Palomo Island:

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The sun shone high in the limpid afternoon sky; wind rustled the high-reaching palms of the tropical arcadia; gas wafted up from the motor boats moored on the dock; the amalgam of chirps and wind chimes created a euphony matched only by the waves sluicing the sandy shore.

“Palomo Island: the island of paradise.”

“I think you mean pigeon island? I miss the pigeons.” The somberness of his sister’s voice caught Bin off-guard. Their family had moved to the island to get away from the city. Bin thought it was great, but apparently his sister did not.

“Misty, you act like you don’t like this place. What is there not to like? It's always sunny and you can do whatever you want!” He nudged her shoulder. “Plus, you can get away from the smog and dust of the city.”

Clearly Bin’s enamorment of the island didn’t galvanize Misty. She kept her eyes focused on the eclectic display of flowers before her.

Accepting his defeat for the time, Bin shifted his gaze to the sinking sun, slowly evanescing into the far-off sky. The peachy glow lit up the garden. Casting its shine against each flower, the colors reflected off the petals and danced across the grass.

“Hey guys!” The echoed voice of their father pierced through the placidity of the moment. “Why don’t you come on in? It’s about to start.” He motioned his hand for them to cover over, beckoning to two empty chairs beside him.

“This is gonna be so boring,” said Misty as they strolled towards the golf course clubhouse. Her little pony tail bobbed up and down as she broke from the stride, prancing towards her chair.

The “clubhouse” was more of a warehouse. It was three stories tall and half a block wide. The interior was mostly open space with a few small restaurants sprinkled along the edges of the main hall. Today, there was a plethora of buffet tables filled with pastries, fruit bowls, finger sandwiches, and anything else that could keep people satisfied with sitting in a chair for two hours. A behemoth structure made of wood. The clubhouse was more or less the locale for important island announcements—and today was no exception.

“We welcome you all here today to celebrate Palomo Island’s 50th anniversary!” The presenter’s voice boomed over the microphone followed by a round of applause. The presenter, who Bin thought was the island governor, although he wasn’t too sure, continued. “I am honored to have this privilege and so glad that you could all join me. The construction of this island was not an easy one, but we have arrived. We have arrived at Paradise!” Another wave of applause cycled through the clubhouse.

The wind was blowing sharper now and the warmth of the sun had left. The coming darkness covered everything in a layer of soot and the once vibrant flowers had yielded to the inky air. Occasional headlights penetrated the dingy atmosphere.

“I hope in these next few years we will continue to work together to make your experience better.”

Suddenly, murmurs began to fill the room. Slowly at first, but growing into a steady stream of voices.

The governor shifted his stance, but continued on. “I will continue to work to make our community stable,”

The murmurs had become chatter now. What was happening?

“Serene,”

The unnerving chatter punched a hole in the calmness Bin had felt five minutes ago. He shifted in his seat, hoping to catch a word or two that would tell him what was going on.

“And safe.”

Bin saw his assistant whisper something in his ear. His eyes widened, but he quickly returned to his composed expression.

He took over the mic again, “I’m sorry, but I will have to stop the speech early. Everyone, please return to your residences. I have to go take care of a—,” he paused as he searched for the word. “—Disruption, on the northside. Have a good night.”

Meaning “pigeon” in Spanish, the name Palomo was given to the island in the 1500s by its discoverer due to its appearance. The discovery had been relatively unknown, and people began to come to the island only recently. The south and east part of the island have two long peninsula beaches that create the feet of the pigeon. This is what the island is famous for, because its beaches and resorts are typically home to many tourists year round. The westside of the island is home to many small businesses and the island capital, creating the head and wings of the bird. Finally, the northside of the island is mainly used for motor boating and fishing vessels. It was on this part of the island where the disturbance happened.

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The governor shone his beam through the office. *Nothing.* He glanced at his watch—12:24. *They should have been here 2 hours ago*, he thought. *Why is nobody here!*

He tried the lights a few times, *nothing*. He was about to leave when he noticed something strange near his feet. He squatted and shone the flashlight at the ground. *Gooey. Must be residue from seaweed. But up here? In an office?* He walked out of the room into a larger antechamber. He cast the light down at the tile. *It’s everywhere! What the hell?!*

“Anybody here!” he yelled. “Hey! What the hell is on the floor?”

