

## The Khaki Project

Water roared down the tunnel, the force of which pinned him against the metal bars behind him. He feels as if his head is going to be crushed through the bars that block the drainage pipe to the drainage lake. Water flowing over and splashing over his face, barely able to get any breath of air that isn't heavily laden with rain and overflowing river water. There's no time for thinking, water steadily filling his lungs. His body convulses, not strong enough to do anything but to take his torturous watery death...

It all began just a day like any other. The only thing good about it was it's a Friday... that and I just had enough go-go juice to start me up for the day. The white skinned human male gently rubs his light brown stubble on his face, peering into the coffee can, shaking it. His light brown eyes light up, "Still some of the Never Sleep Coffee, today is my lucky day," he mutters, pouring it into the jaws of death where the depths of hell await to all who dare trespass its sacred bounds, the bringer of life and death, the one that determines the fate of all men who walk upon the earth... his evil coffee maker.

"Alright Mr. Coffee, don't fail me today," he says to it, checking the water levels, flipping the switch, placing his blue ceramic mug into the coffee receptacle, "Just a few minutes and I can meet the day," he says with a big yawn, stretching, scratching his green boxers when he feels a hard bump against his ankle followed by an even harder meow.

He looks down, seeing a big ol fat black furred cat with even bigger yellow eyes. The feral feline plops his butt on the ground, stares straight up into his eyes, letting out another 'meow' that simply screams, "Now that I have gotten your attention. Do it now!"

The human smiles, "Alright, alright Axel. I'll get you your breakfast. Yours has to come before mine, doesn't it?" he asks the cat.

"Eow!" he responds.

"I'll take that as a yes," he says, smiling, going over to the cupboard pulling out a can of tuna, peeling back the metal with a crunch. The cat's eyes lighting up, licking his lips he head bumps his ankle, rubbing his entire length against him, meowing incessantly.

"It's coming, let me put it on a plate first. The last time I left it in the cat you cut your tongue, and I'm *not* going to let that happen again," he replies, briefly recalling the ear shrieking meows Axel made that fateful day, shuddering at the thought, before placing the plate of tuna on the floor, which the feline hungrily devours, purring loudly with hungry gulps, causing the plate to slowly slide across the floor and into a corner.

He slides back over to the coffee maker, the roaring of the last of the bubbling boiling water, the hiss of the demons within this untamed beast finally coming to an end, the black gold, the sustenance that keeps society glued together, saving it from itself and the fate it truly deserves. He looks into his reflection of the black coffee, peering past the untamed short brown hair and into his soul and feeling his one true urge and desire fill him. To take a piss.

He sugars and creams his coffee, taking a nice long sip, looking up at the small motivational "Hang in there kitty." poster that's right behind the coffee maker. One he never

notices till he's had that first delightful drink. Though this poster has a little bit of a spin on it, as the cat is hanging from a wire held up by two flying saucers and there's a subtext right below it that says, "The truth is out there."

"Don't worry there cat. I'll save you," he says, taking another sip of his coffee, placing it back into the coffee machine and changes the setting for a half a cup, refilling his liquid life, while heading to the bathroom to transform himself from the crazy haired young adult who looks like he's been roughed up by the world. To a well-dressed, clean shaven, nicely combed officer worker, who is ready to be roughed up by it.

His transformation complete, he opens the door, steam escaping from the bathroom and there waiting for him, staring up with those predatory eyes is Axel. Their eyes meet, the human smiles, "Were you waiting for me?" he asks.

Axel responds with a loud meow, then runs off.

"I'll take that as a maybe," he replies, returning to his contractual agreement with the devil, sipping his delicious coffee, the liquid essence that keeps him going, "Ahh that's the stuff," he says, grabbing a bowl of cereal, he sits down, enjoying his quiet little breakfast, the cat sneaking up to rub himself against his legs.

"I love you too Axel," he responds, reaching down, rubbing his fingers together to draw the cat's attention to him, "Pspspspsp," he says, the cat rushing over to rub his body against his hand, allowing him to give a few good pets, "Remember to eat your dry food while I'm gone. I know it's not your favorite, but it will keep you from starving to death."

The cat lets out a soft meow, not even paying attention to his words, purring happily, leaning into the pets as much as he can till his hand pulls away and the cat quickly nips him in the finger, "Ach! I guess I wasn't done yet, was I?"

The cat meows affirmatively staring up at him, "It's not that I wanted to stop, but I have to. Work calls. How else am I going to feed you?"

"Meow," he replies, walking off a moment later.

"That's your answer for everything," he replies, gathering his things, slipping on a coat, grabbing his umbrella, "They said there'd be a downpour today," he mutters, exiting his apartment, closing the door, turning around to see his across the street neighbor exiting her apartment.

A white freckled woman with dashing hazel eyes, she smiles at him with her puckered red lips matches her hair. Dressed in modest clothing, her red umbrella hanging from her arm, she greets him, "Isaac, leaving right on time as always."

"That always depends on traffic Bailey," he replies.

"Oh right, you actually have a car, I forgot about that. It's the subway for me," she replies.

"Nothing wrong with that, I'd take the subway myself if my job wasn't so far away from the nearest station."

"Have a safe drive."

“And you a safe commute,” he replies as a scruffy middle-aged man walks right between them, a brown paper bag in hand and the aroma of alcohol wafting over him, with a slight slur he says “cuse me.”

“Morning Jack,” says Bailey.

“You have a good night shift Mr. Daniel?” asks Isaac with a smile, feeling a pit in his stomach, already knowing the answer just from the aroma he gives off.

Jack stops at his door which is a few feet down from Isaac’s, “You’ll know on the nine o’clock news,” he states with a long-drawn-out sigh.

Bailey tenses, “That bad?” she asks, with concern in her voice.

“I’m not at liberty to say at this moment. Stay safe you two,” he responds, smiling at them before disappearing into his apartment building.

“This is why I never wanted to be a cop. There are things you just don’t want to see,” Isaac remarks.

“But don’t you run that online video channel about finding the secrets of the world or something like that?” she asks as they head down the hall toward the elevator.

He feels a pit in his stomach, face growing warm, a soft gasp escaping his diaphragm, taking a moment to delve into the devil’s juice, taking a long sip of his coffee, buying him precious seconds to organize his mind, “I hunt conspiracy theories but it’s more of a fun side hobby and I video blog it. Sometimes people like what I do. Debunking some conspiracies using logic and critical thinking, while looking for clues about others, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I misunderstood.”

