

CREATIVE WRITING PORTFOLIO

POETRY, CREATIVE NONFICTION, FICTION

Jester Lumos

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Artist's Statement

Nothing enrages me more than the notion of the idea “coming to” or being “found by” the artist. An idea is anything I decide is an idea. There’s ideas in your current surroundings. There’s ideas in my breakfast. There’s ideas in every conversation, every sensation, every occupation. The world is littered with them, and my job is simply to decide one of them gets to truly live, drop its seed into the offensive soil of a blank page, and listen as it whispers to me how it is meant to grow.

When it has spread everywhere it could ever be across every corner of the space, I must overpower it, don scalpel and brass knuckles, and lovingly pummel it in the gut until it spills bottled emotion across the page and begs for mercy. I take a chisel and don’t stop carving until I see aching, shimmering bone. When I’ve finished and the tortured, anguished thing in front of me screams in tune with my inner monologue, I lock it away in a drawer until I forget it ever existed. I either find it as a finished piece or catch a hint of free will and look for the woodchipper.

Costco isn't a store

It's holding up your mother's badge
to the armed guards outside of a Fortress
and feeling important as they wave you inside.

It's being unbearably small in timeless
caverns of steel and sustenance
but also the biggest in the world, knowing
that you belong to It and It belongs to you.

It's your little feet tiring at the end
of the day, letting adults
mount you upon the wheel-wire handle-box cart,
and watching the patterns in the ceiling
as they take you on safari.

It's guarding acres of thermal paper, branded
with the tales of Market adventures, and ready
to be gingerly surrendered to the woman by the door who gives
it a sharpie smile and hands it back.

It's vrooming the vacuums because you've been told not to and
It's your mother's hearing aids and
It's your shirt and
It's dinner.

Costco isn't a store

It's growing up and still getting lost in the aisles,
flattening the happiest place on earth into shelvable cardboard,
walking past white women shaming their own sample-bodies,
and coming to terms with the reality that you do not in fact
need a 6 x 5 modern outdoor storage shed.

It's communion buns and diet-coke blood,
going home to nutella tortillas and mug liquor,
and shivering as you push through the freezer drapes
looking for eggs and wondering what sins got them sent to this
prison of ice-pallets for the glory of Kirkland!

It's not realizing the sun has set until "the sweep"
comes and you're face-to-face with a scarlet-plated knight
next to the treehouses who proclaims
We're closing soon, ma'am.

you feel lost.
you realize that you need to find yourself.
the knight says check aisle four.

the Pen imprisoned

the state's men came to take the poet's home
she Trekked a desert page
they took her clothes they took her skin
she Glided through ink seas

they locked her in a prison dark and bare
she Soared through trees of rhyme
they snapped her body killed her every love
she Scaled the bluffs of verse

when there was nothing else to take, they snatched
her Pen and made her watch it break, she wept
and raged and then she shrilled:
how now can i be, Free?

a fish's-eye view

i am a fish in my head
pressing my hands up against the glass
and peering out at the racks of clothing.

i just stand there
watching people walk the rows up and down and
i grow bored enough to make the mistake of starting to think.

i look around my fishbowl brain
and watch as *won't fit anyway* and *awkward just standing*
flit past and the hum of the fluorescent lights becomes a roar.

i feel my nails bite my palm
deeper and deeper with every hanger whine
and every cart creak and every laugh and every whisper.

i turn back to the glass
but find only the metal wall of a pot
and feel the water turn to boiling stew around me.

i watch as ingredients fall
one after another from the sky
and like seasoning, a bottle shakes pills into the stew.

a lid covers the pot
and i sing a requiem in dark silence
before being ladled from the pot into a fresh bowl
to be consumed.

