

Seeping through

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The buzzing of the incandescent lights and the thud of the reinforced door closing behind Casey were all very familiar sounds in the basement. She pondered whether or not to lock the door. Ultimately, she did, hoping that would make it harder for someone to interrupt her. She rummaged through the cabinets in search of a tool that might be useful, ignoring all the scientific paraphernalia. At last, a hammer. Grabbing it, she walked to the huge wooden display at the end of the room and lifted its case with measured strength. Though she'd seen that particular specimen dozens of times before, that night it felt like standing on a ledge. It was a tall humanoid being, its many limbs stretched out and nailed to the board in abundance. For as long as Casey had been in that institution, it had looked somewhat dessicated and it was easy to see its vascular system.

With a feeling of certainty coursing through her body, she aligned the hammer's claw with the first nail. It was one of those big iron ones. Looking at her own hands felt like looking at someone else's. She pried it, the effort of the job giving far too much time for her head to work. Still, she went through a couple more nails until taking a step back and having the full picture hit her. Nothing could justify what she'd been about to do. It had merely been an idea fueled by imagining her own body gruesomely torn apart. She made a mental note of not allowing herself to stay behind in the classroom building anymore. Then, she picked the nails back up and raised her eyes to the display.

The creature's blank eyes were open, directed straight at her. Casey felt a chill shoot through her veins straight to her legs and flexed her muscles, trying to measure the distance to the door. One of the mimic's hands, formerly nailed down, tore itself from the board; it

reached to its other side to grab onto a handful of nails and pull them away. It hardly took a second. All too aware that she hadn't planned to do that, much less to regret it, Casey realized she didn't have any firearms on her. There was only one course of action, really. She threw the hammer and turned her back to run away, listening as its heavy metal head clanged against the floor and countless nails followed.

A weight knocked her down. She'd expected it to hurt. Actually, Casey had pictured it in her mind down to detail. Still, it only felt cold and tingly. Then, one of her legs went numb. Oddly enough, she thought it felt better than being almost blackout drunk. At first, she'd been clawing at the floor and trying to drag herself to the door, but that seemed pointless. At that point, wasn't not having a choice best? Even though she'd stopped moving, it seemed like the thing soon stopped as well. The weight came off her and, softly, hands pulled her and sat her up against the wall. An index finger touched her forehead and applied force, pinning the back of her head to the wall; it forced her to look straight at... herself. Casey was staring at herself, who knelt in front of her.

"Keaton Coleman?" the mimic asked, crooking its neck like a pigeon would, "I didn't mean to hurt you. I was just very hungry. But I think you know that. You know a lot about things like me." Casey tried to look down, but the finger still pinned her. "You ate me," she accused, "What did you eat? It's all still anesthetized." It blinked. "Your, um..." it said, pausing to look down and taking a moment, "I think right leg. You should be fine, I think?"

Casey took a sharp breath. "Let me look," she said, ignoring the brunt of the situation's absurdity. "I don't know, you seem a bit shaky," the thing replied. "Is it bleeding? Or did your saliva...?" Casey was interrupted: "It's stopped." She pressed her eyes shut for a moment. "Let me see," she said.

The mimic finally let her go. Soon, they were both staring at what remained of her maimed leg. The flesh had undeniably been torn apart by sharp teeth, all of its layers exposed

down to the bone. All the colors she'd seen in diagrams and in the anatomy labs were there. And it was hers. Her mind was as numb as the wound. "I need medical attention," she mumbled. "My saliva will protect you," the mimic said, an easy smile on its face. "I need an amputation. Below the knee," she said. "I can do that!"

"Why didn't you tie me up to keep as a food source?" she asked, rational thoughts moving slowly. If she was asleep, that had to be a fever dream. "I don't want to hurt you," the mimic said, "I want to leave this place. I can't leave if you ask for help now. I look like you." Somehow, its logic was solid, even as Casey thought it over in her mind. Or maybe her mind was also out of whack. "Maybe I don't care for your needs," she said.

"You I can kill in a second. It wouldn't hurt," the thing said, "But since you started using your guns, large groups are hard." Casey averted her eyes to the ceiling. "Are you threatening me?" she asked. "No. That would be hard. You tried to die just now," said the mimic, "I'm just saying I want your cover. You like living, breathing things. I'm a living thing."

She closed her eyes again, trying to feel what was left of her right leg and failing. "How much did you get about me from that?" she asked. "A lot. You hate this place. You studied here when you were younger and you're still here. You used to love... bi-oology, but now your job has killed your spark. That's how you say it," said the mimic, a joyful tone in its voice. "I didn't ask you to repeat it back to me," she said, "Stop." It paused. "This place wasn't a school when I came here," said the thing. "You're older than I thought," she mumbled, "What do you need to get out?"

"I need to know the ins and outs of this place," it said, "And where people will be. I want to snake by." Casey didn't dare stare at her own face. "I can't in clear conscience help set you free amongst humans," she said. "I'm not staying in human territory," it replied. She

swallowed hard and the words burned her throat: "Then eat all of me. You'll get the information you need."

After a pause, she opened her eyes and realized the mimic was staring at her much like a curious chicken would. "I don't get why you'd want that," it said, "You hate it here. I hate it too. Move away. Get another human job. You are quite smart. Made me learn big words." Her throat clenched. "That's not all," she said. "Sorry. I can make the cleaner cut for you," it said, "But I won't kill you. It wouldn't be nice of me to eat the only one who tried to free me."

Casey looked away, knowing it wouldn't hurt at all. "Under the knee, please." Though she didn't watch, she could hear all of it; the mimic's jaw dislocating, the wet tear of her own flesh, the ripping of her tendons... She couldn't be sure of what each sound was, but was imagining it as it happened. Casey was no surgeon. Her wandering thoughts about how being able to use mimic saliva in human medicine would be revolutionary seemed quite silly.

When they were done, the mimic carried her up to the classrooms with ease. Casey pointed it towards a window, praying that the path would be as deserted as usual. The mimic had promised it was able to take her to her room by crawling in and out windows and climbing to the roof. "Is it big enough?" asked Casey. The creature replied affirmatively and its many spider-like limbs sprouted from its back. The skin looked much more lively than it had been when it was nailed to the wooden board.

"Don't look at them," it said. "Are you ashamed?" asked Casey. "I've been through lots of human thoughts. They think it's disgusting." She had no answer for that. Actually, she wanted to sleep. It was like her brain had shut off from the moment she'd walked into that basement. The mimic climbed out the window with ease. Casey had never seen one in movement like that and it was interesting to see that the extra limbs did work like a spider's legs. With extra instruction, it got them safely and quietly to Casey's room through a window.

It laid her in bed. As Casey's own eyes stared at her with seeming worry, she'd never felt so feverish. They'd agreed that the mimic would get her keys, go back to the classrooms and make the way back on foot pretending to be her so night watchers would see her going to the teacher dorms. However, as it turned back to the window, it stopped and opened Casey's wardrobe. "I'm not leaving you alone with this," it said. It was a shotgun, the kind issued to all personnel. Guess it had eaten that information, too.

When it came back, Casey was still lying down in a haze. She watched herself walk in and lock the door, a copy so perfect that it nauseated her. The mimic stopped and blinked at her. "Maybe you should go to sleep," it said, "You sleep too little for a human." Casey used her hand for support as she sat up and, still numb, tried to get up as usual. In a second, the mimic was by her side, holding her in place. "What do you need?" it asked. She looked down to see the absence of her right foot and didn't quite register it. "Pajamas. Bathroom," she replied.

The creature got a set of pajamas from her wardrobe without issue. Though it was uncanny, it felt like having a second set of her own hands. As Casey changed into the comfier clothes, her brain dragged itself along. "Among the information you got on me, did you get my lesson plans for tomorrow?" she asked. "No. Why?" it let its head drop a bit to the side. "If I show up like this, I'm fired as soon as they realize your display is empty," said Casey. "Fired means you go away from here," it said, "Good?" Casey shook her head. "I need to endure a bit longer before I get the means to find another place."

She exhaled slowly. Maybe it was the numbing agent mixed with the adrenaline from earlier, but she felt so calm. It would surely wear off soon. "So I need you to cover for me," she explained, "Do you think you ate enough for that?" The mimic nodded. "I did. All the way to your bone marrow," it replied with ease. Her stomach churned, but she still wondered if that tasted good.

They went over her lesson plans for the next day and Casey probed the mimic for highschool level biology knowledge. They were things she'd know and would have to be confident in to talk about. It seemed to have absorbed a good enough chunk from her, so she only had to fill in some gaps. "Keaton," the creature said at a certain point, "I've been doing this since I was born. You can sleep and let me keep you employed." It gave her an encouraging smile, but it wasn't quite effective. Still, she acquiesced and the mimic turned the lights off.

As the next morning rolled around, the creature took on the role of Casey. It honestly felt more comfortable when playing the role of a human. Even after so long, getting back into it was a breath of fresh air. It reformed itself to Casey's naked body; the prior day, it had copied the outfit she'd been wearing and it wasn't quite convincing. Getting dressed in clothes she would wear was essential. Humans seemed to have gotten more interested in that since the last time the mimic had been out.

It walked to breakfast in a practical pace, keeping its eyes unfocused; Casey avoided looking people dead in the eye in hallways. Naturally aware of all that, the mimic got through most of the morning like a breeze. When Casey entered a classroom, she hardly raised her voice to greet students; however, when they asked questions about the lesson and she found reason to talk more, she really smiled. The creature slid into the same pace, finding itself glad to explain reptiles and such things.

During break, it got to the teacher's room in the classroom building and took Casey's bag off like the weight actually bothered it. "Hey, Casey," said someone from behind it, "Didn't catch you at breakfast." The mimic turned and gave the person a tired smile. It was Fran, Casey's best friend. The mimic had eaten far too many thoughts about her. "I might

have gotten in later than you," it said, averting its eyes. "Were you up late working again?" asked Fran, sitting on the couch in front of them, "You know you'll do fine."

The mimic sighed and rubbed its eyes. Casey was a chronic eye rubber. "Midterms are coming up and the first year kids hardly know the definition of bacteria," it said, sitting with Fran. It spread its legs and rested its elbows on its knees, watching Casey's long hair drop from its shoulder as it looked at the floor. "My lesson plans might be... lackluster." Casey would use such big words.

Fran punched its arm. It didn't hurt, but it acted surprised and rubbed the area. Casey would blush at that and think of it as an affectionate gesture, wouldn't she? "That's bullshit," said Fran, "They're kids. It's probably just this place and my class torturing them. Chin up." Then, Fran put her index finger under the mimic's chin and made it raise its face. Such a crumb of affection would truly make Casey's day somewhat brighter, but it felt off. Still, the mimic acted accordingly, sitting speechlessly as Fran walked away. Time to get back to work.

At lunch time, it got distracted by a huge map of the facilities in the hallway that led to the cafeteria. It had gotten enough off Casey's mind to orient itself, but that was useful. Perhaps looking at that might be considered breaking character; maybe not, because Casey would get lost in her thoughts staring at things. The return of Fran's voice broke its concentration. She stood beside it, smiling. Looked a bit sweaty. "Plotting your escape?" she asked. Indeed. "If only," it said, the tired smile making a return, "You're stuck with me until I pay off my college debt."

Fran enveloped the mimic's shoulders with an arm and escorted it towards the personnel cafeteria. "There's nothing to mope around about," she said, "You don't have classes this afternoon, right?" It shook its head. "Tuesday's my slow day." Fran smiled wider. "Good. Clean yourself up and swing by my class. We'll be having some practical lessons," she said, holding the mimic closer, "We can rough it out like old days and scare the kids." The

mimic felt a pinprick of empathy for Casey. She'd offer up a kidney to be there, though she'd probably be too tired to do so. "Who'll be doing the hitting?" it asked, pretending to think it over. "We'll be fighting for dominance," Fran said, seemingly satisfied with herself. The mimic kept the shy act up, widening its eyes and looking away with a chuckle.

The creature swung by Casey's room after lunch to follow Fran's advice on cleaning itself up for gym class. Casey's form was loosely discernible under the blanket and her stare was distant. She seemed somewhat lethargic. "Keaton," it called out, glad to see her respond. "It's worn off," she said plainly, "I need another lick." Of course, the mimic acquiesced, though kneeling in front of exposed flesh was far too much taunting. It held onto Casey's thigh with steady hands and licked, finding solace in the fact people like her weren't too nice to chew.

It got up, covered Casey back up and started changing into more practical clothes. "Where are you going?" her voice sounded a little lost. "Fran invited me- you? to demonstrate at a practical lesson," it said, "There were homoerotic undertones. I picked those words up from you." That made Casey sit up immediately, her mouth hung open. "What? N-" she stopped, aware that denying would be fruitless, "You can't go." The mimic craned its neck, eyeing her expression as it tied its hair out of the way. "You would. I'm playing Casey." She dragged herself across the bed to make a face at the mimic. "But you're too strong to spar with a human," she protested.

"I play humans all the time. I have lots of your memories. I know how to measure your strength against mine," it said, not seeing the issue. Casey frowned and rubbed her eyes, finally groaning. "I don't want you interacting with Fran more than you need to," she said, "That feels dishonest." It took a peek at the mirror. No residue from Casey's wound around its mouth. Good. "Because it is. But I'll only do exactly what you would," it said, looking away,

"I don't take action myself. Even if I don't see why you'd keep dancing around Fran, I just come and go unannounced."

"I don't need relationship advice from a creature that doesn't even have an established society with its equals," said Casey, raising her voice some. It tapped its head. "You know it here from your textbooks. Things like me don't see each other as equals," it paused, "When we meet another of us, we either eat it, fuck it or both." It knelt to change into shoes more suited for a gym class. "So I guess you're right," it said, "I'm going still. I'll try stealing you some food."