“It’s fine. Given the possible alternatives to do on the weekend. There could be worse things,” he responds with a smile.

“How long have you been doing these video blogs now?” she asks.

“Ah... let’s see, I started to do it as a freshmen year college project, and I just really got into it. So, I’d say about ten or so years now... damn has it really been that long?”

“Time flies when you are having fun,” she says with a giggle, brushing her hair off to the side.

“I will definitely not classify my last decade as fun, but I get what you mean,” he responds with a smirk.

“So are there any crazy conspiracy theories that you’ll just not believe in?”

“Tons. Most conspiracy theories are to some degree crazy. Even the ones I find plausible are to some degree. The key is not to find evidence that will justify your conspiracy theory and ignore everything else that contradicts it. You have to be open minded that you can be wrong. Which I hope I am. There are a lot in the community that are staunch believers in their ideas.”

“What are your favorite ones that are just so out there that you have to wonder how people can even believe these things?”

“Gosh... there are just so many.”

“Top three, for me?” she asks with a smile.

“Since you rhymed, I suppose I can take a moment to think on it,” she responds with a chuckle, the elevator dinging reaching the ground floor.

“Don’t think too hard, I don’t want to make you late for work.”

“I’d say in no particular order. The fake moon landing. That humans are faking to be lizard people to control the scaly nations of the world. And one that always gives me a chuckle, and hits closer to home is that the Toys-4-U adult company turns people into actual toys.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It bemuses me.”

“So, you’ve been in the store then?”

“The one down the block, in that alley way?”

“Yeah.”

“*Crap... this could go bad...*” he thinks taking a long sip of the sugar and creamed demonic essence, “Once to be honest as a verification of what research I did. I’ve never been to the super megastore they have. That’s like four states away and I don’t have the time nor the money to just go to a giant ass sex shop to disprove such an outlandish theory.”

“Really now?”

“Yeah. I have better things to do with my time and money than spend it all in an adult store like that.”

“So... why do you think people buy into that conspiracy?”

“It’s a new company, and what happened with the previous major toy company? They are projecting what happened there to this one. Seeing trends that aren’t really there. Like, oh look someone went missing, and Toys-4-U has a new toy line coming out. They must be connected! Barring the fact of how many times people go missing and Toys-4-U doesn’t have a new toy line? Yeah, it’s just crazy speculation.”

“It seems like you’ve thought that one out well. How about you tell me what ones you’re into next time?” she asks with a smile.

“Next time?”

“Over say a morning coffee?” she asks with a smile, brushing her hair off to the side again, “What do you say?”

Isaac’s heart flutters, excitement rushing through him, “S-sure. I mean great. I’ll meet you at your place and we can go have a coffee together. Preferably one that’s not selling your soul just to get a double shot mocha latte.”

“I know a quaint little joint where it’s not too expensive. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye Bailey.”

“Later Isaac,” she says, the two parting ways, she heads outside, pulling out her umbrella to deflect the steady rain while he goes to the underground parking garage of the apartment complex, “Hot damn. I never thought she’d be into that kind of stuff. Is she a watcher? Fuck... what if she’s a watcher?” his heart races, doubly so with the insurgence of the devil’s blood, caffeine, flowing through him, “I’ll need to have a really good post tonight. That way we’ll have something to talk about. She was asking about conspiracy theories I believe in... I’ll think of

something... I hope," he says to himself, getting into his two-door black sedan and driving off into the thick of the steel jungle of the city, dealing with the bumper-to-bumper traffic, with constant thumping of his windshield wipers.

"Perhaps there could be some strange happenings locally that might be worth investigating. Let's see what the City Underground has for me today," he flips to the satellite radio channel.

"This little gem came to us recently but happened a few months ago. There is something strange going on at the docks. A bunch of apparently missing exotic and fierce animals were found by police in what was meant to be a sting operation for the infamous rut drug. Once they were discovered apparently the police were shooed away and when they returned all the animals were gone," says the primary host of the show.

"Say what?" responds the co-host, "How can you just shoo away the police? Can I learn how to do that for my ex? I could really use that skill."

"This came from a very reliable source, otherwise I wouldn't believe it. They described a bunch of people in black, the federal government or something like that stepped in perhaps? Who is to say, but something is just not right?"

"Which dock was it? Dock thirteen where nothing goes right?"

"Quite the opposite, dock thirty-one where nothing seems to go wrong there. I checked their records, squeaky clean. Not even one dock related accident in the last year. Which sounds a little fishy to me."

"You know our seafaring listeners won't be a fan of you saying that."

"Love it or hate it, I am who I am, and that's not going to change," he replies.

Isaac continues to listen, mulling over the conversation and banter the show had, *"I might have to look that up. There might be more to that and worth checking out. But it's so long ago, is there anything even worth discovering? I'll figure something out."*

Eventually he pulls into the parking garage of his place of work. The massive high rise building is full of energy, he checks in at the security checkpoint with his badge, "Morning Phil," says Isaac to a tanned skin human male in blue and black security inform.

"Morning Mr. Miller."

"Thank God it's Friday," he says, finishing his check in.

"For you maybe, not so much for me."

"Why's that Phil?" he asks with concern.

"You don't have a wife to go back home to," he responds with a chuckle.

"Ehhh, you got me there," he lets out a laugh, heading to the higher floors, toward his place to work down a long hallway, into a large office room filled with open three walled cubicles. The heads of various humans and a few anthropomorphic people are visible from their seated locations. They grey blue fuzz of the walls, a cell within a corporate prison. He takes a deep breath, brings his black gold to his lips and finds himself wanting. He sighs, "I guess I'll have to start this work shift with the devil's piss then," he mutters to himself, heading to the very back of the office, passing by and greeting his coworkers till he reaches a table with a lonesome

coffee pot, the coffee two thirds drunk already. Standing right beside the table, unmoving is a sleek black faceless humanoid shaped rubber drone. He looks to the drone, "Morning Q-ball," he states, the drone unresponsive while he looks over the infernal machine before him. An unholy creation that should not be, leaving the demon's blood to constantly boil till it's nothing but rot and ash in one's mouth, burning away all sanity and flavor of life.