That Whole “Sex” Thing

I was seven years old the first time I heard about sex. I had sat myself down at the edge of the playground/courtyard area, near the bathrooms, and was staring at the clouds, lost in thought. I wondered where one cloud ended and where the next started. I wondered if there were mommy clouds and daddy clouds. I wondered if the clouds grew up, if they felt things, if they hurt each other. I wondered what happened to them when they drifted out of my view. I wondered if they died. Two boys walked by, lost in discussion with each other. They didn’t see me. One of them, a third grader I recognized by his backpack, had asked the other if he wanted to “do S.E.X.” I immediately began thinking about the letters he had spelled out, trying to fit words I knew into the new acronym. I couldn’t make it work, but I deduced from the conversation that it had something to do with them laying down. They disappeared into the bathroom behind me. They had not emerged by the time I went back to class.

#

In fifth grade, we had a set of units in each of our subjects (as I had become accustomed to), but we also had something new. We had a “sub-unit” in science called “Family Life.” It was at the end of our human body unit, but what the human body had to do with family life I couldn’t have told you. As we approached the end of the unit and the mysterious “Family Life” section neared, the adults around us started to act... *weird* about it. Our teacher sent us home with a permission slip for our parents to sign, and I finally was told what it would be about: babies. We were going to learn where babies came from. The unit mostly mirrored what we had been doing for the other systems of the human body. We would look at diagrams, learn biological terminology, and take a simplistic, overarching view of the processes that occur. I remember my classmates giggling to each other and making weird comments about kissing or being pregnant or getting married. “I’m

going to have eight kids,” or “Eric is literally the cutest,” or “ewwwww,” they would whisper from the back of the class, but it seemed straightforward to me and I was as eager to learn about it as I was to learn about everything else.

In the last week of the unit, the tone changed. We stopped discussing biological processes and scientific fact, and pivoted to discussions about the practical reality of *us* engaging with the process. The talks themselves obviously scared me as they were about this mysterious “tampon” that would kill you if you used it, how all married people *had* to go through this process, or how we were guaranteed to *get a disease and die* if we dared to kiss anyone until we were married. The scariest part to me, however, was that it forced us to consider ourselves in this position, and it *disgusted* me. Everything about it *disgusted* me. Every scenario that the teacher would blush as he tried to describe, every awkward picture of nude adults or the paraphernalia they apparently use, every line in every video filled me with this visceral repulsion that my sheepish classmates seemed not to share. I wondered what was wrong with them.

I began to pay more attention that year to the ways it snaked itself into casual conversation. People would ask me if I had a boyfriend, if I had a girlfriend, if I wanted to get married, if I wanted children, etc. My mother would show me Facebook posts from family members who had just gotten pregnant. I would see babies dressed in blue onesies with the text “Future Player” plastered across the front. People would talk about this lady, Michelle Obama, but they would always talk about her as Obama’s wife. Sometimes they would say “First Lady Michelle Obama,” but I soon realized that that was the same thing. I started to really think for the first time about bathrooms and changing rooms and showers. The way we separated out these two arbitrary groups of people just because supposedly you need one person from each group to

make this “sex” thing? Even then, it was completely alien to me the way the entire world seemed to be organized around it.

#

Trying to navigate the world of middle school, I quickly realized that it was just as obsessed with this “sex” thing as the rest of the world. It wasn’t just adults interested in my relationships anymore, it was my peers. They would just walk up and ask, “soooo... who do you like?” Sometimes they would even just talk about who they or someone else liked, expecting you to talk about yourself. Sometimes they would simply proclaim a certain boy “cute” and you would need to agree. That was the most important thing, you *had* to agree. You *had* to like someone. You *had* to respond with your own crushes. It was part of the ritual. It was the way people connected. It seemed obvious to me at the time that none of these people *really* had any particular feelings about each other, and certainly they never wanted to kiss each other or hold hands or “do things” as people would say, we all just had to play along.

At least playing along was easy! It was *so* easy... once I realized there was something to play along with. During that awkward transition phase after it became more weird *not* to have a crush, people would try to ask me about mine or tell me about what cute boy they were “like, totally obsessed with,” but I didn’t know why they would bother talking about something like that when they could be talking about things people actually cared about. I remember the first time someone suggested maybe there was something wrong with *me* because I *wasn’t* interested. I remember how absurd I thought it was to believe something like that about this pretend game none of us actually cared about.