As the mimic stepped out onto what was supposed to be the sports court, Fran waved it over with a smile. There were a few mats strewn about; they softened its step as it walked over to her. "Casey!" she called out, high-fiving the mimic when it got close enough, "Have I told you you look much nicer like this?" It smiled and averted its eyes. "You just can't handle me picking science over this," it said. They sat on a mat as Fran went over what she'd planned for that lesson. It was all about maneuvers that Casey should know.

After the bell, students trickled in. It was the poor first years again. Then it made sense for them to be learning evasive maneuvers and such instead of... well, Casey's memories of gym class in highschool involved a lot of gunplay and punching. The kids had the same grim look in their faces that the mimic picked up from Casey, but they seemed to perk up after noticing its presence. "Ms. Coleman is here too?" one of them asked, looking at Fran with hopeful eyes. "Your biology teacher is nerdy, but can throw a mean punch," she replied, "She'll be good for some demonstrations."

Having a familiar face to suffer with them seemed uplifting enough. It started off far too simple; the mimic lifted its arm to block as Fran punched it, answering immediately with a left hook to Fran's chin. Of course, it stopped right before. They showed different heights at

which to block and, when it came time for the kids to try, one of them asked: "I'm sorry Ms. Sage, but is this really necessary? We'll not be blocking... punches." Kid had a point. One jab of a mimic's side legs would cut right through that block. "We're building up your reaction time," said Fran, "Whatever happens, you need to be able to dodge and make the combat ranged."

Thus, she spent a good chunk of the class attacking the mimic with punches or a staff, jabbing and swiping. At first, it dodged and blocked with precision, but allowed feigned tiredness to slow it down. Its turn attacking Fran instead was much easier on the mind. By the end of it, everyone had worked up a sweat and some of the kids were lying down on the dirty mats, winding down. Fran got close to the mimic and smiled at it, putting her hand on its shoulder. "Thanks, Case," she lowered her voice, "See? You still got it." It looked away and rubbed under one of its eyes, smiling slightly. "I never said I didn't," it said, "But now you owe me one." Fran raised her eyebrows. "Want my dessert at dinner?" The mimic laughed. "No, I'm cashing in on this at a later date," it said.

The evening brought the mimic back to Casey's bedroom. She was lying on her side and staring at a wall; her forehead glistened with sweat and hair stuck to it. "Is your wound festering?" it asked, gathering the food it had gotten for her. "It shouldn't be," said Casey, "How was... Fran?" Before moving on to actual food, the mimic prepared what it knew to be Casey's favorite sandwich. "Regular," it said, "Quite competitive. I- we took a few hits to the face." Casey laughed and accepted the sandwich without a moment of hesitation.

"Why do you care so much about something and still try to die?" it asked, saying it flatly. "I guess I care as long as I'm alive," she said. "Then you're just tired of where you are in life?" Casey paused, licking her lips. "No. I feel like dying." The mimic crooked its neck. "I didn't say you didn't," it said. The mimic kept watching and offering her more food as she

ate. There was nothing better for it to do, really. "They haven't noticed your absence yet, have they?" Casey asked at some point, narrowing her eyes. "No. I think you would have been one of the first to notice," it said. Casey grimaced.

"Someone else might. Other science teachers use that lab," she said, "Your best chance of leaving would be before that." The mimic took its shoes off. Clothing was so constricting. It just nodded. According to Casey's memories, she was right. As soon as its disappearance was reported, all security measures would go into high gear. Aside from the obvious threat of the watchtowers, all personnel had access to firearms and training, not to mention the fact senior students were also in position to be dragged into a fight.

"Has it really been so long that a place like this could turn into a school?" it wondered. "The prison layout lends itself well," said Casey, "You're not the only one. Everyone wants out. Especially the students." The mimic blinked. "I get it. At least, I know your reasons to stay. It makes sense." Casey looked at it curiously. "You know, I didn't think your species were capable of complex lines of rational thought," she said, "I thought you could only replicate thoughts of the people you mimic."

The mimic paused. A human would have been offended to hear something like that. However, a human had a good grasp on their perception of self. "You wouldn't know. As I said, things like me don't talk to each other," it said, "And we only talk to humans while they're under the impression of talking to a loved one." That idea seemed to jog Casey's brain. "I wonder if a person can even construct their identity without interference from others," she mused. "You teach me words. I don't know about any of that. You're the first I talk to... that knows what I am," it said.

"It hasn't hit me yet. I still feel like I have two legs. Besides, I don't feel threatened by your presence," she said, "Maybe because of your appearance." The mimic took some steps

away from her bed after tidying all the food mess up. "Your human brain gets jumbled easily. I've seen it happen a lot," it glanced at Casey, "But you'll be fine."

She laughed. "I think I'm too depressed to care right now," she said, "Can you hand me something to read? Something I might like." That was easy. It went through the shelves on Casey's desk and picked a book, recognizing the title from her memories. Casey nodded when receiving it. "Yes, I've been meaning to take another look at this," she said, "This is a little fun." The mimic sat on the floor and stared at her. "What?" it asked. "You knowing what I want," she replied.

It hugged its knees to its chest and felt displeased again, like when Fran had touched its chin. Something just rubbed it the wrong way. "You should stay alive and care more about your safety. *I* think that," it said, "As a living creature, I don't understand how you couldn't care." Casey hid her eyes in her book. "I'm staying alive. Trying to get killed by you was, you know... impulsive. Sometimes everything is too much." It decided to get up and look at the class materials for the following day. "I know. You fed me that feeling," it said, "I do dislike it."

A couple days went by with no incident; the mimic kept providing saliva to Casey, but she still felt somewhat sore. They discussed getting crutches, but concluded that would be far too suspicious. The mimic managed to get a stool so that she could at least sit down and shower more comfortably. After a particularly long day of classes, it got some coffee to take to Casey's room. She seemed glad to have it, immediately drinking a sip and burning her tongue.

"That hits the spot," she said, lowering her eyes, "You know, I'm not really feeling time go by in here. It's not so bad... Having someone to shoulder the burden of my employment." The mimic sat down on the chair by her desk and watched her, a burning sensation on the

depths of its stomach. "I fear your thoughts are... deteriorating. Locking humans in tiny rooms is no good." Casey rubbed her face and sighed. "It doesn't sound healthy, does it? But it's not much longer now, don't you think?" she asked. "I feel like I've spent more time being a teacher than making progress," it admitted, "And I'm getting too hungry to stay."

That gave Casey some pause. She sipped her coffee as silently as a human could. "How long do you wager you can keep yourself together?" she asked. "You know there's a threshold," it said, "I got that word from you. I quite like it. I've always been the type to ration my food, so I can... go up until there. That limit." Casey sighed and looked for snacks under her bed. She still seemed beside it all. "By ration, you mean you're the textbook example of a mimic," she said, "The nesting, insidious thing they warn us about." The mimic nodded, "Yes, that's the description I got from your highschool years. But I know you have much more complex thoughts about it."

Casey chuckled. "That's why you keep worrying my brain will short-circuit in here," she said. Again, the mimic crooked its neck. "You think I worry?" it asked. "Sentient beings are capable of worry, no?" As Casey finished her question, the bell rang. They looked in the direction of the sound in unison, counting its tolls. Classes had already finished a while ago. "Emergency call," she said after it stopped, "Must be you." So apathetic. There was reason to worry after all. "It is," it replied, getting up and straightening its clothes out. "Are you familiar with the procedures?" Casey asked. "Yes," the mimic said as it tied its hair up formally, "I'm getting the shotgun." With help from the bedpost, Casey got up. Her pajamas were somewhat dirty and her hair was greasy and disordered. From her memories, the mimic knew that was not the first time she got in that state. "We need to hide me. There'll be a general search," she said, serious, "But it should be easy. They'll be looking for a nest, not a cooperating victim. It's a check for the insidious kind of monster, you see."

In the same beat, they looked at the top of the wardrobe. There was a space between it and the ceiling that was covered by wooden boards; hopefully, they could be taken apart. "Won't you feel... claustrophobic?" the mimic asked. "Definitely. And it must be very dusty," Casey looked away, keeping her tight grip on the bedpost, "A bite would distract me enough." It focused its eyes on her, feeling the pain of acid flooding its stomach. "Don't provoke me. I'm hungry," it said, "And you're self-destructive." It took its shirt off so it could unveil its extra limbs without damaging it. "Come on, we're getting up there."

Casey obliged, letting the bedpost go so she could get closer. When she stumbled, the creature extended a couple of its legs and grabbed her by the torso; they adhered nicely. It climbed up the wardrobe in a silent flash, prying the planks with its clawy human-esque arms. "Sorry for touching you like that without asking," it said. "You'll be late if you worry that much," she said, "Please don't be." Its grasp was gentle yet firm. "I won't," it said, "More coffee on the way back if everything's fine?" It blinked as it laid Casey carefully on top of the wardrobe. That little nook looked much like a crawlspace, the dead bugs and dust piling up. "Please," Casey nodded. The mimic put the planks back in place and got itself ready.

The main hallways were flooded with students shuffling towards their dorms. Despite their alarmed faces, they didn't run. Everything remained as organized as usual. Flow got lighter in the personnel section and, among others, soon the mimic was deposited in the personnel yard. As Casey's memories dictated, there was a stone watchtower directly in its line of sight.

Any and every worker of the fort — aside from those in watch — fell in formation out in the open, showing adequate trigger discipline with their shotguns. Everyone looked serious enough, but the mimic made sure to capture the dead fish stare Casey would be sporting. It could almost feel the general chill and detachfulness that she would. Their directors stepped

up, twice as straightened out than teachers like Casey looked; daily clothing requirements varied by position. "You were summoned under this specific protocol due to a safety breach," said the headmaster, projecting his voice to the whole field, "Our last specimen of a mimic, as some may call it, has disappeared. Its display case is empty."

The mimic glanced at the faces around it. None of them had dropped at the news. "Mr. Clarke noticed it today. There were no signs of distress, which suggests that it has taken the place of one of us," he continued, "Definitely personnel, since those of us here are the only ones with keys to that basement." He paused, scanning them more blatantly than the mimic had. "We have concluded that it is still among us, since no one has been reported missing." People started looking around, remaining completely still. The in-house military representative spoke up. "As you have been told before, we will not be revisiting defensive procedures. This should lower the chances of the creature immediately knowing each step." He stopped, signaling to the buildings. "Group up and comb the personnel facilities over."

In complete work mode, the mimic found itself a group in Clarke, the chemistry teacher, and Fran. Casey's extensive training made the situation flow easily, not to mention her lack of survival instincts. The only reason to keep a straight face was for the students. They handled their guns with care as they swept the common areas and outdoor spaces among others. "At least you didn't stay sharp for nothing, Casey," Fran teased, kicking away some bushes that obscured the lower portion of the wall. "I'd still say my survival chances are slim," the mimic said, smiling, "If one of you decided to eat me, that is." Fran smiled back, but Clarke didn't seem to see the humor.

Together, they scanned their dorm's hallways as they walked to their rooms. Other staff did the same. Ideally, each group would cover their own rooms, which was why no one was in pairs; hypothetically, they should outnumber the creature and get a window of execution. Not a significant window, but a window nonetheless. "Coleman," Clarke called, "When was

the last time you went to that basement?" Though there were many options, the mimic decided to settle for the truth as they entered Fran's room. "Monday after classes," it lowered its voice and slowed its breath, as if truly hesitant to walk in, "I checked our supplies and left." The impracticality of holding a shotgun and searching the room dragged the occasion out some. Fran's room had a smell the mimic couldn't quite place. Something that stung its nose. Not one dead bug to be found. Not Casey's room.

"What supplies?" Clarke pressed. The mimic sighed. "I'd planned to analyze some plant tissue under a magnifying lens with the second years tomorrow," it said, carefully lifting the mattress. "Oh," he seemed suddenly softer, "I wonder if they'll lock it up after this." They backed away and locked Fran's room again. "I don't see a reason to," it said, "As long as we stick to protocol. Though in my opinion the students should be put on lockdown." It lowered its voice for the latter part. Fran scoffed, "Kids will be fine." As they rummaged through Clarke's, the mimic thought that Casey would like to keep her room like that. And she'd do it if she had the energy to. All his books were neatly organized, rocks serving as stoppers; his notes were in labeled folders and he had displays mounted on the walls. Having to show the guy who had Casey's ideal room her trashed room next would be gut wrenching.

They at last got there, encountering the unmade bed and accumulated trash beside it; Casey had just been eating. All the books and notes she'd brought to bed were scattered about. There was that specific scent of sweat of an unbathed human, but the mimic wasn't sure if the other humans could pick it up. It swept the room in silence, gripping the shotgun tightly. Clarke had a subtle frown. "Casey... You good?" asked Fran in a cautious tone. From what it knew, she had some knowledge of Casey's mental health, but those memories were lacking. "I'm fine," said the mimic, "My personal space is just messy." Not a chance Casey would admit to struggling in front of Clarke. It could hear Casey's choppy breathing from her

hiding spot, but it seemed like she was standing very still. In any case, the mimic only felt less tense when the group declared the room clear.

Joining the wave of personnel in the hallways, they headed towards the armory and stocked up on single-shot pistols and blanks. As dictated, no one spoke of the next steps aloud. Fortunately, Casey's memory propelled the mimic forwards. The pistols were loaded as they pressed on to the student dorms. Groups stopped by each door, knocking and speaking up together to make their numbers clear; the students knew not to open to a single person in that situation. Distribution took a while and, even if the mimic was used to labor, the desire to go back to Casey's room and retrieve her from that dreary place wore it out. It forced the personal thought back down and remained diligent.