"It's been sitting here for a while," he sighs, "Thank God it's Friday," he mutters, filling his cup with the satanic spit which he adds copious amounts of cream and sugar to cover up the sulfuric hellfire flavor that it had. He takes a tentative sip, judging the flavor, leaving him a little more dead inside, but at least the flavor itself wasn't too bad, "There we go, now I can tackle the day," he says, walking over to his cubicle.

A male anthropomorphic red-tailed fox raises his head over his cubicle, looking at him, "You know Isaac, that drone there can get you the coffee whenever you want. The company gives us it, might as well use it," he suggests.

"I feel enough like a drone here at S. Tech Murray, I prefer not using one to get my coffee."

"It's because it never gets your coffee right, isn't it?"

"Between you and me, I think the company gave us a defective one that could only complete the simplest tasks poorly, just so they can write it off as a business expense," he says, taking a seat in his cubicle which has been stylized with a few family photographs, a hang in there kitty motivational poster, but this time below it is a not too bloody but still obvious meat grinder, "You can make it through the meat grinder of life." the lower text says.

Murray laughs, "You know I wouldn't doubt it," he says, sitting back down. Isaac only getting his computer unlocked when a tanned skinned human woman pops her head up from her neighboring cubicle, "Morning Isaac," she responds with a bit of a sing in her voice.

"Morning, Chhaya," he responds, looking up at her, into her soft brown eyes, her black hair nicely combed.

"So did you hear the big news?"

"What big news?" he asks curiously.

"The boss might be coming down to us untouchables today as a surprise visit."

"Mr. Soulscar? Coming down here? Today? I find that hard to believe," he remarks.

"It's true."

Murray pokes his head up, "If it's a surprise visit, how would you know about it?"

"You know these things are never fully a surprise. People know so they can put on a pony show right before they come, so we can always look our very 'best',` she explains.

"You know, all my years working for the company, I never once even thought I saw the CEO, even though he works here," says Isaac.

"How could you be so sure?" asks Murray.

"I've never seen a sergal before that's why."

“That would do it,” he says, ears twitching turning in a different direction, “Quick back to work, *he’s coming*,” says the fox, ducking back down into his cubicle with Chhaya doing the same.

Isaac quickly gets to work when he’s interrupted only a few moments later by a long drawn-out smug voice that pulls at his words, making them as long as possible like someone stretching out taffy.

“Morning Isaac, how’s it going?” asks a stocky gentleman with greased up black hair, who gives a fiendishly unwelcoming smile, “You know you don’t have to get your coffee like some drone. We have that to do it for us. Such a waste of company time.”

“It never does my coffee right Steve. And I need my coffee to do a good job,” he explains.

“I know you’re assigned to the budget analysis for the construction project proposal for the city. Perhaps you should get on that. If the head cheese comes down and asks about it. It would be a shame if you have nothing to offer, wouldn’t you think?”

“Shouldn’t you be at your desk Steve doing your work?”

“I’m on my fifteen,” he responds.

“Already?”

“I came in early to tackle the day.”

Murray pops his head over the side of the cubicle, “You know Steve. Calling Mr. Soulscar, a *sergal* the big cheese could be misconstrued as an insult. It would be a shame if he came to visit and heard someone say something so speciesly charged. That really might not go well.”

“I said nothing of the sort. You must clearly be mistaken,” he says, looking at his wristwatch, “Well look at that, my break is just about over, I should get back to work.”

“Yes, please do,” he responds, Steve walking off.

Isaac looks up at him, “Thanks.”

“Any time. I occasionally got a sly moment in me,” he replies with a wink, sitting back in his cubicle getting to work.

Isaac goes through the data report, his smart phone charging, leaning against the monitor, where he can flip through some local news channels and reports with a few taps and swipes of his finger, taking a minute here or a minute there to look over what’s there, while keeping most of his focus on the report.

*“There is one larger news network that talks about a long list of exotic missing animals from felines to theropods. But then only two local news networks even mentioned there was a drug bust at the docks, and only one of them mentioned it was dock thirty-one. So there’s not a lot of information to verify but it’s more than some of the things they’ve said on that podcast,”* he thinks.

“Hey Isaac,” says Murray about two hours into the shift, still sitting at his desk working away, tail fluffed out, swishing between the slot in his chair.

“Yeah?” he asks, raising his head.

“Mind coming over here and helping me out for a moment, I’m having a little bit of an issue that I need a second set of eyes on.”

‘Sure, sure,’ he replies, picking up and pocketing his phone, moving over to the fox’s cubicle what has a little bobble head fox that’s chasing a chicken, as well as a picture of his wife and three kids pinned to the wall, as well as a motivation poster that says, “Be the fox in the hen house, not the hen.”

Murray looks over his shoulder at him, “I just got this new budget request from IT, an emergency came up with one of the servers and they need replacement. I can’t find anything from the budget I could cut to divert funds away for this period.”

“Let me see,” he says, peering over his shoulder.

“The budget has gotten tight this year due to the recession.”

“It’s been hard hit on all of us for sure,” he says, scrolling through the document, “That’s a lot of funds you have to divert for this. Why didn’t they warn us about this potential problem? What is IT good for?” he mutters.

“I know. They don’t tell us what’s broken till it actually breaks.”

“They really live up to their name, the helpless desk,” remarks Murray.

“Tell me about it,” says Isaac with a sigh, “That’s an expensive server, do they really cost that much?”

“Good ones.”

“Sheesh, I can see why you’re having such an issue. Perhaps cutting a percent here, and a percent there, it might be a little tight, but it might give you a big enough of a window to stagger the payments or perhaps put an easier to swallow request to expand the budget,” he suggests.

“Yeah, that’s what I was afraid of, but I needed a second set of eyes on it you know?”

“I hear you. Anything else I can help you with?”

“No,” he says with a sigh, ears folding, “That should be it. Thanks man.”

“Anything fox,” he replies, slinking back to his desk.

“How very nice of you to help your coworker when he needs it. I hope the decision works out... if not you better own up to helping out his mistake,” says Steve, sipping the demonic nectar of his own.

“Steve... what is it to you?” he asks with a grump, spinning around in his chair, “*Glad I didn’t have time to pull out my phone yet,*” he thinks.

“I’m just saying that credit should go where it’s due. I know I’d never leave anyone I helped out to dry if things went awry. What kind of person would do that?”

“I don’t know Steve; I don’t think anyone here is that kind of person if I am to be honest. Though if you don’t mind, I do have to get back to my work.”