#

I remember the first time we were given a survey to respond to. It was anonymous and it was supposed to gauge our mental health and identify trends in bullying, but I only remember the first and second questions. I remember them because they gave me pause. They brought out that unique sense of frustration that stems from feeling trapped, confined, restricted. When there's that itch that something is missing but arbitrarily imposed restrictions stop you from ever getting to it. I opened the survey and there were just two words on my screen with two answer bubbles sitting below them: "Your Gender." I knew which bubble people expected me to click, and I eventually clicked it, but I sat there for a few minutes because I had realized that it didn't feel like "mine." It wasn't something I "belonged" to or had any connection to. It suddenly felt stifling for it to even exist.

When I clicked to see the next question, I froze again. "Sexual Orientation." The same two bubbles, but they each now had "attracted to" stuck to the front of them and they were plural now. I stared in disbelief. Even *the government* cared about who liked who, and they cared about it enough to put it *before* the questions about who was bullying us. Why would the entire world not only legitimize this silly game which I was sure that none of us put any stock in but care more about it than about our safety? I didn't accept it then, but I considered for the first time that maybe it wasn't a game for anyone else. Maybe no one else was pretending.

#

I continued to struggle in this sex-centered world as I grew older. The "compliments" I would get from strange men in public before being told it was rude not to appreciate them. The way that doctors not only always asked me "is there any chance you could be pregnant?" but wouldn't even accept no as an answer, couldn't even imagine with all of their education and experience a world in which a kid on their exam table could *possibly* know for sure they weren't pregnant. The

way I would walk back through my life and notice things in new context, like how that fifth grade teacher had not only preached abstinence but talked as though it was so difficult that many of us would somehow fail at not *willingly seeking out* the disgusting horrors he had described. Even the homophobia that had begun to make its way into the peripheries of my awareness seemed ridiculous to me (they were right that gay people were obsessed with sex, but the homophobes themselves were even *more* obsessed with it and in fact they were the same ones who thought something was wrong with me because I *wasn't*).

#

By the time we had all made it to high school, we were used to exploring our identities. I had already come out as bisexual, as had some of my other friends. When I'd first heard the word bisexual, I had known what it meant and I had known that it was me (it wasn't, but it was much closer than "gay" or "straight"). It was a very different story when one of my friends came out as asexual. I had no idea what it meant to be asexual, and though I wish that I had tried harder then to understand, I let my entire conception of the word boil down to the one trait in my friend that seemed to be related: they *hated* sexual jokes. I think I latched on entirely to that one trait because I knew that if that was the one defining trait of asexuality, it couldn't describe me. Perhaps that was comforting, knowing that as long as I still found comedic value in the concept of sex and the weird, mangled, fluid-y physicality of it, I was normal. As long as I clung to it as a mechanism of humor, I had some relationship with it even if it wasn't the same relationship everyone else seemed to have. Maybe that's why my friend hated it so much: because they didn't even have that.

#

I don't think there was a single moment in which I came to accept that I was asexual (more of an agonizingly slow journey of denial and discovery), but in the years since, even something as simple as having a word capable of externalizing my own interiority has helped me exist in an allosexual world. When I turned 18, my boyfriend at the time was still 17, and it gave me a way to explain when my mother decided to ambush us with a "talk" about Romeo and Juliet laws in the car. "We're ace, mom," then silence from the driver's seat. Lecture slain.

When people talk about who dates who, and who "can" date who, and monolithic ideas about the mutual inclusivity of asexuality and aromanticism, about definitions reducing a broad, billowing spectrum to a question of whether or not someone has sex, or any other silly generalization, I have the tools to explain the wildly varied tapestry of wants and needs and feelings that is human society.

That is what I truly find the most beautiful in all of this: not everyone is the way people expected my younger self to be, but we aren't all the way my younger self expected us to be either. We each have our own stories, told through the sums of our lived experiences, and they are all beautiful *because* they are different. People *genuinely* like things that I could never even imagine having any interest in, and they aren't pretending just because I would be pretending if I said the same things.

