually work close to every day.

“Honey, does this scare you?” His mother said while turning to him. River stood proudly next to her, side by side, they looked up at this large painting with a soldier holding a large sword that held down a dove. There was this teddy bear a child held that River remembered telling his mother looked like his teddy at home. He remembered the gun the man was carrying, while standing by this rural building that had been destroyed by the same man with a gas mask.

River shrugged his shoulders and said he didn’t know if it scared him, he had said that the rainbow in the back of the picture reminded him of the rainbows they made on pride month at school. His mother almost looked disappointed that River couldn’t see what she did.

After he parked his luggage car, he ran up the stairs to the main terminal. When he opens the door, there’s suddenly crowds of people in the airport. For the winter season this was nothing abnormal, he just remembered it all feeling so sudden.

Waving in and out of travelers he enters the team lunch room to find John, Trinity, and Nevaeh sitting around in a circle. Wooden, crooked, and never cleaned, the table only had a

handful of seats. There was hardly a window where one could meet the other coworkers while you were on break because of the difference in skill set; behind the desk like Trinity, or accessible transportation like Nevaeh. John was the shift leader of the pack, he always started their shifts with a dozen donuts or fresh coffee from the Dunkin two feet away from the lunch room.

“You’re late, where have you been?” John said to River as he eyes wandered with fury.

“Got pulled over for going 10 over the speed limit” River replied as he plopped into the leftover chair. Nevaeh lets out a chuckle. Trinity looks over at Nevaeh and shakes her head.

“Enough, we’ve wasted enough time” John scrambles through the copies of papers he had printed out with all his procedures for the day, for the second time that day.

River had looked around to see if anyone else was curious as to why this meeting was so important.

“Didn’t we go over this earlier, why am I here right now” River had shouted out as he grew restless of John's robotic voice that almost mimicked the warning message they play every five minutes on the speaker— turning to sudden white noise.

John stood up and told him to leave. “Today is not the day to be talking back young boy, if you aren’t going to be helpful you can leave.”

Nevaeh looked over at River with her eyebrow raised in suspicion. She never looked at him that way before. Sometimes Nevaeh and River would meet up at baggage claim as she would have to push the abandoned elderly to get their bags and put them away safely into a taxi. Here they would exchange a few smiles, she would bring up the weather a lot, but River rarely cared for small talk. Except for one time, a few days ago. He had just dropped off at least three carts filled with luggage from a flight that came from New York. This day Nevaeh pushed

around a silver-headed fox regular named Linda, who only seemed to need the wheelchair because she had a boot on her leg. No older than 65, Linda gossiped away through the rectangular box she held against her ear. Nevaeh walked up to River and asked the usual questions; “How are you? It's so cold out today huh? Are the bags giving you any trouble?” River replied like he always did, with a jerk and a smile, nothing but positive things to say.

She then asked, “What made you want to work here? Do you have a thing for other people's luggage or what?” River remembers the way she twiddled her fingers through her long curly blonde hair, distracted. He made a joke about the conspiracies that have plagued the airport for years.

“Doesn't a piece of you want to know if anything they say is true, I know you have to be curious.” He said as he moved to stand in front of her with a big frown and puppy dog eyes.

Nevaeh looked down as she grabbed her ID badge, moved forward and said “No it can't be, it's all just a joke. Don't play around.” Avoiding making eye contact, they were cut off by the deafening sound of the baggage about to release the bags, she walked toward the carousel and waited for Linda's Louis Voitan to shuffle out. River walked away feeling blown off. They never spoke about it again.

Yes, River knew of the stories they said about the airport. Yes, he knows how the artist for the gigantic horse that stands proudly on the runway, named Blucifer, died while painting the eyes red. Yes, he knows about how the airport went two billion dollars over budget without reason. Yes, he knows everything was subcontracted, so no one really knows the true blueprint of the airport itself. And Yes, he knows about the tales of how the tunnels lead to Washington, D.C., supposedly. River chose to joke about it because he chose to not see it.

As Nevaeh looked back at John in the lunchroom, River walked out of the team meeting. All the crowds outside had vanished. He went off for a smoke break, before the chaos started again.