“Of course, of course, I was simply passing through after using the restroom and I just happened to be passing by is all. Keep up the good work,” he says, heading down to his cubicle.

Chhaya peeks over the cubicle wall, remarking, “The bathroom doesn’t even lead past your cubicle. What a twat.”



Isaac laughs a little, “Yeah he is, but outside of his annoying comments, I think he’s rather harmless.”

“He’s pretty much the boss’ pet. He goes to her about anything that could be considered problematic. Meaning anything he does he can simply get away with. After all, he’s done such a *good* job so far. What else could go wrong?”

He takes a deep breath and sighs, “Yeah... yeah. I get you. No matter where you go, there’s always that one guy. You can’t get away from it. It’s one of those facts of life.”

“I know...” she says with a defeated sigh.

“How goes your work?”

“Long and tedious, yours?”

“Same.”

“Did you want to get some lunch in a couple of hours.”

“That sounds good.”

“Murray, would you like to get some lunch?”

The fox pops his head up from the cubicle, “Sure, any suggestions?”

“How about that new curry restaurant that opened down the block?”

“Do they deliver?” asks Murray.

“You don’t want to go there?” she asks.

The fox shoots her a look, have you seen outside?” he asks, looking out toward the windows. She and Isaac turn to see a wall of water rolling down the sides of the building, blurring the view of the city landscape.

Isaac remarks, “Those soundproofing windows are something. I didn’t even hear the rain. Though my phone was telling me that there is a chance of flash floods today.”

“Now that you mention it, I’ll see if they can deliver. I was hoping to get away from the office for a bit, but it doesn’t look like that will be the case. This has been one heck of a Friday. Is today the thirteenth or something?” she asks.

“Seventeenth,” replies Murray.

“I’ll see if I can get some menus and if they deliver.”

Isaac replies, “Appreciate it Chhaya. I haven’t had some good curry in a while.”

“I didn’t know you liked curry.”

“I like a lot of things, but I tend to get lost in my trends and next thing I know, it’s been six months of having the same thing day in and day out,” says Isaac.

“I can understand that. I love chicken a lot myself and I like to have it prepared every which way, but quiet often it’s just grilled, fried, breaded, raw or sauteed,” says Murray.

“What was that?”

“My wife can cook up a mean sauteed chicken. I should invite you both over sometime, but my misses get a little excitable when people she doesn’t know come over.”

“You said something before the sauteed, what was it?”

“Breaded. She uses this fine seasoned bread that coats the chicken skin or no skin, and it’s just... delicious. Thinking about it right now is getting my mouth watering,” he replies.

“No, no there was another one.”

“It’s still two some hours till lunch. It’s best not to talk about it right now. Otherwise, you know who might get a little antsy about it.”

“Fine, fine,” Isaac replies, getting back to work, thinking, *“I swear he said raw there for a moment. Nothing wrong with it, but...”* his mind trails off for a moment, before forcing himself to focus back on his work. Eventually lunch break comes, the food ordered, and brought over. The three of them sitting at a table in the company’s cafeteria where the sound of food being prepared in the back rings out, dishes clattering in the back, over a hundred employees from all levels of the building have gathered to share in their timed meal break. This place is near constant when it comes to how busy it is, having a lot of the departments having staggered lunch breaks so as not to overwhelm the company’s eatery places.

A few fast-food restaurants are also built into the cafeteria, providing some alternative options as a vain attempt to keep the morale of the officer workers up. Occasionally a smooth black faced rubber drone will move about the place, bussing tables, keeping the place clean.

Their food is laid out before them, the bags that contain them ripped to shreds, the knots too tight to have broken into the bags otherwise, “This does look good, but one moment. I need to make another sacrifice to the rulers of this world before I can enjoy this red curry,” says Isaac, getting up from the table, heading toward the overpriced but relatively good coffee restaurant that always has a line.

Chhaya looks to him curiously, whispering over to Murray, “What did he just say about sacrifice?”

“Ah, you never heard him talk about coffee, have you?”

“On occasion he’d say something weird, but I never paid much mind to it.”

“It’s just his way to admit he has an unhealthy addiction to the stuff,” he replies, finally getting out of earshot from Isaac.

The human gets into the occultish line. Those readying themselves to prostrate themselves before the one true ‘god’ that runs the infernal realm. He looks at the haggard faces, people just happy to get to the midway point of the day before the glorious release of the weekend, but deep down knowing that Monday is only three days away, and that’s three days too soon.

With each step he’s brought closer to the abyss, which he will stare into, knowing it will stare right back, into the cold depth of his soul, finding him wanting for nothing and yet everything. The friendly female human cashier greets him. A gilded mask she puts on to lure unsuspecting souls into a pact of which there is no escape from once signed. For after having tasted that bittersweet nectar, having it invigorate your body, tainting your soul, there is no escape.

“Hello! How can I help you?” she asks in a sweet voice, a siren’s call that brings unsuspecting sailors to the shore.

He smiles, “I’d like a quadruple shot iced mocha latte with caramel cream drizzle, a little light on the ice, medium sugar on top of that.

“Sure, coming right up, that will be twenty-five, twenty-six,” she replies.

He swipes his card. Another piece of himself sold away for poultry return on investment. A devil’s deal where there was really no way to get out except to sign yourself away to it.

“Here you go,” she says, handing him the drink moments later.

Isaac smiles, “Thank you,” he takes a sip, feeling the cold void of the beverage hit his lips, sapping the warmth of all that is good and holy from his mouth, letting the decadence of this life flood his taste buds. A sinful experience which he’s compelled to go back to time and time again simply to make it through his current life, his next already sold to the lowest bidder. He sits back down with the others, “They did a good job on this today. I’m impressed,” he says, mixing his food.

“I submitted the report to the boss right before lunch. Hopefully they’ll find it acceptable, and if so, I have you to thank for that, Isaac.”

“The least I can do.”

“And if I get in trouble, it’s all your fault,” he remarks.

“We can blame Steve for it,” he replies as the trio burst out into laughter.

Chhaya wipes a tear from her face, “My parents said never to hate a man for it taints you, but dang it, I really hate that man,” she replies.

“That’s something we can all agree upon,” says Murray.