The Creature

I'm sure my mother thought she knew what to expect when she married her now ex-husband, and that was her first mistake. You could never know what to expect. I lived with my family and our pets, but it was like this wild creature was also always lurking somewhere in the house. The creature might be hugging you or buying you presents one moment, and shoving you into walls, holding you down, or telling you about how fat you'll grow up to be if you eat that marshmallow the next.

The intuitive response is to do your best to avoid angering the creature. We all tried that at first, but eventually, you realize that you can't predict how the creature will react to anything you do. You aren't ever responsible for it hurting you, and it's pointless to try and keep it happy. This led me straight to my favorite strategy: hiding. There was no perfect way to hide from a creature that could reach any part of the house and even open doors, but in discovering that adults *hate* bending down, I also discovered the place where I began my last night living with the creature.

#

That kitchen table was my shield. It was my sanctuary, my shelter. Its surface could tell any story you wanted through paint stains, scorch marks, and piles of old or unfinished artwork.

Underneath, I needed only a pillow to lay on and something to take me to another world. I would bring paper with me to write stories on or fold into characters and contraptions, I would bring paint and a canvas down to lose myself in abstract swirls or imagined landscapes, or sometimes I would assemble plastic bricks into anything that could be dreamt. That night, I brought my 3DS and lay happily on my stomach, kicking my feet in the air behind me as ponies frolicked across the screen.

The first thing I heard was my little sister's scream. I could feel the confusion and the pain and the pleading. She didn't understand why it would hurt her. After a moment, the thuds of its fists turned to heavy stomping sounds growing louder and louder. The creature was in the hallway. The creature was in the kitchen. The creature was in the dining room. The creature was at the table. My screen's magic of distraction had been completely overpowered by the dread my heart was rhythmically hammering into me, yet I stared helplessly into its depths, pleading it to take me anywhere else. I let myself hope that the creature would pass me by. After all, I had done nothing to incur its wrath.

Pain jolted up my leg as the creature snatched me by the ankle and pulled me from underneath the table in one fluid motion, holding me up and letting me dangle before it. An echo hung in the air briefly of me yelping in pain, before the fear paralyzed me and I just hung there. Not knowing was the worst kind of fear, a kind of fear unique to the creature. I wasn't scared because I knew it would hurt me, I was scared because I had no clue what it would do. You never knew with the creature. My gaze met the molten spheres of rage that sat on the creature where a person's eyes would be, and I watched them narrow as if locking on to its prey. Its maw snapped open, venom dripping from its lips, as it howled at me, "WHY?!"

I tried desperately to come up with any idea what this could be about before I remembered the nature of the creature. It wasn't provoked, it was raging simply because it had found a reason to. I couldn't move to wrest myself free, I couldn't make myself scream for help, I couldn't even attempt to defend myself with the useless balls of finger and sweat that hung helplessly below my head, so I just dangled there, paralyzed by the knowledge that I was completely at its mercy and couldn't predict what it would do to me.

As if by some intervention at the hands of whatever universal force governs the volatile whims of the creature, I was on the floor in the next instant. Before I even had time to process that it had dropped me or see if I was hurt, I scurried to my feet and bolted down the hallway. As I turned into my grandmother's room, I caught a glimpse of what had grabbed the creature's attention. My mother stood fearlessly in the kitchen, the creature having whipped its bulk around to face her. As I closed and locked the door behind me, a rotting, twisting intuition set itself deep inside of my chest that something terrible would happen to her that night.

Trying not to think about the feeling, my eyes darted frantically around the room, searching for anything heavy enough to slide in front of the door. When I'd erected a sturdy wall of furniture and heavy items, I felt hot tears stream down my face. I collapsed onto my grandmother's bed and felt her cool, soothing arms wrap around me. We didn't say anything, we just sat there, sheltering each other as we listened to my mother's screams battle the inhuman cries of the creature in the night. The unholy cacophony of her pain and its fury could be traced as it moved all over the house. Eventually, it grew louder and louder as they started walking down the hallway, crescendoing to its loudest point right outside the door.