As soon as they'd finished the procedures, the mimic hit the break room for coffee. It seemed like others had had the same idea, crowding against the walls. Perhaps they were hesitant to leave their backs open, the mimic thought, sipping coffee as if it desired something like that. Chatter was low and varied. It could hear well enough to pick up words and tone; some people cracked jokes while others bitterly wondered whose fault it all was.

Fran walked up to it and rested her elbow on its shoulder. Another delay in the mimic's coffee delivery mission. "You look tired, Case," she said. As the mimic smiled, Fran lifted a hand to adjust what she thought to be Casey's hair. From her expression, it must have nailed Casey's fake, sad smile. "It's just how it is," it said. As Fran stared at it, it looked away and lifted its shoulders slightly. "What you need is some more punching sessions with me," she teased cheerfully, "That oughta perk you right up." The mimic chuckled and drank the rest of its coffee. "That sounds like a pretext to get me alone and skin me alive," it smiled more, "How am I to know you're still the old Fran?" She pinched its cheek and laughed a little. "The

old Fran *would* skin you alive," she said. It sighed and rubbed its eyes, taking some coffee to go. "That might do me some good, actually. I'll think about it."

Safely in Casey's room, the mimic put the coffee and snacks aside so it could tear itself out of its shirt. Though the shifting hurt, getting all of its extra limbs out was reminiscent of the human feeling of taking off tight shoes at the end of the day. It climbed the wardrobe effortlessly and pulled the planks that hid Casey out. As soon as light hit the cranny, it realized that her eyes stared straight into its and the shock took it aback. "Keaton?" it called, poking her softly. She merely groaned.

Fortunately, the creature's limbs were engineered for such tight spaces and it got a firm grasp on her. Holding her against its chest, it climbed back down. A sudden grip on its nude arms made it pause in its tracks, feet still off the ground as its long legs held it up. "How did it go?" asked Casey, her fingers digging into the mimic's flesh. It made the rest of the way across the room swiftly, sitting her on the bed. "It's alright," it said. However, she didn't let go of its arms, the ones that copied hers. "Were you convincing?" she raised her voice a little, staring at it wide-eyed. "As far as the things I know about you go," it replied, blinking. Casey pulled it forward and it felt itself stiffen, unfamiliar with such a motion. "You need to eat more. They can't find out," she said. The mimic didn't react. "Don't throw me back there," she was nearly clawing it, pleading directly in its face, "I don't want to do it anymore."

"I don't... know how to keep a human alive," it said, looking off to the side. It let its many legs take it across the room to get Casey her coffee. "I already said I won't hurt you more than I already did. I know you hate it here. And if you hate it enough to make you say these things, you really should find another place." When the creature gave her the drink, Casey obliged begrudgingly. "You should know that won't make it better. You said I fed you the feeling," she paused, "So you out of everyone should understand how much my very

existence is insufferable." The mimic took a pause, crooking its neck. "I'm not you. I have some of your memories. That doesn't mean I can... see things the way you do," it said, "I know you suffer, but I won't help you die."

Casey lowered her coffee and covered her eyes with her other hand, shuddering. "What's the difference?" she lowered her voice, "You must have eaten many other people before." It retracted its side limbs, suddenly all too conscious of their appearance. "I must be getting old," it mumbled, "I also don't want to carry all of you forever." Even though it was so hungry. Casey rubbed her eyes and took deep breaths. The mimic knelt in front of her. "Keaton," it said, "Take a shower? You like being clean." She shook her head. "I don't have the will to do all it takes," she whispered. "If I prepare everything for you and carry you to the bathroom, will you?" the mimic asked. Casey lifted her eyebrows for a moment, but soon nodded.

So the mimic did, going as far as getting a fresh set of pajamas for her. It placed the stool in the shower and went back for Casey, who extended her arms out as if asking to be held. The gesture was out of place, but still the mimic acquiesced, lifting her. It set her down on the stool and she immediately started undressing, throwing the dirty clothes to the corner of the room. The carelessness with which she stripped in front of it stung. Even though it knew there could be many reasons, it only made it feel... further from human. Casey wouldn't undress so casually in front of another person.

She turned the handle and just sat there for a while, face hidden in hands, but eventually started washing. When the mimic thought she'd be fine, she called out: "Hey... You." They stared at each other for a while. Wet strands of hair clung to her face. "Could you, maybe... wash my hair?" It was a cautious question; her pupils looked a bit contracted. The mimic approached slowly, as if she might change her mind and flee. "You can take off your clothes. You look like me, anyway," said Casey. "That's not my issue," it said. Clothes were not a

hang-up. "Are you really comfortable with me washing your hair?" it asked, sliding out of its pants. "It's okay if you aren't. I just..." said Casey, pausing to sigh, "Don't feel like I can right now."

It stepped into the shower, the weirdest chill running across its body. What a demanding conversation. "I don't mind. I don't think I do," it said, "I've never thought about it." As the mimic massaged soap into her scalp, Casey contributed by throwing her head back so the water wouldn't wash it away. "It's just something you feel, you know. You shouldn't have to think," she said. The mimic remained silent, struggling to find words for what it meant to say. "Are you just not used to talking out of script?" she asked, looking less pained, "Or maybe existing out of script, really."

It placed fingers on her temples to push her head downwards gently. Time to rinse. "It feels unnatural," it said after a long pause. "I think it's certainly unique. Unprecedented," said Casey, spitting water out of her mouth, "Would be a good case study." She took a deep breath. "Not that I intend on objectifying you, of course," she continued, "Under better circumstances, I'd want you to keep talking to me and see where you end up." Combing her hair with its fingers, it could feel pinpricks on its back. "That still sounds like a science experiment," it said. Casey laughed a bit. "Yes. Sorry," she said, turning the shower off.

She held onto the mimic to get up, facing it at last. "I'm merely feeding the hypothesis that you *can* be a social creature. All you need is an appropriate environment," she said. It just stared at her, taking a moment to realize that its own face had dropped. "You seem... better," it said, unsure. Casey sighed as she dried herself off. "No, just... Speaking about things that interest me is easier," she said, her tone also dropping. "Like when you're teaching?" it asked. That was a memory and feeling it could judge from. "Yes," she smiled faintly.

Her face softened, all the marks of exhaustion becoming more evident. "Will you lick me?" she asked. "Yes," said the mimic, watching as she made her way to bed with help from the wall. It knelt before her after she sat down and grabbed her leg as gently as it could. The wound didn't show signs of infection, at least. The creature itself had a good enough intuition for such things, but Casey's education put words to what it knew. Taking its mouth close to her, it couldn't help but salivate in anticipation of her taste; the fresh smell of clean skin and the faint traces of iron in the blood that ran under it were promising.

"So you *are* hungry," said Casey, watching intently as the mimic simply stared. Only then did it realize it had paused for too long. "That doesn't change anything," it replied, licking her as it had been asked to. Tasting a proper meal and not even being able to chew it was near torture. As it toughed it out, though, a hand entangled itself on its hair. "You need it and I want it. There's no issue here, is there?" asked Casey, her voice graver. "Your body is still recovering from what I already ate," it said, "I'm not touching you." Its mouth was forced further down as Casey pushed it; its teeth scraped her slightly.

A wave of impotence overcame it as it froze. Of course, that gesture coming from a human was enough to put a pause to its thoughts, but there was also the matter of the soft feeling of her against its teeth. That teasing seemed to travel down like electric shock. "Yet you're already touching me. Look, consider it your last meal before going on your journey," she said, holding it there, "It's not like you're killing me." It gripped her a little tighter and lifted its head; overcoming Casey's strength was merely a matter of wanting to. "Where do you want it?" it asked, feeling its eyes widen. "I trust you to pick," she said.

It climbed onto the bed with her, running its hands through her naked arm. Of course, it knew which of Casey's arms was the dominant one by heart; it didn't want to cause her more pain in the long run than it had to. Couldn't it tough it out without hurting her anymore? Still, at that moment it was... Hard to resist, to say the least. It poked at a good chunk of flesh a bit

below the shoulder. "Right about here," it said, their gazes locking, "I'll be careful." Casey smiled. So eager. So off. Deep down, it knew that it had to be some self-destructive ploy. "I won't feel it either way," she said, placing a hand on its hair and rubbing its nose on her again.

"You should look away," it said. "Why? This is a unique opportunity," Casey started, "Your body is so mechanically complex. I'd love to see the way your jaw functions first-hand." It looked up, finding her eyes were wide as well. She smiled and it knew she was completely serious; it had her memories of poking at its displayed body in the basement, after all. Something about it made its chest heat up and it had to avert its eyes. "You can... look at me later if you want to," it offered, voice wavering somehow, "But don't watch this." Casey sighed. "I'd love to dissect you, you know... Or rather, vivisect. Seeing the inner workings of your body in full function would be... priceless," she mused in her excited teaching voice. A pause; her grip on the mimic's hair softened. "Am I objectifying you again?" she asked. Honestly, it wasn't sure. Its abdomen felt funny with a flurry of heat it couldn't understand. "I don't know," it said at last, "It sounds fair. You've given me a lot of you."

That seemed to satisfy her. "I'm closing my eyes, so eat," she whispered. It obliged, revealing the true nature of its jagged teeth and feeling its face distort. As it bit down on her muscle, blood gushed into its mouth, a rich taste that would serve as sauce. It tore her flesh out, making sure to run its tongue on the dripping wound afterwards. Couldn't let a drop go to waste. Though Casey wasn't particularly tender, it chewed thoroughly before swallowing, determined to get the most out of it. Any meal was heavenly after eating so little for so long. Meanwhile, a vague moan left Casey's mouth. Couldn't be pain. She felt a little too loose under its grasp, so it held her tighter and laid her down, making sure her head was resting on the pillow. The wound didn't seem so bad; coagulation had run its course as expected.

"Keaton?" it called, crooking its neck as it watched her. Her small, silly smile seemed out of place. "What?" she mumbled. "Are you okay?" it asked. She opened her eyes, which

seemed somewhat lost and glossy. "Wait... Let it wane," she said, slurring the words a bit. It got off the bed and knelt beside it as usual, resting its elbows on the mattress. Waiting. Minutes crawled by as it watched Casey's peaceful face. When it looked like she might fall asleep, she took a deep breath and turned to the mimic. "Hey, you," she called softly, "I wonder if you got anything valuable out of that." The creature mulled it over. "I don't understand your relationship with Fran," it replied. Casey's smile turned bitter and she rubbed under her eye. "Oh, yes. Nothing useful, then," she said, "Look, I'm sorry for going off on you when you first mentioned that." After sighing, she added: "I did some self reflection and realized you're just curious about me the same way I'm curious about you."

Was that it? It didn't know, because it hadn't thought of it in those terms. "Sure," it conceded, "I don't get most human relationships. If you're attracted to someone, why just linger around them?" Casey seemed amused. "I'm not lingering," she said, "I'm good at accepting rejection. But you might know that." It recalled the way Fran's sudden touches made it want to recoil. "But I don't get why she'd reject you and then be so intimate," it said, "In a romantic way, I think." That made her look away. "I don't see it like that," she muttered, "You've touched me much more intimately. Would you imply the same about yourself?" It froze, though its chest remained hot. Suddenly, the leftovers of her taste in its mouth were overbearing.

"I'm not human," it said at last. Wasn't it easy to undress in front of an object or animal, after all? "Well, you're sentient. You see things critically and form your own thoughts from what I gather," she looked at it sharply, "Isn't that enough?" They just stared each other down as it looked for an answer, not finding any. Somehow feeling stung, it offered: "You can still... analyze me if you want to." Casey's smile was soothing. "You know I'd want to catalogue all of you," she said. Still stung. "Now?" it asked. "If you'd be up for it," she said, looking much more awake than usual. It nodded. She sat up, staring at it eagerly. Still on the

floor, it started shifting back to its natural form; it burnt much more than usual, though in a different way. When it was done, it suddenly felt too big and awkward, occupying too much space — too much space in Casey's eyes, which devoured it.

She got herself on the floor beside it, bending a bit to get a closer look. "I could hear your bones shifting," she said, child-like wonder in her voice, "Does it hurt at all?" Fighting the urge to crawl away, it answered plainly: "It does. Always." Casey lifted her hands and paused. "I'll touch you now," she announced. Again, it burnt and didn't feel right. Still, Casey followed through, her fingers brushing its naked skin. The touch sent shivers down its spine. She started pressing her fingertips down along the extension of its head. "Your cranium seems much more flexible than a human's," she remarked, "It's quite easy to feel that yours has many more plates."

That coming and going of sensation in its abdomen was there again, more confusing than anything. Casey paused, bending to look it in the eyes. "Are you comfortable?" she asked, amping down her voice. "This feels weird," it admitted, "Having a human pay so much attention to... *me*." Casey smiled faintly. "You're more used to immediate violence, I suppose," she said. "You treat me differently," it agreed. She slid her fingers down and kept pressing, feeling the mimic's facial structure. "I want to see you dislocate your jaw," she asked, her fingertips poking at its maw with force.

It opened its mouth at full extent, obeying even if it hurt somewhat. It was used to pain. Somehow, overcoming the fear of showing itself was easier when it saw how excited Casey seemed. She immediately started feeling its jaw again. "I could only understand this if I had your bones cleaned up and mounted," she said, sighing, "Still, it's... amazing." Then, she put her hand inside its mouth with such suddenness that it froze, afraid of scraping her with its teeth. Not getting the message, Casey soon had half her forearm in there. "This really challenges perspective, you know," she mumbled, turning her palm up and poking the roof of

its mouth. The funny feeling made it want to clamp down, but it resisted. "Your palate feels completely soft," she said, "It must drift apart when you do this."