“There’s always one of them,” Isaac replies, looking down at his phone, sliding his fingers across the screen, doing a few internet browser searches about dock thirty-one, “*Huh, interesting. It appears the dock was officially run by Dynamic Defense Corp, a multi-billion-dollar defense contractor. One of S. Tech’s competitors. It says here that the dock was rented out to people a month before the sting operation, but it doesn’t say to who. Doesn’t surprise me, not like I can get all the information with a few quick internet searches. If it was that easy, my hobby would be boring,*” he thinks.

“Hey Isaac, what are you looking at that has hooked your attention?” asks Murray.

“Huh? Oh, nothing really. Just looking up random shit on the internet. I thought I heard something interesting on the way to work and so I decided to do a little research into it, instead of just outright believing it.”

“What? Not outright believing something you randomly heard? Are you sure you aren’t human? That sounds like fox behavior to me,” says Murray, leaning in close.

“Nope, still one hundred percent human.”

“In this life, but if you stick to a righteous path, you can ascend to a higher species,” says Chhaya.

“You’ve said that, but I’ve been meaning to ask. And I don’t mean any offense, I am not that big on the past and future lives believe, but it’s been nagging me. What is considered a higher species?”

“Technically elephant, but I’d love to be a peacock if I am to be honest. They have such beautiful feathers.”

“You do know that it’s the male peacocks that have them, right?” asks Isaac.

“What one is in one life is not tied to the next except how one purifies their soul so it can be judged and deemed to move up or down on the plane of existence,” she replies.

“Right now, I’ll say this curry has put me on a higher plane of existence for I am in heaven. This chicken is spicy but not too much so, and there’s an aftertaste that just gets my fur all tingly, it’s delicious. Thanks for the suggestion, Chhaya.”

“What can I say, I’ve had a lot of experience with curry.”

“I have to agree, the food is really good. Thanks for suggesting it.”

“I’m pleased they were able to deliver in this rain and keep our food dry. Thanks for pitching in for a good tip.”

“Anyone who’s willing to make that trek through this waterfall? Deserves a tip,” replies Isaac.

“I haven’t seen rain like this since I was a child,” says Chhaya, pulling out her phone, checking the weather report.

Isaac continues his browsing, doing a few more searches for the Dynamic Defense Company, “*Huh, they have a big facility not far from the docks. Only a couple of miles. From the satellite images, looks rather heavy in its construction, like a mini prison or something. I wonder what they are doing there. Could it have to do with what happened there?*” he asks himself, typing in another search, eyes widening slightly tilting his head, “Now, isn’t that something.”

“Is what something?” asks Murray.

“Even though it’s only a few local news articles that picked up about this missing animal thing that was apparently a drug bust gone wrong, it seems like Anthros for the ethical treatment of animals has picked up the ‘cause’ and puts the company who owns the docks to blame with what happened,” he says, turning his phone around playing a news article of the organization leader a middle aged female human declaring that these missing animals will be found and that Dynamic Defense will pay for their lack of foresight and care over the illegal poaching of these rare and precious animals.

“AETA That’s more like animals for the ethical treatment of animals. Those crazy people have respect for no one. And amusingly enough the leader of the whole organization is a human even though they talk about anthros doing it for anthros,” comments Chhaya.

Murray lets out a soft growled yip, causing the humans to stop their conversation dead in their tracks. Isaac turns his attention to him, “Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” says Chhaya.

“No, no, you didn’t. Those people give us anthros a bad name. People think we are tied to our feral counterparts and that makes it hard to get past people’s preconception. And then others walk around eggshells thinking, ‘oh if you make a joke about how sly foxes are, he’ll get mad,’ and shit like that,” he explains, changing the tone of his voice when he refers to the conversation.

“Yeah it’s rough. But we know you aren’t like those people,” says Chhaya.

“I know it’s just...”

“Just what?” asks Isaac.

“Well, I had...” he takes a deep breath waving it off, “Never mind. Let's just not talk about that, okay?” he asks.

“Sure thing,” replies Isaac, taking a sip of his corruptive demonic blood, relaxing himself by exciting his blood.

“I never knew you had such an issue with them.”

“I prefer not to talk about it okay? Let's just drop it,” he says, taking another bite of his curry his mind shifting back to the deliciousness of the food before him, “That's more like it, yes,” he says, licking his lips in delight.

“You know I wonder when the boss is going to show up. You'd think he'd come down already,” says Isaac, changing the conversation.

“That's if he is coming,” replies Murray.

“He'll be coming, I'm rarely wrong about these things,” replies Chhaya.

“What about the time you said the boss was getting a promotion and we're going to get someone new?” asks the fox.

“That was just... a one off. No one is perfect, you know.”

Isaac speaks up, “What about the time you said there was going to be a fire drill and that we should be ready for it at a moment's notice, so we could score good and be the best in the building?”

“Well... that was me being a little misinformed. If I get bad information, I can't help you right?”

Murray then says, “Well what about the time that...”

“I got it. Sheesh. Sometimes I'm wrong, I admit that, is that so bad?”

“No, not at all,” he replies.

“But I'll say your accuracy on where to get a good lunch is a hundred percent,” says Isaac.

“I can agree to that, thanks Chhaya again for an excellent selection,” responds the fox, scraping the bottom of the barrel of his bowl of food, ears folding back, “I should have gotten more.”

“There's always Monday,” says Chhaya.

“Are you trying to seriously get me to look forward to a Monday? For I don't think my brain can handle such a contradiction.”

“And what if I am?” she asks with a smile.

“I'd say you made a very convincing argument for Monday.”

“And we should be able to walk our way over there if we aren't drowned in a sea of rain by then.”

“Sounds good to me. Isaac, want to come?” asks Murray.

“There was something else on their menu I wanted to try, so sure why not,” he replies.

“Well, that's a date then,” says Chhaya with a smile, finishing their meals before heading back up to get to work.

*"I'll need to do something big for mine tomorrow. I'll be sure to find something if I spend the day looking,"* thinks Isaac, taking a sip of his unholy concoction, resuming his work. Feeling rather grateful that the boss was a no show as he took moments here and there to look up more information to help narrow down his search, making his drive straight to where he wanted to go all the easier, which is needed given the still constant flow of rain down upon the city.

"Damn, I never seen such a heavy rain in all my life," remarks Isaac, his windshield wipers thumping away, keeping the window as clear as he can, while driving to a spot about a block away from his actual destination, taking a good ten minutes to find a parking spot near the docks in question.