He listened. *Nothing.* But then, he thought he heard a stir from one of the office rooms next to him. He made his way over to the door gilded with the letters R. Jones, Head Director. *He should be here tonight. EVERYONE should be here tonight.* But the building was as quiet as a tomb.

Again, a faint stir behind the door.

The governor peered through the opaque glass on the sides.

*Blood.*

He hurried to the knob and threw open the door. What was left of the head director was not a pretty sight. Slime was draped from the ceiling and the furniture, creating a large, webbed nexus of dripping ooze; splotches of blood painted the walls like a mural of death. And in the heart of it all lay the head director.

It was easy for the governor to see what was there of the man, but it was even easier to see what was not. A large chunk had been removed from the side of his stomach and calf. Organs, spilling out from the wounds, lay sprawled across the floor. A crimson pool had emerged at the bottom of his feet due to several missing toes.

A crack of lightning revealed the pallid face of sheer terror on the governor. His hands were caked with slime and his shoes were soaked with blood as he ran out of the room. He burst out of the main entrance, leaving a trail of bloody footprints.

Outside, thunder boomed and rain fell in torrents. He could barely see where he was going as he ran across the sleek grass. He was drenched from the rain, but he couldn’t distinguish between the sweat, blood, and water anymore. He tried to think, but he couldn’t. The world was spinning too fast as he ran through the storm. The rain pelted and the wind howled.

*Nothing.*

He felt a jab of pain in his quad.

*Nothing.*

It was all coming back to him as he fell to the ground. The slime, the blood, the director. His head couldn’t stop spinning. Another stab.

*Nothing.*

He could feel the gnawing. His howls were swallowed up by the raging storm. No one would come. The pain pierced his head. His vision blurred as he drifted into the darkness. His throat was choked with blood. He could no longer feel his legs. He tried to move as he fell victim to the dark.

*Nothing.*

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The warmth of the sun sent tingles through his body. The chirps of the birds outside his window grew stronger as his dream began to wane. *Aah, sleep—the universal panacea.* Bin lifted his head off the pillow and looked outside at the wet morning. *Man,* he thought. *That storm was pretty bad last night.* He took a moment to wake up and shuffled his way downstairs towards the rest of his family.

He found his sister and dad spread across the sofa; their eyes were fixed on the TV. Bin took a closer look and realized the local news was playing.

“I thought you guys would be watching cartoons or something,” he said. “What’s up with the news?” No response.

Naturally, he made his way over to the TV and read the headline: Palomo Island Governor Dead After Storm Hits Mainland.

“Dead?! What the hell happened to him?”

His dad looked him dead in the eyes. “They’re saying it was debris from the storm. I don’t know, maybe some flotsam off of a nearby trawler.” The news reporter when on.

“Local fishermen making their way towards the docks this morning found a very ugly sight waiting for them when they arrived: the deceased governor. Forensic experts determined that the time of death was around midnight that evening. We’re about to show images that may be very graphic for some viewers, so please be advised.”

Misty’s dad covered her eyes with his hand, but his grave face did not drift from the TV. Bin, bracing for what was to come, took a swallow and shifted his stance. A dismal display soon took over the screen, replacing the vanishing reporter.

A layer of mist hung over the air like a curtain trying to hide the opening scene from the audience. A half-naked, half-shredded man emerged in the center of the screen, his chalky face stricken with horror. Wide-open eyes were half out of their sockets as if someone had squeezed him until he popped. Daubs of blood streaked along his unsepulchered body as if Lucifer himself had clawed away at his flesh. Down from his waist to the meniscus looked as though it had been carelessly tossed in the shredder and then crudely sutured back together. Where his legs were supposed to be was a pool of slime creeping up his body, getting ready to submerge him and drag him down to hell.

Upon seeing this Tartarean image, his dad quickly turned off the TV. They sat there for a moment taking in the horrid vision. *What was that? What happened?* Whirlwinds of thoughts were tearing through his head when the sharp ring of the doorbell cut through the silent afternoon. They all jumped.