She removed her arm and sat back on her foot, looking at the mimic with completely dilated pupils. Her expression was almost... adoring. "Oh, the range of motion you have is fantastic, you know," she said, sniffing her fingertips, "It defies the laws of nature. Biology can't explain this." Somehow, its chest felt really hot and tight. "I wish I had a scalpel or something sharp enough in here so we could take a closer look at you," Casey said, making the mimic shiver at the use of the plural pronoun. As it watched her odd smile, an idea crept in. After hesitating a little, it said: "I could try to get you something tomorrow." Her smile immediately grew and she nearly laughed. "You would? Ah, this will be the best. I can't wait to sketch your organs." It looked away, suddenly too ashamed to sustain her stare.

Casey moved on to its back, touching the points where its extra limbs grew. She ran her hands along one of them, testing its range and pressing its joints. "I feel that their placement, adjacent to your spine, gives you a near three hundred degree range," she mused, "I'm glad I don't have to run from you." That made her chuckle for some reason. She moved on to the upper pair, the one that grew upwards to its shoulders. "Clearly meant to take prey closer to your mouth and aid in feeding," she mumbled, "And the lowest pair aids your movement, helping you latch onto any angle and lifting you." She ran one hand along one of the two middle pairs; she grabbed one of the limbs and started stretching it, trying to gauge its length. "Quite general purpose, like when you held me..." she sighed, "I wonder if, when faced with one of you, we feel the same way insects feel when faced with a spider."

"You don't seem scared," it said. Casey sat in front of it again, the curious look still on her face. "Because I'm not. Even if you decided to eat me, I have the knowledge that it doesn't hurt," she smiled. "And you don't mind the possibility," it said, somehow tired. "I'm sorry. I really am," she said, getting back on the bed. She started putting on the pajamas the

mimic had set aside earlier. "Why?" it asked. "Well, it sounds like you care," she said, finally dressed, "So it must hurt." Realizing that she was right was what stung the most. Hearing her ask for death *did* hurt. It took a deep breath and shifted back to Casey's nude form. Then, it got a clean blanket from the wardrobe and handed it to her. "I must truly be getting old," it said, "Good night, Keaton."

The next morning, the fort felt like a completely different place. The usual leisurely-yet-strict atmosphere had been replaced. Personnel walked about armed with heavy firepower and wary eyes; students' belts carried the single-shot pistols. Instead of wearing Casey's preferred shirts and wide pants, the mimic was battle ready. Outwardly, it kept an upset expression, but there was a weird fluttering in its chest. Casey was the one planning lessons for the students and she'd have fun with that day's. The creature sort of wished she could be there instead.

As it knelt on the grass in the yards and collected plants with a kitchen knife, it caught itself thinking about them like Casey would, the same way she had touched and talked about it the night before. The thought was too personal to be just about getting in character. Maybe she was right. It did care. Walking by the sports court, it noticed Fran setting up an obstacle course. She noticed it and jogged over, smiling. "Case!" she called, only stopping when they were far too close. The mimic plastered Casey's trademark tired smile on its face. "Hey," it said, "You look far too amped up." That conversation was really dampening its mood already. "Just glad you're still alive," she said.

The smile turned bitter. "Maybe I'm not. I might eat you right now," it clacked its teeth menacingly. Fran chuckled. "I'd be able to tell if something was off about you in an instant, Casey. I'm not the least concerned," she said, crossing her arms, "Clarke, on the other hand..." She lowered her voice to make the accusation. The mimic rubbed an eye as if it was

itchy and raised its eyebrows. "What about him?" it asked. "I'm just saying I'd avoid him. The way he pressed you yesterday left a sour taste in my mouth," she said, frowning. "I'm sure it's fine," it said. Though it maintained the tired expression, the fluttering feeling was back. Something about Fran being so unconcerned towards it gave it a sense of elation.

"You coming out to our sports court tomorrow, right?" asked Fran, "The kids could use some extra motivation right now." It sneered. "Come on, you know I don't leave my room on Saturdays," it said. "I already owe you a favor, so... stack it up," she smiled. Casey was bad at saying no to Fran, so the creature pretended to ponder, rubbing its eyes. "Fine. You owe me big time," it said, "Especially because you're making me lose my precious class prep minutes." Fran rolled her eyes and slapped her back jokingly. "Yeah, whatever, go drop food coloring on those plants or whatever it is you science teachers do these days," she said. The mimic frowned and started walking away. "That's *so* reductionistic," it replied.

Every teacher got paired up with one of the watchers for the day, neither supposed to leave the other alone with students. The mimic nodded at its assigned partner, some man it didn't know by name. If he'd studied with Casey, they hadn't been in the same class. As they shepherded the students into the basement, it felt lighter because their faces seemed lighter as well. It knew that the students loved lab classes and noticing that the effect remained the same even under these circumstances made it glad. It divided them in groups and taught them to make the cuts in the plants; slicing in that proper manner made the fluttering feeling come back. It couldn't help but think of its promise to Casey and imagination ran its course for a second too long.

Still, it swept such weird thoughts aside and performed its job. It stole Casey's lexical capabilities to show the students each section of the plants, using words it had never cared for before, such as "vascular". As they drew diagrams, it walked amongst them, peeking over

their shoulders. Its mind kept conjuring the words Casey had said the previous night. The idea of holding still while she sketched just as the students did made it hold down a full body tremor. When their time was nearly up, it clapped its hands softly. Casey was a very silent person, but she had to call their attention in a grounding manner sometimes. "Hey, guys," it said, "Please try to finish your reports while I organize the materials."

With the soft murmur of conversation as backdrop, it cleaned all they'd used and started putting it away. It took the opportunity to rifle through the drawers; it knew where it should be. A brand new scalpel. It slid it into its bag shamelessly. The watcher seemed only slightly bothered. Most personnel didn't care at all about stealing fort property. "I just hope you don't intend on protecting yourself with that," he said, sounding as tired as Casey would be. "Call it a last ditch effort," it smiled.

The further the sun sunk, the bigger the hollow in the mimic's abdomen seemed to be. After it got back to Casey's room, it was almost caving in on itself; cold waves were centered right there, converging in that exact spot. "You're back," said Casey from the bed, trying to smile, "With coffee, I see." It sat on its ankles beside the bed and gave her the drink. Then, it opened its bag, getting the scalpel. "And this," it said, holding it up. Casey's eyes shone. "You're really comfortable with this?" she asked. "I think so," it said.

Casey set the scalpel aside carefully, the hint of a smile on her face. "I feel like I've been too eager to cut you open," she said, "I haven't even asked where you intend on going after you get out of here." It hugged its knees. "That strip of land untouched by humans. It must be crawling with my kind now," it replied. "To eat and fuck?" asked Casey, seeming to find it humorous. "Mostly avoid being eaten and fucked," it sighed, "I have the idea you find us... uncivilized. But the way things are right now, we don't have many options. I don't think it's normal for things like me to get as old as I am anymore." Casey shook her head. "Not there, no. Your cycle of life gets considerably shortened when you're forced together and out of your preferred prey, considering your competitive nature as well," she said, pausing. "I don't know if you got this from my memories, but there's this country where you're protected citizens," she chuckled, "Tightly controlled, but still having a right to live. Firland."

It looked at her for a moment, considering her light expression. "I don't see that working," it said finally. "Well, I'm just throwing you a bone," she replied, "Because I think you'll feel lonely in a hostile environment. Not that this one isn't." It blinked, crooking its neck. "Lonely?" it asked. "I was under the impression you've been enjoying talking to me," she said. "Oh. I have." Casey smiled softly. She took the last sip of her coffee and then got off the bed, kneeling beside it. "I wish there was a way to refer to you," she said, "A name." The creature blanked for a moment. It had never thought of that, because there had never been the

need for one. "You think I should have a name?" it asked, slowly. "That's exactly what I said," Casey smiled more, "You should name yourself." It combed through its memory; it had eaten parents before. Parents named people and, thinking on it, the process seemed deceptively easy. Plus, picking a human name felt off. "How do I go about that?" it asked. "Just pick something you like," she said.

It blinked, widening its eyes at Casey. "Fish!" it exclaimed, piping down after realizing it had never raised its voice like that without playing a character. Casey laughed a little bit and patted it on the head, disturbing the neat updo. The gesture was so out of left field that it could have caused spontaneous combustion. "Right, so Fish..." she said, lifting the scalpel, "Can I cut you up?" Fish bowed its head, a bit wary after the touch. Then, it started removing its clothes. "Yes, just... be careful with my abdomen," it said. "I will be," she replied, "You know, that's the first place we're taught to shoot at." It just nodded, feeling a return of that chill in its belly; however, it was different this time. "Oh, don't shift just yet," Casey raised her hand, "I want to see what you look like under a human disguise as opposed to your regular form."

She waited for it to nod again before putting a hand on its chest and pressing down slightly. Fish obeyed, lying down on the floor. Casey reached for her sketchbook and materials. Then, she looked Fish in the eye and took the cap off the scalpel. "Ready?" she asked, rubbing her eyes as if to make sure she was well awake. It gave confirmation and she took a deep breath. "I'll make an incision starting here," she said, touching the top of where its sternum should be with her index finger. Though there was hesitation in her face, her hand was stable when she carved into its skin. "I must tell you this is not by the book. I'm merely... satisfying myself," she paused, furrowing her brow, "Your regeneration is here, but thankfully slower than I'd predicted." The cut stung a bit and was undoubtedly deep, but easy

for something like Fish to deal with. Still, it couldn't look at Casey; its extremities felt chilly. "I'm not in my best shape," it justified. "Well, you've been in worse," Casey pursed her lips.

She made a lateral cut, carving into its intercostal muscles; pinpricks of pain shot through its thorax as it breathed in, going off in bursts. "I'm putting my fingers in. I want to take a closer look at your ribs," Casey muttered, sounding focused. It heard and felt Casey's fingers sink in its flesh, that initial chill becoming waves of alternating temperature. The pressure of her fingertips felt so focused Fish convinced itself that it was imagining their placement. "This is just lovely," she said, speaking over the sound of something more being ripped, "You must have many more bones than we do. I can feel them." Fish blinked hard, trying not to squirm. "I know. I can feel your fingers in my flesh." Casey paused. "Are you uncomfortable?" she asked. "No," it replied, "Keep going." There was definitely some discomfort, but not of that kind.

After she was satisfied with examining its ribs and watching it breathe, she took her hands off and just waited. It seemed like she was being considerate enough to let it recover. "Shift for me?" she asked, her voice softer. Fish acquiesced wordlessly, looking away once its bare form was revealed. Casey adjusted her position to Fish's new height and grabbed the scalpel. She warned Fish of her next step, but feeling the edge of the blade on its belly still made it stiffen up. "Relax," she said, "It'll make it easier." Once it had loosened up, the blade actually sunk; it didn't look down and thus had no idea how big the incision actually was, but it felt like being torn apart. Pain flared up as heat, spreading away in the direction of its limbs.

"I can see why you would be sensitive about your abdomen," said Casey, raising her voice, "For the amount of organs in here, the layer of fat is not nearly thick enough to protect it." Fish looked at her, watching her smile grow and her face turn softer than usual. Then, she stuck her hand inside it somewhere. It could feel its organs shifting in their cavity, the sound

of moist flesh filling the room. The feeling was so foreign that it made it almost kick Casey involuntarily. There was fluttering in its stomach and chills running down its body. She started speaking again, mostly to herself. Something about Fish's anatomy, but it couldn't really focus. Casey held its waist with one of her hands as she messed around with the other. It arched its back in what it thought to be agony, only making that hand sink in further. That made Casey withdraw it. "I'm sorry," she said, "I guess I got carried away." Her hand was tainted with its blood.

For the first time in a long while, Fish was panting. It blinked hard. "You're fine," it mumbled, "Just give me a while." Casey rested her bloody hand on top of its, staring at the mess. Despite the gaping whole in its abdomen, suddenly what Fish was most aware of was her touch. Was she holding its hand out of misplaced guilt? "You know, I observed some discoloration," she said, "I think you're not getting enough nutrients." It just laid there as the incision closed up slowly, itching like needles were poking at it. "Last time I really ate was before I was nailed down," it replied, "But I'm fine. Things like me can take a beating."

"That's no way to live," said Casey, lowering her voice. Fish didn't expect that answer. It was ironic coming from her, really. "I don't live, I survive," it said, "You understand. I know you do." Casey poked at its abdomen lightly, examining the wound. She sighed. "It's not your fault that your diet requires humanoid flesh," she said. It crooked its neck and blinked at her, experiencing a sudden loss of words. Fish hadn't really thought that it would ever hear that sentence. "I'm... dealing with the cards I've been dealt," it answered at last. Casey laughed wryly, "That doesn't sound feasible." Fish looked away. "I'm not saying I felt that bad for eating back then. I won't pretend I did," it said, "And it's not something I choose. I'm mostly moving on through... acceptance." A sudden pressure on its hand startled it; then, it realized that Casey was actually gripping it. "I don't get that. So many things are a mere mockery of the universe," her voice was lower and graver, "I can't forgive it."