His phone suddenly buzzes with a warning just as he parks the car. He looks at it, noticing that it's giving a warning of flash floods in the area, "Good thing I paid for the water-resistant version," he says, grabbing his phone, turning the camera to himself, hitting record, "Hello there fellow conspiracy theorists. It's me, your favorite conspiracy blogger, The Spiracy Debunker. Here in the middle of a heavy rainstorm," he says, pointing the camera to the water washed car around him, "To get to the bottom of a mystery. What does a drug bust gone wrong, a multi-billion-dollar military contractor, and missing exotic animals all have something in common? We're here to find out. Before the crazy ideas and conspiracy theories can fly about what happened. I'm here to get the ground floor scoop. Get to the source of what happened. Get the facts you see? Wish me luck," he says, pocketing his phone, grabbing his umbrella and about to step out into the rain when he stops himself.

"I almost forgot the most important thing of any person trying to get anywhere where he might not be supposed to," he says, grabbing a clipboard, a pen and some paper, that are already placed in a Ziplock bag. "There we go."

He steps out of the car, the rain pitter patters against his umbrella, his feet splashing in a thin layer of water that's all across the parking lot. Undeterred he looks out toward the docks, and the truck drivers, crane and forklift operators that push on with their job, having little choice but to face the rain, but under the wet haze that surrounds the area, it makes his movements easier to get by without being noticed by anyone.

Isaac juggles with all the items in his possession from his phone that provides his GPS location, umbrella that keeps some of himself out of the rain and the Ziplock clipboard that he keeps under his armpit while working with all the other items, "It should be about this way,"

"I wonder if the river is going to flood... it's a big river but this is a lot of rain," he mutters, moving to and fro the docks, having to get close to the signs in order to read them, "I'm almost to dock thirty-one and the associated warehouses," he says, looking at the tall buildings, water just pouring off the sides.

"Hey! You aren't supposed to be here!" yells a large human dock worker, approaching Isaac, who turns to face him. The dock worker is wearing a rain poncho which is doing little to keep him dry in this downfall.

"Eh? I can't hear you, what was that?" he asks, approaching him.

"I said you aren't supposed to be here!" he yells.

“Of course, I am. I’m the safety inspector,” he says, motioning to his clipboard.

The dock worker looks at him curiously, looking up and down at him, “What are you doing here at a time like this?”

“Look man. I’m just here to do my job. Do you think I want to be out here in this shit?”

He takes a moment, letting out a laugh, “I feel you there buddy.”

“Look, my boss is breathing down my neck that no one has gotten down here since what happened with that so-called drug bust. They want to make sure everything is above the table if you get what I mean?”

“Ah that,” he says, getting a closer look at him, “You aren’t a reporter now?”

“Do I look like a fucking reporter? Do you think those vultures would come in this shitty weather? They just want me to check to make sure the police didn’t break anything on top of what I told you. What they make of the report is on them. Do you think you can help me? I can barely see in this.”

“Sure, I’ll take you. They were about to put things on hold, the water is getting too choppy, and they are sending folks home. Now is as good a time as any to inspect and not be in the way,” he replies, leading him toward the target building.

*“Praise be the clipboard, how you never fail me,”* he thinks, replying, “Small miracles. I haven’t heard the docks being closed for weather since that flash freeze where the river froze over for three days,” he says.

“The ships weren’t coming, but we were still working. I thought I was going to freeze my ass off,” he says, going to a large warehouse on the far side of the docks near where the ground was starting to rise up but man and machine dug into the earth to carve out the section where it was built.

“I didn’t get a day off either, so I feel you there,” he says, the dock worker opening a side door to enter the building, “Tell me, where you here when this all happened?”

He looks at him curiously, reevaluating him for a moment.

*“I shouldn’t have asked that,”* he thinks, quickly saying, “I want to know if you know anything that was damaged by the police. You know how abrasive they can be when they jump into situations like this.”

“No, I wasn’t actually, there were damaged doors, but they’ve already been repaired and put up to code, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“You caught me,” he says, the two stepping into the large warehouse with its tall storage racks, the place far larger and emptier than he’s expecting with only a third of it currently being utilized, “Thanks, I appreciate it. It really makes my job easier.”

“Look, I need to get back to what I was doing, is there anything else you need?”

“I’ll be good, but thanks I appreciate it.”

“How long do you think you’ll be?”

“I’d say about an hour. They want a ‘thorough’ inspection if you get what I mean. Don’t know what they are expecting me to find. A broken conveyor belt? A guard rail that isn’t up to code? Actual drugs?” he asks hypothetically with a shrug.

“I don’t know what to tell you, I just work here. I don’t handle that sort of thing. I take the crates and move them from one place to the next and make sure others are doing the same. What’s in them? None of my business and never was. I’ll send someone in about an hour to check up on you.”

“Appreciate it. This place is a maze. I don’t know how you do it.”

“It’s easier when it’s not raining harder than my shower this morning.”

“I hear ya. If I knew I’d be out here, I’d skip my morning shower and save on the water bill.”

The dockworker laughs, “Tell me about it,” he says, waving him off, exiting the building, leaving him alone to move through the open area, the sound of rushing water overhead, the windows darkened by the flow of water across them. Ceiling fans slowly spin, circulating the cool outside air, preventing the air from getting stale. The large bay doors down the way are closed, with yellow and orange markings on the floor giving vital information to the workers.

Right now, though the place is devoid of people save for himself, footsteps echoing through the place, large thick metal beams crisscross overhead with an internal crane system to help lift some boxes, while lined up along the back wall are large forklifts sitting idle ready to be used.

Metal barriers divide the place up, where conveyor belts line across the inside of half the warehouse. Isaac gives a quick look around, faking the clipboard use in his hand and once he realizes that he’s in the clear he pulls out the phone, recording away from himself, “Here’s the famous or perhaps infamous warehouse where the drug bust happened, but an illicit animal poaching ring was discovered, where all the animals disappeared, and the incident was tossed under the rug. This video is brought to you by an anonymous source, who would prefer to remain hidden,” he says, walking through the place, recording his inspection.

“So far nothing appears to be out of the ordinary. Any damages that occurred from the police drug bust have already been repaired. Is that too quick given the situation? Who is to say or judge? I don’t know enough about that to say for certain. What I can say as I view this video is that nothing appears to be too out of the ordinary, except how empty the place is. Many of the storage racks are empty, and places to put larger crates and storage boxes are bare.”