“Hellooo?” said a scratchy voice from behind the door. The doorbell kept ringing. “Open the door, will ya?”

Bin made his way towards the door on the other side of the living room. He knew exactly who was on the other side, but he didn’t know why she was there.

“Hello, Mrs. Frizzle. How are you?” The little frame standing on the doorstep was that of their widowed and withered neighbor, Mrs. Frizzle. She was wrinkled all over with knotted gray hair and a hooked nose that poked into your heart, sucking out your love for her elixir of life.

She squinted her eyes, “I’ve been better.” She pressed her hand to her chest and heaved a sigh. “My, what a *burden* it’s been coming over here! Always so hot and mucky! And your walkway is a landmine, I’ll have you know, crumbling everywhere. I swear it’ll be the death of me!” She gave a huff and leaned her nose closer to Bin.

“Uh, sorry about the inconvenience,” he responded as he took a small step back. He hesitated, “You, uh, came here to tell us about the walkway?”

“You think I’m that dull? I *came* *here* to tell you about those sea-bastards!”

*She’s definitely losing it,* he thought. “And these sea-bastards are…?”

“Haven’t you watched the news! Ah, you’re probably too lazy to do it anyways. The things on the north side, you should see those demons.” Rain had started falling down, wetting the ever-precious person of Mrs. Frizzle. “I’m not wasting my time with you people. Look at you, making me come all the way here, only to get rained on!” She hobbled down the stoop and precariously made her way across the walkway and down to the street.

“Hey!” Bin shouted over the growing rain. “What do you mean ‘things’?”

Mrs. Frizzle stopped in the middle of the storm and turned around. The shadowed body was obscured by a wall of rain, staring and searching right into his soul. He thought he saw her put her hands to her mouth as she shouted. “The things that killed the governor, of course!”

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The Mephistophelian image he was looking at was that of a hellish creature, somewhat resembling a gnocchi dish lathered with creamy alfredo sauce. A slimy, savage slug was crawling across the screen. *Is this what Mrs. Frizzle was talking about?* Bin had been texting his friend about what he heard, and he had shown him this.

“They must have come from the ocean,” said his dad. “It probably attached itself to a fishing trawler and hitched a ride to the island.

“So if they’re in the ocean *and* the land, how are we going to get out?”

“I’m not sure…” he rubbed his chin in a pensive manner. “Let’s go find the neighbors, though. Maybe they have more information.”

“We should bring some supplies. Y’know…” he waved his hand. “Just in case. It’s better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.”

The next half hour was a mad scramble of picking up random things around the house and deciding which was useful and which was otiose. Finally, once they had amassed a rather eclectic backpack stuffed with various flashlights, pocket knives, clothes and snacks, they trudged into the pouring rain and made their way towards their neighbors.

The sun had fallen low in the horizon and now made little impact on the dreary evening. They had stopped in front of one of their neighbor’s houses. Everything was dark inside. “The storm must’ve cut the power.” The dad tapped the door and it swung right open. He continued down the hallway followed by Bin holding Misty’s hand.

It was a large house with many small rooms splitting off from a main hallway through the middle. It was decorated with family photos and a peeling wallpaper. Walking down this abandoned hallway, they suddenly stopped about halfway through. A terrible miasma had wafted from the dark room on their right. Bin looked at his dad’s face just long enough to see a small shift in his mouth.

“You guys wait here. I’m gonna go check this out.” Creaking open the door and trudging inside, he got swallowed up by the room, leaving Bin and Misty in the quiet hallway.

“Stay here, I’ll be right back,” he whispered to Misty. The stench had grown too strong to sit there and wonder. He had to go see.

Next to the door he squatted down and peek through the keyhole.

The room seemed to be a study. It was lined with high-reaching shelves that blocked the light from the stained glass windows and caused the room to be even darker than out in the hall. His eyes caught sight of *Paradise Lost* and he couldn’t help but chuckle when he thought of Palomo Island’s own Luciferian fall from grace. He couldn’t see too well, but he could make out the shadow of his dad next to one of these shelves. He was standing on a chair, trying to see something on top of the shelf. Nudging the door open a little bit to get a better view, Bin squinted towards the top of the shelf. There was a pile of something there, but he couldn’t tell what.