Fish's fingers twitched slightly. It took a long moment to put its thoughts together, looking for words that made sense. "I know. But it's not about forgiveness," it said, "You don't have to forgive. It's just... learning to stay alive and above that." Casey pressed her eyes shut and sighed. "Look, Fish... I know you're right," she said, "I'm just..." She paused and took a deep breath, covering her eyes with her free hand. "Yes, I know," Fish intervened, "You feel like you're suffocating." She nodded and chuckled, but there was no humor to it. "Yeah, thank you." It blinked. "For what?" Casey got up with the aid of her arms. "For validating my emotions," she said, pausing to sigh, "What do you say we call it a night, huh? Big feelings and procedures." She mostly hopped to the bathroom. Fish touched its abdomen, trying to ascertain how far the regeneration had gone. It seemed like the first layers of skin had closed up completely, but its insides still felt... goopy. "Sure." Behind it, the bathroom's faucet went off and it could hear Casey scrub her hands. It took the opportunity to shift back into her naked form, stifling a moan of pain as its bothered organs rearranged themselves.

When Casey was already comfortably sitting in bed, it got up to turn the lights off. However, the way its organs slid back into place with the pull of gravity gave it pause; it was long enough for Casey to speak up. "Are you alright?" Fish smiled faintly at her. Making such facial expressions was so odd. It never felt genuine, as if it was always a mimicry of real human emotion. "You know I can take a beating," it said. Casey rubbed her eyes and stopped for a moment. "My arm is a bit sore," she said, "Would you do me a solid?" Unbothered, Fish sat by her side and waited as she slid her wounded arm out of her pajamas. It held her as tenderly as always to bring her arm closer; then, it licked the exposed flesh thoroughly. Casey's breathing staggered and she shuddered.

After finishing that exercise in self-control, it pulled back and took a long look at Casey. Her mouth was agape, a bit stretched in a silly smile, and her eyes were shut. "Keaton," it said, "You're getting addicted to my spit." It wasn't a new thing. Fish had seen it

happen before. Besides, Casey herself knew about it according to her memories. She frowned and it took a long moment for her face to turn serious again. "It's fine, isn't it?" she shrugged. "No," Fish tried to sound stern, "It might lead to me taking advantage of you." Casey sighed. "Well, your critical thinking seems to be working fine," she said, "I'm going to sleep, Fish. Rest up." So it left her alone, turning the lights off and heading to the bathroom. As it closed the door, discomfort stirred in its stomach. When Fish washed itself in the shower, sliding its hands across its morphed body was nausea inducing. Being in the body of someone it *knew* felt foreign.

Standing in the sports court the next morning, Fish and Fran waited for the students to organize in neat lines. They were all seniors, as far as it could recognize their faces. "Didn't see you at breakfast," said Fran, teasing, "Sleep in again?" It frowned. "You're lucky I'm even here," it said. "Guess I am," she chuckled, "We got firing clearance for today." Fish could envision what they'd be doing; it was the kind of practice session that had plagued Casey's final school year. "We're going out to the fields, then?" it asked. "Yeah. Isn't it the best?" Fran put her arm over its shoulders, far too familiar. "That explains the extra watchers," it said, looking around, "I see I wasn't enough to make you feel safer." Again, Fran punched its shoulder before distancing herself a little bit. "Nah, Case. At least you I'm sure won't eat me once I turn my back," she said. Almost proving her point, she turned to the students and whistled. They all straightened themselves up.

"Listen up. Be at full attention," she raised her voice, "You've done this before. It's shooting practice day. The current circumstances don't change anything." Even though she said that, most of the students' eyes were inhumanly wide. It weighed Fish down to see that some of them were completely beside it all, though. "Coleman is here as aid today. She's just as qualified and will help you if anything comes up and I can't reach you," said Fran before

gesturing to the other personnel with them. They came up with duffel bags and started distributing shotguns, two per row of students. The two first of each row strapped them to their backs. Meanwhile, Fish and Fran grabbed the bags of resources and ammunition they'd need. "You guard the back?" Fran asked, her ponytail swaying as she readied up. Pretending to struggle with balancing the bag and the usual shotgun, it raised its hand with the palm upwards. "Well, I want a whistle," it said. "You think I carry multiples?" Fran asked, furrowing her brow. Fish smiled. "Come on now," it said. Shortly after, it had a whistle on its neck as well.

Without waiting for approval, it hurried to the back of the formation and whistled. "Ready!" it shouted, letting its voice crack. Fran whistled again from the other end. "Start!" she complemented. Thus, they started marching through the fort and to the fields, covering the terrain at decent speeds. Occasionally, Fran would whistle to signal switches, making the students pass the shotguns to the ones behind them. It must have taken a couple hours to reach the fields and then set everything up. The watchers took position and the two teachers shepherded the students again. Fish took half of them and half of the shotguns. It knew how that exercise went; a demonstration was in order. The students watched as it loaded the chamber and raised the shotgun, aiming at a distant target. It took a deep breath and closed the action. Casey was a far better shot than a fighter and Fran definitely knew that. It pulled the trigger and tried not to grind its teeth and curl up as the shot exploded out of the barrel; its sensitive ears rang and the pain traveled through its head. Pulling through, Fish focused its eyes to see the results. It had hit the target exactly where it had wanted to: the abdomen. Somehow, seeing the shredded metal conjured up the feeling of Casey's scalpel in its belly and it felt nauseous.

A few of the students cheered, perhaps just happy to hear loud bangs and feel the disgusting smell of gunpowder. Fish didn't see the appeal and nor would Casey. It helped

them set up and keep a safe distance from each other. At some point, one of the girls walked up with a far too weak grasp on her shotgun and a blank face. "Hey, Scotts," it called softly, remembering her surname, "You're not okay... Are you?" It chose the words carefully, knowing Casey would not let something like that slide. Not in a student. The girl exhaled and took a shell from the bag at Fish's feet. She avoided its eyes. "I hate these drills more than anything," she said, reluctantly pushing the shell in. "I know. I did too," it said, "Can you push through until graduation?" Scotts lifted the gun and paused. "Ms. Coleman... How did you do it? Push through, I mean." She looked just as tired as Casey. "Time drags on even when you think it won't," it said, "Because it is a constant." She sighed, "That makes it sound like there's nothing I can do." Fish just nodded. "I'm sorry. There isn't. But you'll get out of here," it said, "Just shoot straight ahead, alright?" She took the shot without hesitating anymore.

Each shot taken increased the pit in its stomach. There they were, kids it had spent its last days helping train aiming at the spot they were taught to shoot a thing like Fish at. To top it off, it had to lose a whole day listening to machines it hated and playing Casey when it could be with her instead. The pressure of all the watchers around it felt too grand; coupled with the holes in the targets, it was a reminder of what would happen if it slipped. And to think it had once been so good at stoically playing roles. Was "stoic" really the right word? Casey's lexical knowledge suggested "dissociation". Fish really was getting old.

When they were finally back to the fort's main facilities hours later, it was time for some gun maintenance. Fran sat by Fish's side, smiling. "I told you they'd like it if you came," she said. It raised an eyebrow. "I don't know about that, but I'll be claiming that big favor anytime now," it replied, scrubbing the barrel with feigned concentration. Fran's face softened and she focused on Fish. "You know you can ask me for anything anytime," she said, "You're a solid friend, Casey." Hearing that set Fish's gut on fire and it had to hold its

expression firmly. It was true. Casey was always doing Fran favors and whatnot, all in exchange for exaggerated smiles and shallow touches. "I'm just trying to give back," it said, smiling a bit and averting its eyes, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

Seeing Casey in her bed after such a long day was enough of a relief to make Fish's knees falter. It left the shotgun aside, anxious to sit by her and offer her food. She accepted it with the usual grateful smile. "I've never seen you look so annoyed," she said, "That's a first." It realized that its expression wasn't as neutral as it had thought it was. "I hate gunshots. And Fran takes you for granted," it replied. "That annoys you?" Casey rubbed her eye and started eating her sandwich. "I don't know," it paused, holding its knees tightly, "Yes! It does." She smiled while chewing. "Maybe eating someone you talk to everyday has made you care too much," she said. Fish recoiled and looked down, soon sinking its face in its hands. "This used to be easier," it mumbled. "How so?" Casey instigated, no doubt for her own science-y purposes. "Playing a role never tired me out the way your human jobs do to you. I never once thought about how much I wanted to 'go home already' like you do," it said, still hiding its face and applying pressure, "Because letting that bleed through my disguise can mean my death. And now it's not the same anymore."

There was a shuffling noise and a hand landed on its shoulder, softly enough that it didn't startle it. "It's fine to get tired. All you do the whole day is force reactions, expressions and gestures that aren't yours. You should *expect* to get tired," said Casey, her voice as soft as her touch. Fish went still for a good time, silent. It did want to answer, but conjuring up something was hard. "Thanks for... validating my feelings," it said at last, stealing Casey's line. She laughed a little. It got the courage to lift its face and look at her, its chest heating up at her smile.

They spent a moment in silence while she ate. As the minutes sneaked by, a smell it had been feeling faintly since it got to the room became more conspicuous. At last, with Casey right beside it, it could pinpoint what it actually was. "I smell pus," it said, its nose furrowing as it sniffed the air. "Well... I was meaning to tell you," said Casey, a forced smile, "The wound on my arm is looking somewhat infected." It bent in her direction and dug its gaze into hers. "Keaton," it called out slowly, "That should have been the first thing to come out of your mouth." She sighed and cleaned her mouth with a napkin. Then, she slid that side of her pajama off, exposing her wounded arm. "Here, you can take a look. Consider it a peace offering," she said. "I'm not mad," it said, bending closer, "There's no need for peace offerings." There was obvious redness around the area and a yellow crust was starting to form. Some pus was draining. "To be honest, you're kind of hard to read," said Casey, not a single hint of concern in her voice. The phrase made Fish pause, something heavy pulling it down. It took a deep breath.

"It's festering," it said, touching the reddened skin with its fingertip. The light pressure was enough to make Casey hiss and shy away. "Yeah, I know," she replied, "I'm gonna actually need your saliva. This hurts like a bitch." It looked at her for a moment, wishing she'd care more. "You need more than that." Casey shook her head. "We can numb my pain first," she said. Fish acquiesced, lifting her arm. "I'm not making you lick pus," she interfered, "Besides, that crust isn't quite absorbing." Again, it just stared at her, dumbfounded. "If we do it mouth-to-mouth, I can hold it under my tongue," she explained. The flurry inside Fish's body felt more like the last gunshot it had taken, or even the way it felt when Casey had stuck her hand between its organs — like everything was shifting in undesired ways. That was a kiss. It had kissed people before, but always under false pretenses. But Casey talked to it.

"You're talking like an addict," it said, "That's what I meant when I said I'd end up taking advantage of you." It was Casey's turn to look confused. "How is this taking

advantage? There's no advantage for you to gain," she laughed, "And I'm not an addict. Yet. Though I admit I might be one after this big dose." She was right. It was no advantage, so why had Fish come to that conclusion? It froze. "I get it if you're not comfortable with this," Casey said, her face turning neutral.

Fish took a deep breath. "No, it's my fault you're in pain," it said, "Come on." In unison, they both bent towards each other, though Fish was far slower. Casey encased its face with her hands. "Your breathing's disturbed," she pointed out, "Are you really okay with this?" Ignoring the heat in its chest, Fish pressed its eyes shut for a bit. "Are you? This is intimate for humans, is it not?" it asked, watching her eyes. It got nothing. "Yeah. I trust you, you know," said Casey, "And this has a purpose. Plus, I have nothing against kissing you." A moment ran by. Fish's throat had tightened up too much.

"I'm... not human," it said at last. "Yeah, I've seen your insides. They're nice," she laughed, "You can consent, can't you?" Fish nodded. "And do you?" Casey asked. Even if it was hard to decipher all that was going on in its body, it knew the answer. "Yes," it said. Then, she pulled Fish closer and touched her lips to its. Though the mechanics of a kiss were familiar, Fish found itself gripping the mattress. A soft humidity presented itself as the tip of Casey's tongue poked at its lips. The heat already present in its abdomen started feeling more like fireworks. Casey paused and looked at it, leaving it oddly exposed. "Give me tongue," she said, moving back in. This time, Fish parted its lips and met her tongue. Though it hesitated, Casey seemed to have no qualms about it. She put her leg on Fish's lap and dragged herself closer. It felt itself shudder as the heat in its stomach became cold and shot through its body. It held Casey gingerly, hardly applying pressure; even if she was gripping Fish with force, it couldn't bring itself to that level of certainty.

When Casey moaned against its mouth, it was like its chest was on fire again. Wasn't that a good time to stop? Aside from the moaning, her movements were becoming a little

loose. Before Fish could complete the line of thought, she grabbed a chunk of hair above its nape all the way to the root and pulled it down gently. The shock of it was such that it did allow its lips to part some more and Casey took full advantage. Still, that yank had been far too much. Fish felt lightheaded, as if from hunger. It let go of the previous concern and held Casey tighter. Their initial purpose was forgotten as the kiss turned into a sloppy make out. At some point, Casey had climbed on its lap and Fish had touched its back to the wall.

It came to an end when she turned limp in its embrace, resting her head on its shoulder; her hands slid down. That was enough to immediately give a jolt of impulse to Fish's brain, which seemed to have turned to mush while they kissed. It gripped her shoulders and held her straight, analyzing her face. The silly smile was there; her eyelids were fluttering. At that point, its chest stung as much as when Casey had cut it open. "Keaton?" it called, trying to keep its voice down. "Mmm, yeah?" she mumbled. "Are you okay? That was too much," it said.

"It was great," said Casey, slurring her words, "Pillow." Swallowing its concern, it laid her down gently, centering her head on her pillow. She immediately extended her arms, making wobbly grabby hands. "Hug me," she said. Fish hesitated, hearing its own frantic heartbeat. "Please, Fish," she begged, dragging its name out. It finally acquiesced, laying by her side and hugging her. Something about that was embarrassing. Though it felt the sting of guilt, it knew she just needed to sleep it off. So it held her as she wished and soon heard her breathing deepen; as she slept, it closed its eyes and tried to rest a bit as well.