He continues to look around, recording, keeping an eye on the battery life of his phone, “*Plenty of battery but that can go fast when recording,*” he thinks, “Nothing too out of the ordinary as I look at this video. I really must say it was nice of my contact to risk themselves like they are at this moment. So brave to try to bring us the truth. To squash the fledgling conspiracies in their tracks so we can put effort into the real ones. One day we’ll find proof... one day,” he says, following along the conveyor belt, stopping where it turns away from the heavy machinery equipment against the wall.

“What do we have here...” he mutters to the camera, catching a slight oddity with the conveyor belt. Where most of the sidings are hard railing here it seems they can bend down and the join where two belts can meet is oddly flexible, “Damn it why did he go past that, I’ll have to rewind and view this longer, call my contact quickly to find out more,” he says, nonchalantly



recording past where he's going before shutting off his phone, "*What do we have... I might have something for two blog episodes,*" he thinks with some excitement, hopping over to the other side of the conveyor belt seeing scratch marks along the concrete floor.

He turns the camera on again, "Okay I contacted my contact, and they are inspecting this strange thing, at their own risk! So brave people. I'm glad to have people who help me out. I guess I'll be going out there to meet them. Hopefully the weather will be on my side when I go," he says, all the while he moved behind the equipment, squeezing through to show a subtle crevice in the wall, very well camouflage, needing to use his phone's light to get a good look at it, "Yup does look like they found something. Perhaps it'll be good, will let you know!" he says, turning the phone off again.

He runs his hands along the crevices of the wall, feeling it up, noticing the concrete like feel of the real wall and the cooler sensation of the hidden door, "I doubt there is an easy way to just open this..." he says looking over the door, getting an idea of where the hinges are, taking a good ten minutes to inspect it, barely able to see the hinges of the door, "Okay, okay. Now how to force the door open? A secret door has to have a way to be opened, but I doubt I could just simply find a secret button to open it," it's probably some panel somewhere or a signal to do it..." he says, taking another few minutes to push and feel along the wall.

"Damn it. I should have brought more devil's piss with me to figure this out," he says taking a step back, bumping into the massive forklift. He turns, his eyes light up, a grin forming on his face, "I guess I don't need the devil to get a devilish idea..." he says, climbing onto the forklift, looking over the controls, testing them, the machine being unresponsive.

"That would be too easy, wouldn't it?" he asks himself, looking over it, noticing there is a keyhole, "I need a key... Of course, there would be a key required to operate this. And they are probably locked away somewhere where I don't think I'll be able to BS my way through," he mutters with a sigh, leaning into the back of the chair looking over to the half a dozen other forklifts that are lined up in a row, "Unless..." he says, hopping off, climbing onto the next one checking the machine's ignition slot for a key... nothing.

"Damn it," he grumps, checking the next one, also nothing. And the next. Nothing and the next. Nothing. Undeterred he checks the next machine, climbing into the seat, reaching for the spot where the key would be, bumping into it. His heart races, "Yes! God bless the lazy forgetful man who forgot about the key in the ignition," he says, grabbing the key, rushing over to the first forklift.

"Now lets see if these are universal or unique," he says, climbing back into the seat, slipping the key into the ignition, "Please be universal, please, please, please," he says twisting the key the forklift revving up, coming to life, "Fuck yes!" he exclaims in excitement, fiddling with the controls, jerking the machine back and forth, tapping the pedal to get an idea how it works before he backs it into the door with a thud and a crack. He pulls forward checking the damage behind him.

The stone is cracked and damage, the door pushed in, "Let's hope that is enough," he says getting off seeing the door angled away from him, a crack of the room behind just visible, the

space for him is tight but he just managed to wiggle his way through and into near complete darkness.

He pulls out his flashlight from his coat pocket clicking it in on to see a hidden conveyor belt system that leads out in the direction of the hill the warehouse is build into, “Why what do we have here,” he says, turning on his phone, “We managed to find this secret passageway. My contact is stepping out, letting me take the risk to venture forth deeper into whatever this is,” he says, recording the slightly open door and the conveyor belt that is at least a yard in width, traveling along the side of the wall, “This appears to be some kind of secret conveyor belt system that would connect to the warehouse’s own system. There might be something to this conspiracy theory, but what? Actual drugs? Or are the missing animals real and they were taken this way, but for what purpose? I’ll tell you more as I discover it,” he says, turning off the phone.

“Have to save battery. Only a fool would use their phone as an actual flashlight,” he mutters to himself, moving down this cool and damp tunnel. The lights that hang overhead are off with no clear way to turn them on. His footsteps echo out, crunching on bits of gravel and whatever small bits of garbage that happened to be here.

Along the side of the wall are occasional scratch marks, “If the animals were in metal cages they probably ran across the wall,” he comments, moving forward, feeling the tunnel gentle curve keeping the conveyor belt system running smoothly. The tunnel itself is big enough to give only a small side path for Isaac to walk beside the conveyor belt system, seeming as if the tunnel was made just for this.

Suddenly they are brought higher up, having to go two flights of steps at least, the sound of rushing water echoing down the tunnel, “Is this connected to the city’s water drainage system? If so, is the city also in on this? Or is some official being bought?” he mutters, reaching the point where the tunnel connects to the water tunnel. He stops reaching the end of this secret tunnel, finding a platform that can be raised and lowered that the conveyor belt stops too, “Crap I should really record this,” he says, scrambling to grab his phone, turning it back on.

“I’ve been following this tunnel for I’m not sure how long, but it suddenly ends,” he says showing the end of the passageway, “But the conveyor belt stops at this platform form. You can hear the sound of rushing water from the city’s water drainage system. Is the city hiding something? Or is this something the Dynamic Defense built without the city’s knowledge? A secret path to connect to their massive water drainage system so they can move animals about unnoticed. But still, why would they do this? What is the purpose? I’m going to go down and try to suss out where this tunnel leads. But due to the rain there is a lot of water, so this could be dangerous. So, this either will be the end of blog either because I died or I realized how fucking dangerous this is and I prefer to wait for a drought to check this out, now that I know this is here rather than risk it all now. Wish me luck!” he says, showing himself lowering the platform, which is built into the roof of the water drainage system to look exactly like the ceiling and the wall, “This is Isaac Miller, signing off for now, wish me luck!” he exclaims, turning off the recording.