His dad began fiddling with it, and it rolled off the top with a soft thud when it hit the ground. Again, that horrible stench began to rise and fill the study. Squinting his eyes until it seemed as though he would no longer be able to see, Bin searched across the room until he could make out part of the pile. At first, he didn’t know what to make of it, but as he pieced the visions together, hair by hair, finger by finger, foot by foot, he came to the horrid realization: he was staring at his dead neighbor.

*That’s it,* he thought. *I can’t wait here any longer, I need to know what the hell happened.*

Shoving open the door and striding towards his dad, Bin made his presence known.

“What’re you doing here?! I told you to stay back with your sister!”

They stared at each other. Bin walked forward more in hopes of seeing the body that had fallen behind the desk and was now out of view.

“No. Don’t come closer.” His dad put his hand up like a police officer directing traffic away from a horrible accident. “Let’s go, there’s nothing to see here.”

“Even when the truth is painful, it’s better than ignorance,” declared Bin as he leaned over the desk and looked at the pile. It’s a funny thing, death, thought Bin. Once you see it the first time, you either futilely try to avoid it the rest of your life, or you become so desensitized that the next thing you know you’re staring at the most revolting thing you’ve ever seen and thinking, *ooohhh! What’s next?*

As he peered over the desk to the other side, he saw all the usual bodily pieces in the pile. The man’s head lay at the top, his arms spread out to the sides. His legs lay limp at the end, but all that didn’t seem too bad. What caught his eye, though, wasn’t the wonted, it was the unwonted. And in this case, the unwonted was a gaping hole right through the man’s stomach, leading straight through to the other side. It looked as though the man was a garden and a plant had just been ripped from his center, roots and all. Various veins, intestines, and Bin didn’t even know what else, were sticking out of the side of the hole. The edge was jagged as if a shark had taken a bite out of him and splotches of blood dotted the floor from the fall. Again, the all too familiar ooze filled the hole and, as Bin’s eyes made their way up the shelf, created a gelatinous ladder leading up to a heaping intestinal dumpster of several half-eaten discarded innards unfit for the production of human chitlin to feed to even the most gluttonous and filthy swine.

Visions of blood and guts filled his eyes as his dad swept him out of the room. “That’s it. We're going back.” The finality of his statement was one that no one wanted to argue with. Surely the place of so many good memories in the past months would prove to be a worthy oasis where they could assess and plan. But when they got within 200 feet they could already see the toll that the invader had taken on it. Holes dotted the walls of the house and wood was left strewn across the lawn. In the distance, small slug-like creatures were crawling in and around the house leaving trails of slime in their wake.

Bin whispered to his dad, “Those are the things my friend texted me.” He got a nod in return.

“I don’t know much about those things, but they seem to be going very slowly from what I’m seeing.” It was true; although they had caused considerable damage to the house, the slugs were barely moving.

“That’s good. That gives us one advantage.” Bin could again see thoughts cycling through his head. “It’s nugatory to stand here and wait for our fate. We gotta find somewhere safe to stay.”

“And sustainable,” added Bin.

“Right. How about the clubhouse? It’s far from our neighborhood, so maybe they haven’t gotten there yet. And they would have food left over from yesternight’s buffet.”

Bin grabbed Misty’s hand. She hadn’t been talking much, but that was probably because of cognitive impairment and emotional dysregulation brought on by the possible early childhood trauma of realizing how there was a dangerous, and rather unknown, creature that had invaded their home in hopes of finding and killing the whole family.

Determined to find a place to stay, and a moment to think, the family broke through the thickening mist and continued on towards the clubhouse.

⊰5⊱

Before residence was even considered, Palomo Island was home year-round to tourists trying to escape the cold and enjoy a relaxing vacation; these “tourists” were mostly rich businessmen trying to get into the real estate of the island before it was too late. They tried to buy it up, bit by bit, house by house, in hopes of one day creating famous hotels and industries that would turn it into the city people were trying to get away from. The leaders did not want this, so for a while the push for property grinded to a halt. And since the tycoons had nothing to do during this stagnancy, they resorted to the only other activity where they could maintain their status: golf. The center of the island: breezy, quiet, and spacious enough for two golf courses—one for the commoners, one for the rich. One for fun, one for negotiations. And with these courses came the clubhouse. A dyad of occupation, yet a surprisingly successful contemporality. One side for golf affairs, one for meetings. One group bent on power and exploitation, the other there for good times and peace. The ineluctable duality of this reality was one that lay moored to his synapses as Bin caught his first glimpse towards the clubhouse.