I tried to make out words, to figure out what the battle was about or how I could help, but I didn't get far before the creature grunted and something impacted the wall with enough force to shake the entire room. The creature had thrown something, and my mother's immediate yelps of pain quickly revealed what it was. After what felt like many lifetimes of trying to appease the creature and suffering silently when it couldn't be satisfied or reasoned with, that was the moment I finally acted. Tears dropped on my grandmother's phone as my little fingers entered three arcane numbers. Numbers I had heard recited in chant and song my entire life, numbers I had been forced to memorize, numbers everyone in my life knew the power of. I'd been told they

could save me from anyone and anything. Any true emergency could be handled by dialing these three numbers. I was sure they could help us now.

#

I don't remember anything between dialing the numbers and the time of their arrival. I just remember a knock on the door from a woman I didn't recognize telling me that it was safe to open the door. I remember the questions they asked of us, sometimes the same question over and over. I remember the glance I snuck of the chains being clicked around the creature's wrists outside. I remember staying at a hotel the rest of that night. Most of all, I remember the dent in the wall in the shape of my mother's head. That night was not my last encounter with the creature, but it never lived in my house again. Now, I see it only in my nightmares.

A Troll in Aethia

I was three years old the first time I told my mother I was a troll. I'd been brushing my hair when the brush snagged on something hard and out of place. When I looked in the mirror, I saw a bit of horn poking out. *Humans don't have horns.* My mom laughed in my face when I told her, even when I tried to show her the growth, "You're a human, little one! What an imagination you have!" I should have realized then that the rest of my life would be hard and out of place as well.

My mom is a human, and my dad was a dwarf, so when I was born, they took me to the Shaman. I grew up thinking *the Shaman said I'm a human, so I'm a human. Besides, we only have humans and dwarves in the village, and I'm definitely not a dwarf!* I did my best to fit in with my classmates, and I even made a few friends!

Hannah was my best friend; she helped me dress like a human and even took me out to human parties. She was the one who wouldn't touch me because she said my skin feels too leathery. There was also Dotty who seemed to somehow know everyone in the village and had such an infectious laugh; she's the one who told me how tall I am every time I saw her. Sometimes we hung out with Danny, the one who used my horns to open things without asking, but we were never as close with him as we were with each other.

#

As I left to catch my ride to my internship in the city, I began to miss school and my friends, but I was also excited. I wanted to learn everything they could teach me about mushrooms and their properties, and I also had heard they have trolls! I thought about how much I would love to meet a real one. *Maybe then I'll realize how silly it is to think I might be one.* Standing in the station, I felt as out of place as ever. Humans and dwarves scurried around, boarding and dismounting

various flightbeasts. It was hard not to envy them, especially the younger ones, growing up looking and thinking how they were supposed to.

I watched as a flightmaster helped a little human girl onto a hippogriff before she turned back towards her mom with a tear growing in the corner of her eye. Her mother reached a hand out to wipe the rebellious tear away as if it never existed, and soothed the child, “It’ll be okay, little one, you’ll be home before you know it.” The two exchanged a smile and the flightmaster cracked the reins. As the musculature of the beast’s horse body tensed and its eagle wings launched it powerfully into the air, I realized I’d probably been staring longer than I should have been.

Little one. I wondered if that felt hard and out of place for the girl to hear. I wondered if it feels hard and out of place when the little dwarf children hear their parents call them stout one. I wonder what a little troll’s parents would call them... *but I don’t know any trolls. There are no trolls in my village. I am a human, and every human probably feels the same way about being called little one. It’s just embarrassing. That’s all.* A small, pink and blue drake landed in front of me, its shorter hind legs bending down and its front legs straightening to puff out its chest, making it easy for a passenger to climb into the empty back saddle. The flightmaster called my name and I situated myself with my back against the edge of the saddle behind me and my feet pushing against the opposite edge, my arms wrapped around one of the spines protruding from its back. It crouched down and coiled its whole body up before releasing the energy to spring into the sky.