As he headed for the doors he stopped on the mat, the doors opened. It was snowing outside. He turned his head and saw the gargoyle that is told to “Protect the luggage.” He took this as a sign to head for the luggage sanctuary, the tale of legends, the tunnels.

As he headed back down the stairs he started looking around as if the terminal cop would be on the lookout for him. Worried, he went to a different side of the tunnels he had yet to visit before. Here it was quiet enough that the luggage cars wouldn’t be able to inhale the fumes of his devils lettuce.

The run of his rolled cigarette burned faster than he expected, he dropped the rest of what was left on the ground and stomped on it. He looks around before starting to walk back. The tunnels were always dark, always seemed like it was busy, but it was mostly just the sound of the travelers on the upper floor. Depending what area you’re in, you can look up and see the old luggage’s system they tried to make so people like River would be out of a job. River got distracted by the outdated system, and got spooked when he heard John and Trinity coming. Trying to sneak away, River found a hallway with a cracked door, and he went in.

When River entered everything was crisp, clean, and white. In awe, he stood still. His eyes widened as he moved his head to see a large common space, with a kitchen, couches, a bar, a record player, a satellite radio, and a large dinner table. There were multiple doors on the sides of the walls that had full bedrooms. He drags himself into one of the rooms to find that it has a bed on the left side, with a desktop computer placed on a desk to the right of the room. When he turns around there is a bathroom, with a toilet, sink, and a shower. River feels glued to the

ground, that's when he heard John's voice get closer, he slowly cracked the door shut but left it open enough so he was able to hear what John was saying.

"I got orders that it's time to start prepping soon. We don't have time to waste, the next batch will be here in a few hours. And they don't like to wait." John said as Trinity followed him around the common area writing down notes.

"What about the baggage handlers? Won't they start seeing them coming down?" Trinity asked as she looked around for inconsistencies within the room as though it had been just a duplicate.

"They shouldn't be around, with the instructions given at the meeting and what was on the paper I handed it out to everyone. They won't be seen in any of these areas, at least not today." John said surely as he began to cross his arms. River slipped and dropped his lighter on the marble white floor. River knew there was no way to avoid his presence. As the lighters echoed far past the door frame. He opened the door to the misplaced bedroom and walked toward John and Trinity slowly. Trinity looked at John, John looked at Trinity. The room stood in silence for at least ten seconds before River could see their reflection through the glass mirror that hung on the wall behind them. Their figures were unrecognizable and before River could get a better look John started jolting at him.

River tried saying sorry, that he didn't hear anything, before he realized the look on John's face looks more venomous than usual. River started booking it, he ran out of the new room he never knew existed. Sprinted through the soft lighted torches the tunnels had synchronized on the walls and found his way back up to the main stairs. He couldn't see John behind him anymore, he catches his breath before going up. He opened the door and sees Nevaeh

walking to baggage claim number six, when he catches up with her and tries to tell her everything he saw.

“What they said about the airport might be true, Nevaeh, I can’t believe it but I think it’s all true because what I just saw—“ He says before getting cut off Nevaeh pulls him to the side.

“Calm down, what do you mean, did you just smoke?” Almost trying to quiet him down, she looks at him, looking around, her witty eyebrows at full height and her arms crossed around her body.

River describes the room he entered in, he tells her about what John and Trinity were saying, and that’s when River looks up to see both of them behind the desk just a few feet away. At that moment they both glance at River.

“Are you sure? What kind of stuff were you smoking? I don’t think you are supposed to be doing that while you’re working” Nevaeh looks at River looking at John and Trinity, and she quickly walks away.

River lost in his own space, he begins to question if he really saw what he saw. There was no way that they would both be able to make it behind the desk that fast especially after River had sprinted his way back through the tunnels. John begins to walk over to him from behind the desk 20 feet away. River glued to the ground doesn’t move.

“Smoking on the Job? That can get you fired, you know. Do you know how much of a privilege it is to work here at this airport? You better be careful where you run off too, we don’t want you getting lost now, do we?” John walks back towards the desk, where Trinity seems to have been writing down the transcript of their conversation.

The rest of the shift, River drifted from plane to plane, baggage to baggage. He never said anything about it, and he never made his way down to the mystery room again.