In the morning, it couldn't take worrying about the increasing smell of pus anymore. So it woke Casey up before it was time. Her eyes opened slowly. "Hey, Fish," she spoke softly, turning and hugging it as if it was a pillow, "Let me sleep." She still sounded hazy. "Can you show me your arm?" it asked. "Go ahead," said Casey, nodding and closing her eyes again.

With a chill in its fingers, it sighed and grabbed the hem of her pajamas, sliding it down her shoulder. When the wound came into view, its ribs sunk into its chest and it surprised itself by biting its own tongue. "Keaton... It has gotten worse," it said. Seeing infection had never bothered it so; it was just a signal that it wouldn't be able to ration food anymore. Afterall, letting the infection turn systemic would just spoil the meal. Grumbling, Casey sat up and touched around the wound. Her face contorted in pain. "It's too dark for me," she said, "Open the curtains." It obeyed and sat by her side again. As she looked at her arm, her eyes widened.

Aside from the obvious pus and increasing yellow scab, it had swollen a lot overnight. Casey traced something with her index finger, going up her arm. "A red streak. Fuck," she muttered. With pain distorting her features, she started feeling herself up, going through the muscle that connected her arm to her chest and under her arm. "My lymph node's swollen," she said, "Yeah. Pretty bad. I feel... feverish." Fish lay its hand on her forehead, immediately sure of it. "Keaton. It's over," it said, "You need to be hospitalized."

Casey immediately grabbed it by the wrist and held it to the bed. "Then what happens to you?" she asked, raising her voice; her pupils contracted. "I shouldn't have given in and hurt you more," it said, "I knew that you were still recovering. It's on me." Her grip on it was strong. "That doesn't matter. I'm not letting you kill yourself either," she sounded rough. "I'm not killing myself," it said. "The intention doesn't change the result. I'm *not* going." Casey kept staring and holding it down until it sighed and nodded. "I'll think of something else, Keaton," it said. Seeing the relief on her face made knots form in its guts.

It held itself together until it was a believable time to get out of the room. Breakfast should have already started. Thus, Casey thankfully asked no questions when it dressed up and left. The weight of the shotgun on its back only strengthened the knots. For the first time, it was thankful to see Fran's face in the personnel cafeteria. It kept its cool, acting like regular sleepy Casey until it had finished gathering food on its platter; then, it sat beside Fran. "I see

yesterday did tire you out, huh," she said, smirking. "Fran, I need to cash in on that favor," it said, making its face serious. That straightened Fran's out as well. "Did something happen?" she asked. "I... hurt myself again," it lowered its voice and averted its eyes. "Casey... What can I do for you?" she touched its shoulder lightly, her thumb brushing its clothes. The knots twisted. It bent closer to Fran and bit its lower lip; feigning hesitation, it rubbed its eyes. "Look, I... I know this breaches protocol, but I really need to talk to you alone," it nearly whispered. "You know I can't do that," Fran replied after a moment.

Time to pull all the stops. Tears welled up in its eyes and it raised its face. "You sounded quite sure yesterday," it whispered, choking up a little. That felt much more familiar than talking to Casey — there were no conflicting emotions at all. It was just an act, after all. "I am. I'm sure of you," she said at last, wiping the few tears that managed to roll down its cheeks. It started rubbing its eyes again, avoiding eye contact. "Fuck, I sound so manipulative," it said, "Look, nevermind. I shouldn't be asking you this." Fran's grip on its shoulder grew stronger. "No, Casey. It's fine. Where do you want to go?" she asked. It met her eyes again. "Is it really alright? I get it if..." Fran interrupted it: "It's alright, Case." Her hand cupped Fish's cheek and it had to give it all not to show disgust. It exhaled slowly. "Can we go to my room?" Fran nodded and finished her coffee. "Alright."

As soon as the door was closed, Fish's extra limbs tore out of its clothing to embrace Fran tightly. It covered her mouth and threw her shotgun on the floor, keeping her close to its body. Her heartbeat was obnoxiously loud. When Casey swallowed a scream, it froze in place, staring her dead in the eye. "Fish?" she called out, controlling her tone, "What the *fuck* are you doing?" Her anger felt hot enough to burn. "You need to be hospitalized," it said again, "Fran can help you."

She grabbed the bedpost and dragged herself up, her brow furrowed and her fist balled up. "Then what happens to you?" she said, not screaming but still adding a bite to it, "We've talked about this." It wanted to say that didn't matter right then, but reconsidered it. "Your situation is far more urgent," it said, "Show Fran."

Reluctantly, she slid her sleeve off again. Fish could hear Fran gasp under its mouth. Slowly, it let her go. "Help Keaton," it whispered. As soon as she was free, though, her eyes wandered to the shotgun. Without missing a beat, Fish brandished its claws and side limbs. That made Fran rush over to Casey, lifting her arm and analyzing it closely. "Fuck, Case... What's going on?" The worry on her face was noticeable; though Fish supposed that was a good thing, it made its stomach stir. "It's my fault. Look, I freed Fish on purpose," Casey said, gripping Fran's shoulder and sinking her gaze into hers, "It's not its fault." In turn, Fran cupped her cheeks, squishing them. "Why would you do that?" she pleaded, "You're still... I thought you were better now." Casey sighed and shook her head, almost trying to free herself from the touch. "It's not a linear process," she said, "Now please pretend you didn't see Fish."

Fran's head whipped back to it, her mouth curling. "Fish?" she spat, "This *thing* ate your leg and you gave it a *name*?" Casey's eyebrows dipped. "It named itself," she said, "Don't insult its individuality." Letting Casey go and biting her own lip, Fran's gaze kept going back and forth. "Fuck that, Case. It's killing you," she almost shouted, "And if you had your head in its place you'd see issue with that. You're sick." Judging by Casey's expression, the words hit her like a slap; she recoiled. Immediately, Fran's face dropped and she got closer, raising her hands to touch her. However, she wasn't having it. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's not your fault," said Fran, lowering her voice, "You need help." Unmoving from its guarding spot, Fish interrupted: "Casey's thoughts may not make sense to you, but they make perfect logical sense to her." When Casey looked at it, she seemed... scared. "And you should go with Fran," Fish concluded.

Then, it lowered its extra limbs and crossed its arms, taking a step aside to free the way to the door. As insurance, though, it kept the shotgun under its foot. "Go." Fran enveloped Casey's shoulders and helped her take a reluctant step forward. At last she gave in, letting Fran aid her to the door. They stopped and Fran's eyes dug into Fish's. "You're a manipulative son of a bitch, do you know that?" she said. "And you had total faith in me," Fish felt itself smirk on its own for the first time, "I guess you don't know Keaton as well as you thought you did." Casey tried to reach and touch it, but Fran pulled her back. Her forehead wrinkled in anger. "What are you going to do?" she asked, her face softening when she looked at Fish. "I'll stay cornered here," it said, "Too many guns outside. I'm taking what comes." Casey struggled and managed to grab its arm. "It's not fair that you get to give up," she said. "I'm not giving up," it replied, "I'm putting your health first. Giving up would be facing them. Now go. Please." So they did, leaving it behind with the image of Casey's betrayed face on its mind.

They hit the hallway and the sudden exposure made Casey stagger. She resisted Fran's pull and was almost dragged along. "You'll be alright, Case," Fran said, "You'll be alright." Each step made turning back less of an option; as soon as someone saw them, it was over. Casey's state wasn't exactly inconspicuous. Her feverish mind conjured up numerous ways she could thwart Fran and get Fish out of that situation, each more ludicrous than the other. However, when they got to the staircase, they did run into someone. A watcher. He was immediately alarmed and the commotion of words made Casey's switch immediately flip off. There was no stopping it. She just stood there, her fingers going cold as Fran explained the situation — the way she saw it, of course.

Before the guy could run to summon backup though, Casey grabbed his wrist. "Tell them not to shoot on sight. It will cooperate," she said, widening her eyes, "I promise. Give it two seconds." He paused, looking at her as if she was crazy. She pressed harder, her injured arm trembling from the effort. "*Please*," she added, hoping that would better her odds. Without an answer, he turned tail and Fran resumed the dragging. "Come on," Fran whispered, helping her down the stairs, "You should worry about yourself, not the thing that did this to you." Casey bit down on her lip; the descent was nausea-inducing. "Some of it I did to myself," she replied.

By the time they got to the fort's hospital, the bell had already rung, ensnaring the whole place in chaos. Still, people opened passage for Fran and Casey after a mere glance, skirting around them. Personnel dragged her around as soon as she got through the door; she found herself sitting on a cot in an empty room and the whole process had been a haze. One of their resident doctors, Miller, had helped remove her pajama top and was analyzing her arm. Her face didn't reveal much. Casey looked down, following her gaze. "We might have to amputate it at this point, huh?" she said, eyeing the ascending red streak.

"Contract says we have to try to save it until we've exhausted every possibility," said Miller. Oh. Casey hadn't really read the contract. The doctor paused and turned her back. Casey could hear her sigh as she rummaged through a drawer. "Don't worry, Keaton. You'll get some morphine and we'll take care of you." When she turned back to Casey, she was already tapping a loaded syringe. "By take care, you mean..." Casey begun, but Miller interrupted: "You may have some idea of how it goes. Yes, I mean a shitload of antibiotics. Now, leave it to us. Okay?" She parted her lips again, but Fran patted her hair and started caressing it. "You'll be fine, Case," she said.

Casey took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes. "Alright. Give me the shots and whatnot," she said, "I have to go." Fran forced her shoulder down. Meanwhile, Miller furrowed her brow. "I'm admitting you as an inpatient," she said, "You need bed rest and close observation." Though Casey remained still, her insides stirred. "I can't stay. Fish..." she started, immediately being interrupted by Fran: "You're not thinking straight, Case. You're feverish." She'd leveled her eyes with Casey's, her gaze unwavering. "Come on. Let Dr. Miller keep an eye on you, will you?" Fran asked, nodding to the doctor, who grabbed Casey's arm lightly. "A little pinch," Miller murmured before inserting the needle.

As Casey allowed them to lay her down on the cot and change her into a hospital gown, she rued her own complacency. Couldn't she have said different things or moved in other directions? Then again, probably not. The oncoming wave of personnel would have run her over anyway. Her conscience being at peace or not didn't quite make a difference. As the morphine hit, her body relaxed, melting among the sheets. Her mind conjured up the sensation of Fish's tongue against her, spreading warmth; she realized it was because that opioid release was reminiscent of what Fish's saliva offered.

Thus time passed, her consciousness dulled out either by bouts of fever or the morphine that curbed her pain. There were only Miller, the nurses and Fran's eventual visit to take her

out of her hazy thoughts. Fran would sit down on a stool beside the cot. "Your color's returning," she said once, smiling faintly. "It's not going away," Casey slurred her words. Her friend's hand lay on her hair as she answered: "It's looking better, darling. I swear."

The pet name took Casey aback, almost making her physically recoil. That wasn't the reaction she'd expected herself to have. "What happened to Fish?" she asked. It wasn't the first time she asked, but there was never an answer. "Don't think about that thing," said Fran, sighing, "You need to rest your head." With the hand that didn't make her arm hurt, Casey gripped Fran's wrist and pushed it away from her hair; her eyes widened. "I can't *rest my head* if I don't know what happened to Fish," she said, lips curling downwards, "It can't die because of me."

Fran joined her hands on her lap, pulling away from her. For a moment, her face looked disgusted, but soon she looked away. "That thing's conniving. It's poisoned your mind," she said. Casey looked away as well, feeling her brow furrow. "You never thought I could think for myself," she mumbled, "But I thought it was cute, like you were protective of me." The short silence was thick. "It's not," she concluded. Though she didn't turn to see Fran leave, she did hear her footsteps.

Time only slowed down again when Miller turned up with measuring tape. She lifted Casey's bedsheets, exposing her. "Hey... What are you doing?" Casey asked. "Taking your measurements for a prosthetic," she answered plainly. "What? No," Casey said, stirring, "My debts are already gonna be a pain to pay off. I *can't* afford this." Miller kept going, unfazed. "This is also contractual," she said, "Our employers are paying for it." Of course. Casey's brain functioned for a moment. "Mmm. Out of the goodness of their hearts," she mumbled. "Professionals like you and I aren't as easily replaced," Miller lowered her voice. Of course, if Casey's only function were that of a teacher, they wouldn't bother paying for a prosthetic. She kept that to herself, though.

"Do you think I'm well enough to be discharged?" Casey changed the subject with a sigh. "I want to keep you under observation for another couple of days," said Miller, jotting the measurements down, "Honestly, I didn't think you'd recover so well... Physically." She paused, staring her down for a little longer than she was comfortable. "If you meant something by that, say it outright," said Casey. Miller fiddled with the tape. "I'm sure you know your body has suffered immense stress. It doesn't seem like you've processed your loss yet," she replied, "It's a traumatic experience, Keaton." Casey piped down, averting her eyes. Shame stung her cheeks a bit.

When it was time for Casey to be discharged, she was unceremoniously sent out with a pair of crutches, dressed in clothes that Fran had brought down to the hospital — not that they'd talked much. As she walked the halls, people regarded her cautiously, students nodding their heads in greeting. Some smiled. The atmosphere was eerily normal, as if they hadn't just had a life-threatening experience. The implications of everyone's seeming tranquility clung to Casey's chest, making knots amidst her ribs. Just walking around, there was no trace of Fish's existence. Her room was... clean. No trace of gunshots either, though. That should be a good thing. As she inspected her bleak room, there was a knock at the door. She opened it without a second thought.