#

“So... headed to Aethia, strong one?” *What?* I felt the sack of meat that was supposed to be my heart freeze, my breath catch in my throat, and the brain under my not-at-all-troll-like horns fill with panic, dread, confusion, and... recognition?

“Y– I– don– you mean... little one? You meant to say little one, right?” The man burst out in laughter, almost falling from the saddle to his doom before righting himself.

“I didn’t realize I was flying with a comedian!”

“Is this about my horns? The shaman says they’ll go away! Really, I’m just like the rest of the humans! They’ll go away!” Every part of me was moving a million miles an hour, from the heels of my hands smacking into each other repeatedly to my lungs filling and emptying as quickly as the punch cups at Hannah’s human parties. *There are no trolls in my village. There are no trolls in my village. The horns will go away. The Shaman knows I’m a human. I’m a human; I am human!*

I was suddenly brought back to my musings at the station. *What do troll parents call their little troll children?* When I had thought about that before, I hadn’t considered the possibility that I... would *like it*. I felt the connection to it that I was sure nobody ever felt to stout one or little one, and I realized that maybe *I* just didn’t feel any connection to them. *Maybe something is wrong with me. Maybe something is wrong with him. Shit! Him!*

Remembering where I was, and that there was someone else around, I snapped back to reality. I found myself bent over with my head just above my cupped hands, hyperventilating. My head pounded and my chest ached, and I even noticed bruises forming along the heels of my hands. *What about him?*

“Hello?!” I looked up to find him turned around in his saddle, staring at me, concern sitting deep in his eyes. *My life is over. He saw all of that.* Seeing me glance up at him, he breathed a sigh of relief and threw out,

“Aethia’s gates, strong one, you gave me a good scare there! I was asking if you were alright, but you were just balling up more and more! I was about to land and call for a Mender!”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I’m fine! Don’t worry about all of that, I just… I remembered a… funny play I watched!” I tried to muster a laugh, but the awkward, pathetic thing that escaped my lips just made the flightmaster look even more concerned. The rest of the flight, we sat in silence, me not wanting to worry him any more and him not wanting to give me a heart attack. When we landed at the Aethia station, he gave me one last look of concern and flew off after I flashed a smile in response. *I’m glad that’s over.* I drew in a shaky breath to calm myself, sighed in relief, turned around, and saw her.

She leaned casually – far too casually for how regal she looked – against the fence directly in front of me. A large hippogriff broach sat at her throat, wings extending out majestically to just above her shoulders, intricate lace sleeves clawed up her arms to meet at the beak of the hippogriff, elegantly framing her chest, and a gorgeous, golden, silk skirt swept outwards from a pointed bodice to sway effortlessly at her feet.

As breathtaking as it all was, none of it was what I noticed first. I noticed her leathery, purplish, slightly mottled skin. I noticed that she was a little taller than me, even leaning on the fence. I noticed the points her nails grew to, the ridges on her shoulders, and the slight notch in her lip as she smiled, and– *On Brenner’s Hammer. Her horns.* They poured out from the curly, white sea of her hair like liquid, crashing in waves just behind her, drawing attention to her face. *She’s a troll.*

I'm a troll. Trolls can be... beautiful. For the first time in my life, I didn't feel hard or out of place.

I'm not quite sure how long I stood there, how long I stared at her, when she left, or how long I spent staring at the empty space by the fence, but it was enough time for me to think through my entire life as a series of moments. The first time I told my mom, the *second* time I told my mom when the other horn came in (I guess I hadn't learned my lesson the first time), my first human boyfriend and all the ways I tried to be more human for him, even Dotty, Hannah, and Danny. Especially Danny.

Anger started to fill my body as I thought about how he would use my horns, and how he wouldn't even ask. Looking at the golden lady's horns, I couldn't even imagine doing something like that to them. It was unthinkable. *Why did I let him do that to me? Why did I think he was being friendly? Was I just that absorbed in hoping it would make them fall off?* I realized that I mostly don't even remember any of the times he did it, I just know it was something he did. Or maybe he didn't if I can't even remember it.