At first glance, the extensive buffet was still spread out from the night before—plenty of food for several days. But upon second reappraisal, slimy slugs had clearly taken advantage of this stronghold, and were holed up in the clubhouse to protect their bounty.

Bin ducked down behind the hill again. “Look,” he began. “There’s no infrastructure on this island for aircraft rescues. The navy or coast guard might come, but we’re probably looking at a couple days there. No deus ex machina godhead of any socially accepted or paganistic theological religious tradition can grant us an impromptu salvation to shepherd us away from this valley of death, it’s gotta be us—we’ve gotta get that food.”

“You’re right.” His dad held up the backpack they had brought. “We’ve only got a couple of granola bars in here. Maybe some gum. We’ll be out in a day—we need that food.”

Misty poked her head up, “I don’t know what ‘godhead-salvation-death’ thing you’re talking about, but I’m hungry.”

“Exactly. But first, we need to excogitate a fast, efficient, and *safe* way to do that. We don’t want to rush it.”

“The heated mind resents the chill touch and relentless scrutiny of logic.” Bin paused for dramatic effect. “Gladstone.”

“But relentless scrutiny is just what we need.”

Misty rolled her eyes, “Can you guys stop speaking in tongues. You’re driving me crazy!”

“The roots of extensive preparation are bitter, but the fruit is sweet.”

“Oh, come on! Now you’re just playing!” Misty crossed her arms. “Stop with the sesquipedalianism and verbosity and get to the point. We know they’re slow, let’s just go get the food.”

“A fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.”

“You’re right, we’re really not sure how they operate. We’ve only seen them from a distance. They could be more advanced than we know.”

“Let’s wait ‘till night, it can’t hurt.”

After several long hours of waiting, the darkness had finally fallen over the island. A thick cloud cover had rolled in and shrouded any possible light from the stars. The slugs had long retreated from the outside of the building, having crawled their way slowly towards the inside.

“Maybe they sleep together?” It was confusing to Bin. Even at night, the air was warm and dry. He saw no reason for them to have retreated.

“Okay, we don’t want to wait here forever. Let’s go in.” They all crawled over the hill and ran nervously towards the building like thieves.

The “plan” was quite simple. Clearly, they were faster than these things, and since they had moved off into a separate part of the building they would be able to get in and get out without being caught. It was risky, but what was the other option?

They had all fanned out to three major buffet sections. The goal: eat as much as you can, carry as much as you can, and run as fast as you can. The main goal for Bin when he arrived was to eat as much as he could. A long, white buffet table lay in front of him, hosting tarts, pies, cookies, and any other glorified post-meal victual species that nutritional yankee imperialists could add sugar to and sell for a profit. He was starving and the table of pastries spread out before him only exacerbated the feeling. He had already eaten with his eyes, but he still had yet to satisfy the cravings of his mouth and maw.

He knew that his masseter and occlusal bite force in the permanent dentition stage should be somewhere around 700N—about a third of the force required to crush a human, yet three times the amount of force required to bite through a chicken bone. It would be a workout to get through all those pastries, and because of the lack of time available, the high intensity gnawing could burn up to nine times the amount of calories as a leisurely sit-down approach. However, he eagerly tucked into the plethora of sweets and began mashing furiously. Like a blender without its lid on, pellets of spittle and other salivary particulates mixed with neglected fodder globules that rained down on the tiled floor below.

After only a few minutes of feasting, Bin’s throat burned from all the food going down. He needed something cool to drink to soothe it. He turned his head towards the small snack bars next to him. One of them happened to be a smoothie bar that he went to pretty often. The colorful lights and thatched pandanus overhang made it an inviting place to hide from the sun. All the food was kept in the back, so he pushed open the double action swing doors and made his way down the short hallway. He really didn’t want to run off, but his throat was on fire and he was wheezing at that point. Just a couple more steps and his head poked around the corner.