"Good morning, Coleman," said her military overseer, "I believe a discussion of sorts is in order. May I come in?" Overcoming the stun of his sudden presence, she got out of the way. "Yes, sir," she replied, closing the door again, "But wouldn't you rather I go down to the office?" He merely smiled and pointed at her desk's chair. "Sit, please." She obeyed, furrowing her brow some. "Sir, I'm perfectly capable of standing up," she said. "There's no need to concern yourself right now," he replied. Fuck, she really hated when people talked to her with such an intentional height advantage. "Your resistance gave us something

unprecedented," he said, seemingly in good spirits. Her stomach sank, but she still hoped it wasn't what she was thinking. After seeing her puzzled expression, he explained: "You were right. We were able to make it cooperate. Great strides are being made and it's all thanks to your survival efforts, Coleman."

Having a tall, burly guy stare at her with adoring parental approval made Casey shudder. The cold ball in her center seemed to have grown to envelop all her organs after hearing that. "Great strides, sir?" she asked, trying to keep a neutral expression. Her hands hurt from gripping the crutches. "Yes. If you want to see for yourself, perhaps you should watch some of Sage's classes when you have the time," he said. Casey froze, her grip losing force. Fran's class. There was only one type of *stride* that could be made there. Before she could think of an answer, though, he kept going: "For now, however, you should resume your classes. Your supervisor asked me to inform you that we were not able to find a substitute biology teacher." Casey took a deep breath. Great. "Yes, sir." He gave her a sympathetic smile. "Rest assured that commendations are in order for what you've endured," he said, "You're dismissed." So, he turned his back and walked away, leaving her all alone in her room again.

Casey let her upper body drop, hitting her forehead on her desk; she rested her head there, eyes wide open. Everything within her itched. She had to see for herself, but it wasn't time for classes yet. Still, at least she'd found out that Fish was alive, even if merely being alive wouldn't be of much solace to Casey herself. Fish had said it wanted to live, so there was still a chance. She clung to it. Curbing her apprehensions, she reached for her lesson notes. Though she hoped to find out where Fish had left off with the students, a bigger part of her just wanted to read its notes. Their handwriting was perfectly alike, but Casey could tell hers apart by memory. After a heavy sigh, she closed the notebooks and touched them to her forehead. There was nothing of interest there. What had she expected to find?

In any case, she had to face the task of being thrown back to her job. When her schedule allowed it, she'd find the means to visit Fran's class. Thus she got up and risked a peek at the mirror. Her hair was haphazardly combed, the fringe a complete mess; there seemed to be dark cavities under her eyes. Still, she didn't have the will to do anything about her appearance. Hopefully they'd be lenient on a poor helpless teacher who'd just nearly died, huh? She took off, still getting the hang of the crutches. The arm that Fish had bitten a portion of a muscle off ached from the effort.

She got to the classroom and took the roll call. All the kids were there — but only them. No watchers, no extra security measures. Whatever had happened to Fish, they should be quite confident about it. Casey sat on top of her own desk, resting her chin on the crutches. Some students had been quite enthusiastic to welcome her back, but most just stared at her like they'd seen a ghost. They got through the class with that weird atmosphere, no one raising their voices. When it ended, one of the girls walked up to Casey as the other students filtered out. "Ms. Coleman?" she asked in a low tone. "Yeah, Scotts?" The girl looked downwards. "I'm glad you're back. I'm sorry, I... couldn't really tell the difference," she said. Casey made an effort to smile warmly. "They're experts at conning. It's alright," she assured the girl. Still, Scotts' face remained uncertain. "Actually, it talked to me a little. About my problems," she said. When Casey didn't light up in recognition, she added: "I feel like this place is killing me. Anyway, I wanted to ask you if there was anything true to what it said. About you. It made it sound like... you didn't have an easy time here either." It looked like she was a second away from crying, really. She bit her lip. "I need to know you pulled through."

Oh. Yeah. Casey wasn't really a reference for good mental health, but she couldn't just tell a younger girl that it hadn't gotten much better. "What did it say?" she asked instead, somewhat curious. "It said time keeps going even if we feel... whatever. Because it's a

universal constant," said Scotts. Casey smiled. "That's exactly what I would say," she said, "Look, give yourself a chance, even if the wait is torture. I didn't think graduation would ever come either." She tried not to let her smile falter. "But it did, and so did many things after it," she concluded. Wasn't that a bit of a lie?

Scotts shifted. It looked like there was more on her mind. "I'm sorry. I know it hurt you, but I still... feel bad for it," she lowered her voice. Upon hearing that, Casey's heart jolted. "You know where Fi- I mean, the mimic is?" she asked, losing balance for a moment. The girl's eyes widened and she bent away slightly, taken aback by Casey's sudden energy. "Um, yeah. They're using it for combat practice," she said. The answer put a heavy stone in Casey's stomach. She gripped the edge of the table, her knuckles whitening from the tension. Of course, she'd thought of that, but hoped dearly that it wasn't the case. Her body felt hot and tingly. It had been a while since she'd last been angry at someone besides herself. "I'm sorry, Scotts," she said, "I have another appointment to get to. But you can talk to me whenever, alright?" The kid nodded and they left the classroom.

Despite struggling, Casey managed to get to the breakroom in time to catch Fran drinking her coffee. Upon seeing her, her face turned somewhat sour, which only made the tingling in Casey's body grow as she stood beside her. "Hey, Casey," said Fran, eyeing her over the rim of her cup. "When do you have classes with the seniors this week?" Casey asked immediately, poking straight at it.

As she'd expected, Fran staggered, but quickly recovered and furrowed her brow. "First period tomorrow afternoon," she said, narrowing her eyes, "Why?" Letting her body rest against the wall, Casey took a deep breath. "I wanna watch it," she said. "I'm not comfortable with that," said Fran, looking away and sipping more coffee to hide her face. "Captain said I could."

That made Fran sigh. It was a deep one, the kind that Casey seldom heard from her. "I'm just... protecting you, Case. He only suggested that because he doesn't *know*," she said, the pain in her voice prickling Casey's gut with guilt. It didn't last long, though. "And I'm thankful that you didn't tell anyone," Casey lowered her voice, "But I wish you'd trust my judgment just a little more."

Fran finally turned her face back to her, her eyebrows arching upwards and her lips in a thin line. Her eyes widened and she just stared Casey down. "Don't look at me like that," said Casey a bit roughly, "I might be mentally ill, but I'm not an infant." Then, Fran set her cup aside and gripped Casey's shoulders, sinking her gaze into hers. "You almost died, Case. Do you even understand what that means?" she whispered, her pupils contracting, "If that won't wake you up, I don't know what will."

Casey made herself stop, almost having to bite her tongue. She focused on breathing, letting the tension wane as the seconds went by and Fran grew tired of staring at her. If she refused to understand Casey's point, arguing it over and over wouldn't change a thing, would it? "I'm going anyways," said Casey, "It's not like I can run somewhere you don't want me to." She smiled bitterly; the words seemed to make Fran's face contort a little. "Fine. Do what you think is best," she said, reaching out to touch Casey's hand.

The shock made her stand still and, as she didn't recoil, Fran held her hand. "I'm just worried about you, alright? I'm sorry for pressuring you. I know you're going through stuff," said Fran in a near whisper, "I feel I... took you for granted." It was Casey's turn to look bewildered. She pulled back without much force. "I'm still here," she said. "I didn't mean it like that," Fran raised her hand, hovering about cautiously. "Look, you don't need to worry. I'll be there for your class tomorrow," said Casey, turning her back on Fran to get some coffee to go.

Keeping her word, Casey showed up to Fran's class the next day. The group began walking elsewhere and she recognized the path immediately; they'd hit that walled off practice plaza. That cold mass in her gut grew larger as she wondered what the location choice meant. Though she felt that Fran had slowed the pace down to match hers, she tried to ignore it. When they got there, Fran organized the students in groups of three and left them alone so they could sort themselves out for a moment. Then, she walked up to Casey and took her to a shadowed spot away from the middle of the court. "No matter what, don't get closer than this," she said, "Promise me?" Reluctantly, Casey nodded. She'd always despised that place. It looked more like an arena, with cell doors lining it and spots to attach chains to. A lot of the fort's structure was like that: best kept in the past.

As shotguns were distributed among the students, Casey's gut sank further. She didn't want to be right. However, as the first group fell into formation and one of the cell doors opened, it became increasingly clear. Four watchers dragging heavy chains emerged from the shade. They pulled on it hard and soon the light hit a tall creature; it bent down to pass through the door and, when its full figure showed itself, Casey's throat tightened and her grip on her crutches faltered. Fish seemed much more discolored than the last time she'd seen it. Its extra limbs all pointed downwards, as if it didn't have the will to hold itself straight. Immediately, its head whipped to Casey's direction and the iron choker that engulfed its neck clamped down, making her heart tighten along. She could see Fish wince; despite the non-human features of its bare form, she thought she could see sorrow in its face. Casey hadn't noticed she'd lunged forward until Fran grabbed her shoulder and made her straighten up again. Cold sweat made her fringe stick to her forehead and her lips quivered.

"You're going to kill it," she said, eyes glued to Fish, who was being dragged by the chains, "You can't possibly intend on practicing gunplay on it." Fran sighed. "The shots in the wads aren't iron," she said, "We've done it before. It'll regen just fine." Casey swung on her

only foot, desperately balancing herself on the crutches. "Look at its state," she raised her voice, feeling her throat swell, "It's starving. The regeneration rates will only decay." Still, all Fran did was force her shoulder down. "Look... We're using it while it has a purpose, Casey," she said, taking a deep breath. Then, she paused and looked ahead; the watchers had attached the ends of the chains to the fixtures and the first group had taken their positions. Fran whistled, the piercing sound making Casey grit her teeth.

The three students immediately started scuttling about, averting obvious swings from Fish, who didn't seem quite so enthusiastic about its task. As it moved, the spikes on its big choker — which was attached to the chains — pressed down on its neck, opening gashes. The sudden sound of the first shot ripped through the air and seemed to lodge itself in Casey's chest, compressing it. Her eyes widened and her foot felt frozen in place. The shot had hit Fish square in the shoulder; its reaction times were sloppy, a fact that only made Casey bite down on her own cheeks harder.

All she did was watch as the force of the impact made Fish stagger and take another hit, one of the kids seeing the window of opportunity for what it was. "You're torturing a living creature," she said, pressure building up in her body under Fran's hand. "I wish you'd listen to what you're saying," Fran said, "I'm not arguing about this anymore." Her voice was bitter. Casey was held in place as Fish defended itself from constant onslaught. Though the chills in her body demanded that she went forward, her mind knew that any physical effort was futile. When they locked eyes, the full sight of Fish's deceptively blank face made her want to scream. The contact lasted little, even though each second dragged on — and Casey endured all of them. She stayed for the whole class, torn between not being able to watch it anymore and feeling guilty for wanting to leave.

In her bedroom, she allowed her thoughts to seethe, fueled by the hot mass in her core. There was little she could do in the way of physical defiance, of course. Catching her own reflection in the mirror made her pause. Somehow, knowing that it was herself she was staring at took her aback. It made her chuckle a little. After all her desperate attempts, she still had her body and mind to live with. Fish deserved the same.

4

As soon as possible, Casey found herself in a scheduled meeting with both of her superiors. She'd spent her spare time repeating her lines over and over in her head, buying her confidence through biting scorn; that's how she intended to look composed as well. Sitting alone before them in her best clothes, she put on a smile that didn't suit her. "So, Ms. Coleman," said the headmaster at last, having tired her out asking about her health already; "We hear you have a proposal for us." She joined her hands in her lap, her thumbs pressing down on her skin as a way of relieving the tension. "Indeed," she replied, keeping the pleasant expression, "I watched one of Sage's classes and agree that the creature seems quite subdued and compliant. While it's still in this state, I'd like permission to perform a vivisection."

"A vivisection?" asked the captain, raising his eyebrows. "Yes, sir. It's... like a dissection, but on a living being," she said, cringing at her own bastardization of the term. He nodded. "I believe a properly conducted investigation of a mimic's anatomy would prove beneficial to both the scientific community and our future military efforts," she argued, gesturing calmly, "And I'd be honored to head it." They seemed to think it over, eyes turning distant. "I can picture the benefits of such a study, yes. We've never had that chance and it's not like Firland officials would share their intel," said the captain. However, the headmaster

sighed and countered: "The creature's currently under the combat training department's custody. We'd have to talk to their advisor first."

Casey's blood ran cold, making her fingertips tingle. Her nerves made her smile. Their advisor happened to be Franklin Sage. "Considering the nature of their practices, sir, I fear that the vivisection has to be top priority," she said, the sweat on her back undermining her confidence, "Lest the mimic be too battered for good observation, to put it simply."

The headmaster nodded. "It's a formality. I'm sure the department transfer will go over well," he said, smiling, "Afterwards, you can help us assemble a small team if you need one." He reached his hand out to her and, as she struggled with her crutches to stand up, he seemed a little embarrassed. "Oh, you don't need to get up," he said. She bit back a retort and shook hands with both of them. "I wish we had more proactive employees like you, Ms. Coleman," said the headmaster, his kind elderly face offering a smile.

Sitting in bed, her head sunk in her hands, Casey weighed her options. They were looking scarce. She'd dealt her best card and immediately gotten blocked; there was no way that Fran would accept the transfer without a fight. Aside from bizarre intrusive thoughts of rendering Fran incapable of attending the meeting, she couldn't see a way out. Casey laid back, covering her eyes and sighing. Fuck. In any case, if Fran didn't offer any reasonable reason to block the transfer, wouldn't their supervisors go forward with it anyway? They seemed to have liked the idea. All she could really do was wait.