#

The rest of that day – and the entire summer after it – was like a hazy dream. I was so consumed by epiphany after epiphany about myself and my life and what could be that I could barely focus on anything they taught me. There is just one lesson I will never forget: Maskcap. I don't remember any of the unimportant things like how to identify it, whether or not it's safe to touch or eat, what it's used for, or its classification, but I remember my trainer telling me about their relationship to Sinuccians.

"The Maskcaps are like the spies of the mushroom world, strong one. Look at this cluster of Maskcaps over here and tell me what you notice."

I thumbed through my field guide, anxiously, looking for anything that might help. I'd been lost deep in thought about all of my new experiences with trolls and with teaching myself to be more like the—like *us*. I furrowed my brow as I glanced back and forth between the mushroom cluster and the guide page on Sinuccians.

“You said Maskcaps? These look just like Sinuccians.”

“That’s because they are! Well, all except for that one.” He knelt slightly and bent over, his cracked glasses almost slipping off of his face, as he pointed to one of them. Looking closely at it, I noticed that its stipe was a slightly different color. *So that’s a Maskcap. Why is it trying so hard to look like the Sinuccians? Does it hurt them? Does it steal from their mycelium root systems? Why does it have to hide?*

“Is it bad..?” I cautiously wondered out loud. I expected to hear him respond, “Of course it is! Anything trying to blend in is evil and broken!” I knew that a mycologist had to hate everything this mushroom was just as much as... just as much as my village hates what I am.

“Bad? The mushroom world isn’t as simple as ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ Every living thing out here is complex and interconnected, but *especially* the mushrooms! And the Maskcap doesn’t hurt the Sinuccians; it blends in for our sake, not theirs. The Maskcap just wants to be eaten by the same spore dispersers as the Sinuccians, so it can spread its spores more effectively and grow more Maskcaps.”

I was listening at first, but at some point, my mind started to wander. *I was just trying to blend in to survive. It isn’t bad to be a troll, we aren’t ugly or broken, and I didn’t do anything wrong. I’m not broken, I won’t grow out of it, and I shouldn’t want to! I shouldn’t have to mask to survive. I shouldn’t have to grow up being told I’m something I’m not and having to fight tooth and nail*

from the age of fucking three just to meet the impossible expectations set for me! I am a troll! I AM A TROLL AND TROLLS ARE BEAUTIFUL! I almost shouted that last part out loud in front of my trainer, but I managed to keep it inside where I would never lose it.

#

Even more daunting than my journey to Aethia was the journey back. When I got to the Aethia station, I stared out at the little humans and the little dwarves getting dropped off and picked up by their parents and heard the soothing farewells and excited greetings of all the little ones and stout ones, but I also saw a little troll boy and his grandmother. I couldn't quite hear the words, but I saw the smile on his lips as she wished farewell to her strong one, and it brought a smile to my lips as well. Glancing at the mounted crystal, I realized I had arrived rather early, so I cast my eyes over the station in search of somewhere to sit. In the end, I found myself just leaning against the fence, in the same spot the golden lady had been, and thinking about getting home, unpacking, and experiencing the third time I told my mother that I am a troll.

The Bounce

I expected him to splat like a pancake when he hit the hull below, so I was unprepared for the gut-wrenching horror of the bounce. Wiping the unsightly bile from my lip and composing myself to the standards of my rank, I clapped my hands and ordered the surveillance footage produced. After a few moments, I heard the whir of mechanical wings as a Sentinel approached, its monitor deployed. I tried to quell the unease in my stomach as the replay began.

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I sat there, looking out at the great emptiness in this part of the ship. I could see the hull all around, and even looking through the windows, space was just as empty. All that could be seen was the small maintenance bridge extending from the door behind me to the engine, the folding chair my Defender had set up for me to sit on, and the engine itself. It was a beautiful, miraculous thing, roughly cylindrical but with different widths across its length and perfectly symmetrical from the rivets down its surface to the precision-aligned blades of the fan at its end. It bathed the bridge in the pale blue glow of power.