The first thing that hit him was the smell, but the source was recognized only a second later. A compost pile of human remains lay in the center of the room. Stark white arms and legs dangled out of the mass of bodies. Disconnected eyes and teeth and feet had tumbled across the floor and were thrown in various directions. Climbing on top of the pile, the slugs had formed a shell around the bodies. The slime that coated the cadavers was fresh, but the blood was dried.

*They’ve been here for a while,* he thought. *There’s a lot of them, too. This must be where they store the bodies. A classic, yet twisted, example of hunter gatherers. Parasites to the dominion of man…but were we any better? Hunting gnus and gazelles only to bring them home to roast over a fire. Parasites to the dominion of nature, yet doyens in survival. Is it ethical to destroy the old, to create the new? To destroy the bad, to bring the worse? To kill…to live? One man, destined to succeed, or five lions, headed for the limit of intelligence? Quality over quantity? Quality yields results, yet quantity yields quality.* The quagmire of ethics created a Möbius netting around his brain until he was as confused as an Amish electrician.

He quickly scrubbed off the stain of thoughts from his mind and gathered his cerebrations. He backed away from the vile scene in the kitchen and made his way back down the narrow corridor and rushed back to his family.

He took a moment, gasping to pull in some breath and wet his desiccated lips. “Look—we’ve, we’ve gotta go. I was just in one of the snack shops and—and all of the…things were just crawling on a—on a…” he locked eyes. “They bring all the victims into a huge pile to baste in a marinade of their own mucus.”

They all looked at each other in a silent yet consensual stare down.

“How many were there?” asked Misty.

“I’m not sure. I couldn’t make out any whole bodies, but judging from the parts…thirty, forty-ish?”

Their dad started zipping up the backpack. “They’re moving faster than I thought. We can’t stay here anymore, on the island. We have to take a boat out of here.”

“But they come from the ocean!”

“What choice do we have? They’re going to get us eventually!” He started to make his way towards the docks on the edge of the island. “C’mon, maybe there are others trying to get out too. We need to make sure we get a boat.”

The large hull stuck out across the coastline like a jagged rock trying to pierce its way onto the island. Out of the early morning fog emerged the rest of the behemoth ship, floating in the small bay just off the shore. The Stygian ship lay ninjaed in the night, laced with a veil of rusty, wrought iron chains. Void of light and void of life, it was a buoyed crypt in the cold, still air. The Mephistophelianly Haphaestusilian thalassic rig bobbed up and down in the murky water with such an air of noxiousness that it seemed to the despondent and vagabonded family as if Thanatos himself had captained the vessel to cut through their own murky hearts and unmoor the dinghies of hope and salvation.

“Looks like the Navy didn’t make it all the way.” Bin glanced towards the dock of small wooden rowboats. “You think any of those will fare better than that 30,000 ton steel ship over there?”

“Maybe, but only if it’s made out of a really nice hardwood.”

They all knew it was over. Since the minute they found their neighbor dead, it was only a matter of time. They were just actors in a play—crushed by a fatal plot twist.

Bin walked towards one of the boats. “Well, this one’s Armenian white poplar.”

“Too soft and dentable.”

He strolled over to the next and showcased it like a salesman. “Can I interest you in Italian ash?”

He looked away. “Too prone to rotting and non-durable.”

The next rowboat. “African Teak wood?”

A stroke of his chin. “Excellent dimensional stability, suitable rot resistance, and marvelous strength and durability. I’ll take it!”

The three of them hopped in the boat and began to row with the oars—the play was almost over, the final act. Their slimy and sluggish audience crawled into the sea beneath them. Muddy silhouettes swam fast-approaching the stage. Bin wanted to get off it, but no matter where he stepped was the cold hard stage wood. *The show must go on.*

The lights from above dimmed as the final scene approached. The slugs had latched onto the boat and crawled their way into it. Trails of slime and chunks of flesh filled the hull as they climbed onto the imprisoned bodies. Blood began to pool as the theater went dark. The curtains were closed.