Having to get up in the mornings and go about her daily life as if nothing had happened made it seem like she'd popped into an alternate reality. The only thing that confirmed the veracity of it all was what went on in that combat class court. She didn't ask Fran to watch anymore; she just made the hike to the closest watchtower and climbed the stairwell painstakingly, which proved to be a huge workout for her arms. The watcher posted at the top

of the tower didn't seem to mind the extra pair of eyes. In fact, they watched the rest of that week's classes together, as if he shouldn't be looking out for danger — to be fair, any potential danger in his eyes was Fish itself, who was down there taking a beating. "Why are you so interested in that thing?" he asked Casey the second time she showed up. "Scientific purposes," she said flatly. She focused on Fish's distant form. It seemed increasingly slower. "Like what?" he chuckled. "I want to cut it open and feel its entrails," she spat, feeling her throat burn. That seemed enough to kill any prospects of conversation; what remained was the sound of gunshots.

Next time she was summoned to her superiors' office, she was greeted by the back of Fran's head, her ponytail as tidy as ever. She got up and turned to look at her. The atmosphere seemed to pressurize instantly. "Hey, Casey," she said. Without replying, Casey sat down and so did the others. Fran looked at her own lap, avoiding Casey's burning gaze. "As you may have guessed, Ms. Coleman, this meeting is about your dissection proposal," said the headmaster. Vivisection. Casey's lips curled. "Ms. Sage has informed us about your... mental health issues," he continued, pacing himself, "Considering your recent loss, we feel it might be best to keep you away from the creature."

Though Casey's throat felt tight, she managed to sound clear: "With all due respect, sir, this is important research. A scientist is objective. Whichever *issues* I've been implied to have don't come into play." He moistened his lips and looked away for a moment. "Even so, Ms. Coleman, the incident is too recent. We agree that it's an interesting idea," he smiled, "Perhaps someone else may head the project."

As she froze in her seat, he continued: "You should focus on your recovery. That was all." Casey accepted the handshake numbly and, moments later, realized that she was so out of it that she found herself in the hallway without knowing how she'd gotten there. Fran

walked by her side, a gloomy look on her face. The vitriol in Casey's gut clawed its way out of her mouth before she could hold it. "That was *low*, Franklin," she said, lowering her voice; it sounded hoarse. "Weaponizing the fact I let you into my personal space for *years*."

Fran halted. Slowly, she turned to Casey, her face distorted. "*Weaponizing*? Seriously, Casey?" she asked, coming closer, "I'm just worried about you. Did you think I'd just sit back and let you hurt yourself?" She sounded unusually high pitched. The notes in her voice did sting Casey, but she pressed on. "I'm not hurting myself."

Fran took a deep breath and tried to hide a bitter smile. "Right, you're just getting something else to do it for you, so it doesn't really count," she said. "*Someone*," Casey corrected. "What the fuck, Keaton. Is that the hill you want to die on?" Fran's face turned from anger to what could be disappointment. "Look, I don't need your worry right now," Casey replied, "Especially not if it comes as manipulation. I don't know how to prove to you that I'm not trying to hurt myself." She lunged forward, almost spitting in her friend's face as she spoke. "Fish is not a tool for that. But apparently I can't convince you that locking up and maiming a living thing, let alone a sentient one, is wrong. No, that couldn't *possibly* be my motivation." Silence settled in and Fran's face softened along with it; looked like hurt or acceptance, perhaps both. "It couldn't. Because it's always something with you, Case," she said in a low tone, turning and walking away.

Feeling needles under her eyes and a burn in her chest, Casey started her way out of the main office building. She hadn't even gotten past the first hurdle; everything was back to square one and Fish would still be tortured. Though she'd told Fran that it wasn't a tool, had that not been the way she'd treated Fish when she'd freed it from the display case? Essentially, she'd just pushed it into the fire. A chill ran through her spine when she got near the communications room. The sound of mail being sorted was familiar, even if Casey didn't write home often.

An idea shot from her gut straight to her nerves and she acted on the impulse. Trying to act gingerly, she got to the door and peeked in, greeting the few employees. "Hey, guys. I was wondering if I could use your telegraph?" she asked, averting her eyes, "I, um... Have a personal message to relay." They looked at her the way everyone seemed to those days; the hollow smiles of sympathy made her want to hide in her room. "Of course. In that room over there," one of them said. She excused herself, leaving the hectic nature of the mail room to get into the tinier space. Honestly, she hadn't seen a telegraph in so long. After messing about a little, she was sure she remembered how to send that message where it needed to get. However, as her finger hovered over the switch, it went numb. As soon as she started tapping it out, her job would be dead. It's not like she'd tried to cover her tracks. After a deep breath, she sunk the switch for the first time.

There was no way for Fish to know how many days had gone by. It had given up on cohesive thoughts, going with the flow of what happened around it. When someone yanked on its chains, it followed. All of them smelled great and it knew that they must be warm to the touch; its mouth salivated whenever one of them came close. Still, it remained compliant, the acidic blackhole in its stomach punching it constantly. So, when people walked into the stone room it was chained to, Fish didn't pay them much mind. None of them smelled like Casey, after all. However, its attention was forced back when someone spoke to it. The voice had been buzzing in its ears for a while, but it had been ignoring it, unaware that it was the addressee.

"Are you conscious right now?" the person asked. Fish looked down. It was a middle-aged woman, wearing a badge that marked her as a visitor. Besides her, there were a few other visitors and a handful of watchers — they didn't seem so pleased. Fish pressed its eyes shut for a moment, a bit weary of the daylight that streamed in. "Yes," it answered, "With effort." The woman smiled faintly and turned to the watchers. "Would you mind giving us some space?" she asked. Of course, they protested. "This is our jobs on the line if you get torn apart," one of them said. "They just said they're conscious, so we're clear," she replied, "It's allowed private time." After some more back and forth, they went outside. Fish's brain hadn't quite caught up with everything yet.

The woman took a few steps closer, none of the caution of the watchers present in her features. A bit like Casey. "We received a telegraph from someone in here," she said, her words gripping Fish immediately, "Reporting the situation and requesting your extraction." As its heart skipped a beat, she continued: "Would you accept to be taken in at Firland as a refugee?" Trying to shake the clouds off its brain, it nodded its head in acceptance. If that was something Casey thought was good, it should be okay. "I want to see her," it said. The woman

shook her hands. "Oh, we don't know who sent the message." Fish crooked its neck, regretting it when the spikes dug in further. It winced. "I do," it said, pausing and hugging its knees, "But I guess it wouldn't be any good."

Fish was taken aback by the weird understanding look the woman gave it. Afterwards, she walked back to the door and signaled; the watchers streamed back in, shotguns at ready. "We're proceeding with the extraction. Take the choker off" she said, gesturing. They hesitated long enough for Fish to speak up: "No, keep it on. I'm... hungry, to be honest." The woman blinked. "Are you really alright with that?" she asked, "You seem quite lucid." Fish sighed. "Consider it insurance," it said. Somehow, it was so tired that it felt like its age was finally weighing down on it. Casey would say it was malnourishment, though.

Epilogue

Being exposed to people as itself was the oddest thing, even after years had already passed. Fish had a name and was regarded for its own personality; people saw the image of Casey but called for "Fish." That part felt like theft. Everyday it woke up and looked in the mirror to see someone it realized it held dear. Each time, its guts would sink with the knowledge that the brief period of time they had known each other for was forever in the past. Living just for living felt good, though doing daily things for itself was nothing short of bizarre. When it performed tasks before, they were always someone else's responsibilities; now Fish had its own work and scheduled feedings.

Its routine moved like a well-oiled machine until the day someone waited by its door at twilight. Fish was coming home from work and the sight made it stagger and drop its bag. "Keaton?" it asked, its voice failing as it blinked. She laughed. Definitely her, though her face was fuller and her hair was not the old style. "If anyone asks you, I'm Keith Cameron," she said, "Just running from some debt collectors." Overcoming the stun, Fish recollected its

thoughts. It was hard, though; something like euphoria chilled its blood. "I suppose that's my fault. I know you needed that job," it said.

Casey sighed. "It's no one's fault but my own," she replied, "And you know what I'm like. That place wasn't good for me." Fish looked at her face thoroughly, trying to see if she believed her own words. Instead, what it found was her first wrinkles. "You look... healthier," it said, "Well, why are you here?" That made Casey smile. "Already told you. Running from my debts," she said, "But I thought I should try to find you while I'm at it." Still, the chills. Fish was unmoving and unblinking. "Keaton, I..." it started, not knowing where to go. Casey pointed to the small house. "Come on, invite me in?" she asked.

With its heartbeat going too heavy, it indulged her request. Soon they were inside. Casey stared at the green wallpaper and the low couch with a tiny approving smile. "May I sit?" she asked. Fish nodded and she sat on the couch, propping her leg that was still fully flesh up. After encouraging taps from Casey, it sat beside her, maintaining cautious distance. "I don't get it," it said. "My life isn't exactly full of prospects," Casey lowered her voice, "I have to chase whatever gives me a little joy. I realized that." She smiled. "I thought a lot about some words you said. I don't think it gets any easier, but I'm alive for now," she continued, "And I had to see you again."

Trying not to think about the feelings behind that, Fish asked: "How did you know where to find me?" Casey chuckled. "Turns out Firland keeps tight records on beings like you," she said, pausing to look at Fish for a long while. Her pupils dilated and her face softened. That made its blood rush all over again, a low heat weighing it down. "I missed you," Casey said at last, "I guess it's just that simple. Though that might be overstepping your boundaries, huh?"

No. Not at all. The possibility of being misinterpreted made Fish reach out and touch her hand, holding onto it. Casey's eyes widened. "I missed you too," it said, "It was short, but

it was... a pivotal moment of my life. I got that word from you." It smiled genuinely. That was still hard sometimes. Humans expected reactions so often. Fish took a deep breath, the fingers that touched Casey suddenly feeling cold. "I've been wondering how you were doing. Seeing you..." it said, losing track of the thought as Casey squeezed its hand. "You thought I'd have managed to kill myself?" she asked. "I thought about it," Fish admitted.

"Ironically, I'm more stable these days," she smiled a little. "Can I see you?" she asked, letting the words out slowly. Once Fish got what she meant, its abdomen went cold. It was reminiscent of that thrill of exposure — having Casey stare at its insides. "You want to see me?" The question made Casey's smile turn taunting. "Of course I do," she said, "I need to know if they've been feeding you well."

After pressing its eyes shut for a moment, Fish got up and started undressing unceremoniously. It was Casey's body, after all. The shifting was as painful as always, even if in a pleasant manner, like a deep massage. When it finished, it had to look down to look Casey in the eye. She had that familiar glint in her eyes, staring at Fish hungrily. It held its extra limbs close to its body, as if ready to cover itself up. Shame burnt a little.

"Your color's so much better these days," she said, coming closer and lifting her hands, "Mind if I touch you?" The question itself already burned immensely. What a throwback. "Go ahead," it said. Sooner than it was prepared for, Casey's fingertips were running along its ribs, her thumbs digging at the muscles under them. Her touch sent a fluttering sensation down its spine. She looked pleased.

"What have they been feeding you?" she asked. Fish tried not to look away. "I get some scheduled feedings of donated corpses of the recently deceased," it said in a low tone, "And hospital scraps sometimes." Casey furrowed her brow a little, kneeling on the couch and raising her hands to Fish's face; Fish bent down to help her reach it. "I suppose live-feeding would be inhumane," she said, "Psychologically, at least, even with all the numbing agents.

But this is not ideal." She pulled the skin under Fish's eyes down, examining it closely. Her breath was warm on its cheek.

"You're finally admitting that what I did to you was wrong?" it asked cautiously. Casey chuckled. "I've struggled with the consequences of it, yes, but the act itself? No. It was initially the result of my own suicide attempt," she said, "It would be naïve to think I'd come out of it unscathed." She let her hands drop, looking at Fish like she was afraid it would be gone the next second. "I wasn't completely good to you, either," she concluded.

Fish crooked its neck. "The whole cutting you open thing and conning you into a kiss," Casey explained, "Just as an example." Fish went completely blank for a moment, its blood rushing in waves of heat. The memory of that itself would be enough to get a response, but... "Conning me into a kiss? It sounded valid," it said. "Yeah. But there were probably different ways to do that," Casey averted her eyes, "I'm sorry. I saw an opportunity and I took advantage of it."

Fish blinked, bending down further. It took a moment to grapple with the implications of what Casey was saying. "Keaton... I felt a lot of guilt over that," it admitted, "Because something like me took joy in something you never would." She rubbed her eyes and grinned. "*Something* like you? Shut up," she said, "You gave me your full attention and that was something I needed. So yes, I'd say I enjoyed it."

With its claws retracted, Fish reached out and tidied her hair with caution. The flurry it felt was affection, it realized. She closed her eyes, letting it touch her. "Are you staying? Moving here, I mean," it asked, "I would like to see you more." Leaning into Fish's hand, she nodded. "I was thinking of accruing some debt here as well so I can get a place to stay," she laughed a little.

"Stay with me if you need a place for now," the words came out immediately, "I can spare the attention." Casey raised her head and looked around, lifting an eyebrow. She stared

at the empty space ahead. "I can't live without a kitchen," she said. "I'll get one," Fish promised, cupping her cheek. Her eyes widened in surprise, but soon softened. "Isn't that too big a bother for temporary living arrangements?" she asked. "Not at all," it said. "I might take you up on that offer," said Casey, "Your presence is quite comforting."