As I contemplated the engine, the door hissed open behind me and two other figures stepped onto the maintenance bridge. My Defender shoved the other figure, their face concealed by a metal Silencer and their hands and feet shackled in front of them, towards me before bowing and awaiting my orders. With one wave of my hand, I permitted him to stand upright, and with another, ordered him to remove the Silencer so I could see and speak to the criminal. As the grimy indigent's face was revealed, I caught a moment's hesitation from my Defender, but his expression was completely neutral when he turned back to face me.

"You know why you have been brought." It was more of a statement than a question.

“I haven’t done anything wrong!” the muck proclaimed, prompting me to page through my list. Eventually, I found the first name not crossed out: *Justin Ebed. Medicine Thief. Punish.* As I looked back up to the wretched pilferer, he avoided my gaze. He already knew what I was about to say.

“Justin Ebed, lowborn are not authorized to administer or receive the Medicine. You will be punished.” There was only one punishment for lowborn aboard the Potentia, so there was no need to say anything more. My eyes flicked to my Defender as I spotted the slightest twitch from him. I searched his face once again for anything out of place, but he remained expressionless. I explored, “Miles, do you have something to say?”

“No, sir. Please proceed.” Upon hearing his voice, the thief glanced up at my Defender, trying to meet his eyes. My Defender’s eyes flicked to meet the criminal’s for just a moment. I felt my fists clench and my eyes narrow. The villain flung himself towards my Defender and began pleading profusely,

“Please, Miles! You remember me! I didn’t even do anything! I have a daughter now; she’s dying and I- I- you know they would never have helped her! I had to! Please!” Each word dug my nails deeper into my palms, making it ever harder to maintain my composure.

“Old friend, Miles?”

“No, sir. He is nothing to me.” The right words, but he didn’t seem to believe them. I couldn’t lose control here; I needed to remove his weakness as swiftly as possible. I stood and walked over to the edge of the bridge.

“Bring him.” My Defender grabbed the shackles around the lowborn’s hands and yanked him up by them. The two stood there for a moment, and I watched a scene play out behind my

Defender's eyes. His filthy lowborn childhood. The pain, the hunger, the sickness. The night my father brought me before them all. "Choose, Albert." He had told me. I knew Miles remembered me pacing the lines of fresh adults, and I knew he remembered me pausing before him.

"Approach!" I had ordered him, and then I gave him everything.

"Defender! Approach!" I commanded. Dragging the criminal behind him, my Defender approached. He dropped the wretched creature at the edge and turned to face me. I met his eyes and waged war against his thoughts. I had given him everything, and all he was ever asked to do was to protect the ship from dangerous malefactors like the filth we were standing over.

"To his feet!" Miles pulled the quivering pile of meat and bone up as I turned away. He pleaded once more,

"No, no, no, M-Miles, please! I couldn't let her die! The Medicine cures *everything*, it should belong to *everyone*!" Finished with this belligerent terrorist, I waved my hand and commanded, "Miles."

"No." My skin turned to ice and then to fire as every muscle in my body tensed.

"Fine. I have hands of my own. You will be dealt with later." In one calculated motion, the glow of the engine bathed my face in blue as I turned on my heel and shoved with all the force I could muster.

"No! Miles!" I heard the subversive exclaim from the side. *From the side?!* My eyes focused on the descending figure of Miles below me as the reality of what I had done – no, what *he* had done – set in. I watched the blue light fade from his face as he got further from the engine.

I expected him to splat like a pancake when he hit the hull below, so I was unprepared for the gut-wrenching horror of the bounce. He impacted the rigid metal below on his side, before

lurching back into the air as if intending to fly back up and push me off instead. He made it about a foot, the middle of him reaching the highest, before twisting and collapsing like a doll onto the ground, the arm he landed on bent as if folded in half.

I tried to meet his eyes but was haunted by the dent in his head as liquid began to pool under him. The final thing I tossed off the edge that night was the contents of my stomach. I would have someone else dispose of the radical.