He swings his flashlight around looking at the water flowing through the tunnel below. He looks around trying to gauge how deep it is, "It looks traversable," he says, lowering the platform steadily, slowly, till it reaches the bottom, stepping off, he finds that he's shin deep in water, the flow steady but not overpowering, "This will slow me down but not too dangerous. No one has drowned in a foot deep of water without someone else helping," he chuckles, checking his phone, "I wonder..."

He checks his GPS, "Shit, I love this provider, I have two bars down here? That's freaking amazing," he exclaims, looking over his location, "This is sort of in the direction of that Defense Dynamic building. I bet if I keep heading that way, I'll find something. And once I find some more proof, that's it. I'm no hero to rescue some animals or stand up to some multi-billion-dollar corporation. I can't stand up to my own boss *within* a multi-billion-dollar corporation, let alone this. But I know I will have *plenty* to talk about with Bailey when I get back," he says with a grin, feeling a rush of excitement, adrenaline shooting through him, pushing on through the tunnel.

Meanwhile over at the Defensive Dynamic a blond-haired woman with blue eyes, dressed in a business suit monitors the movement of a dozen cylinders that are all tightly clustered together. Each canister which is about a foot in diameter and three feet in height. She twitches and winces with each wobble and shakes them as they are being carted through the lab.

"Careful! Careful!" she exclaims her voice hoarse and desperate.

The clueless transport crew moves them with care, taking note of the biohazard, corrosive, and toxic symbols that are plastered on each of the canisters.

The anthropomorphic razorback gorilla lets out a huff, "We can handle this. We've moved dangerous material all the time," he explains, looking to his helper an anthropomorphic female grey skinned rhino.

"Oooo... you just don't understand how careful you have to be with these," she states with ever growing concern.

The gorilla thinks, "*Sheesh, she's been like this all day. She acts like this is the first time we are transporting laboratory waste for the company,*" he gives a comforting smile, "We've done this before. It's what we are paid to do. We won't let anything happen to them till they reach their destination. I'll handle them as if it were my own child," he explains.

The woman looks visibly put at ease, but she bites her red glossy lipstick covered lip, eyeing the containers, "Please do. I don't know what I'd do if something were to happen," she squirms with anxiety.

"Forgive Miss Tempoole. She can be rather nervous when moving hazardous waste. Last thing we'd want is a spill. That'd be an ecological disaster," explains a tall broad shouldered bald black skinned middle-aged man.

"Don't worry Mr. Ploro, we'll be very careful with this move," says the Gorilla.

"Glad to hear it," Mr. Ploro responds with a smile, looking over to Miss Tempoole, who appears to be on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

The gorilla gives them a nod before steadily carting the containers out of the lab and down the hall with his companion taking the lead point.

Miss Tempoole looks in their direction about to reach out to them when Mr. Kaffee places a hand on her shoulder, “Relax Shirley. This is going to be a smooth transition. Everything has been going fine and we’ll be able to take them to a place where we can fully test them.”

She swallows a lump in her throat, “It’s too soon. They aren’t ready. They are still young and learning Kaffee,” she replies, rubbing her hands together.

“We’ve put our hearts and souls into this, it’s time we test what we’ve discovered.”

“I’m going to stay close. They could get so... scared if neither of us are there,” she replies walking off after them.

Mr. Porlo sighs, “You’re too attached to the things,” he mutters following.

“Why did it have to be raining so hard today? What if there is an accident on the way to the new location?”

“Relax. We’re taking every precaution we can without drawing too much attention to ourselves. After what happened with the false flagging we have to tread lightly. Otherwise, we’ll draw the eyes of unwanted company,” remarks Kaffee.

“I wish I could accompany the transportation,” she says with angst in her voice.

“We’ll be arriving a day after they reach their location. Relax. You’ve done a lot of work. Take this time to relax,” he explains.

“How can I relax when they are being taken away like this?”

“They aren’t being ‘taken away’ as you like to put it,” he groans, they reach the loading bay, the truck is inside the building, the docking bay door where it will exit is open, and the wall of water flowing off the building is before them. The water blurring the view of the paved backlot of the building complex. The fenced in area hidden by the limited vision caused by the rain.

The container is strapped securely within the back of the medium sized truck. They close up, locking the back, “That’s that. Now we’ll just take it where you need it to go and that’ll be that,” says the gorilla.

“Just be sure to drive safely, okay? It’s still raining rather hard,” she says, walking up to him.

He takes a deep breath, holding back a sigh of frustration, looking at her, “Miss Tempoole, we’ve done this before. We know what we are doing. We’ll drive carefully, look both ways when crossing the railroad tracks, and signal well before changing lanes. The whole spiel. We’ll be so safe that my grandmother will be complaining we aren’t taking any risks.”

“Thank you. I really do appreciate it,” she says with a big smile, adjusting her glasses that are beginning to fog up.

“Just doing our job Miss,” he says, getting into the driver seat while the Rhino slips into the passenger side, the doors slam with an echo as they close, the rumble of the truck’s engine fills the room.

Shirley tenses, watching the truck drive through the wall of water. She watches the truck drive out into the parking lot, about to fade into the haze of the rain toward the exit when a large black van with a popped tire, sparks flying crashes hard into the side of the truck busting right through causing the truck to spin while ejecting the containers out all over the place sending some containers flying out into the distance.

Shirley screams like a mother who just witnessed her child being shot. She's about to rush out into the rain when Kaffee grabs her by the shoulder, "Let go of me!" she exclaims.

"Calm down something isn't right," he says, firmly holding her when a dozen people rush out of the back of the van, mostly anthropomorphic people but there are two humans with them. A few of them are armed with guns while others are carrying sledgehammers and fire-axes.

"What we get with a human driver," grunts a lion.

"I heard that," says a human, "But forget about it. Focus on finding the animals and punishing these people for what they've done!"

"Right," he says, some invaders firing off some shots.

Kaffee forces Shirley close to the ground, "We'll let security handle this," he says, pulling out a communicator, "We have a code black. I report a code black in the docking area," he says, other guards who were there doing the same, engaging the attackers.

"What's going on?! Who are they!" exclaims Shirley, who screams when bullets whiz by.

"Don't know."

"Could they be another company?" she asks, looking out, tensing, seeing some of the containers in the mess and wreckage.

"Don't know, we need to get someplace safe."

"But what about them?!" she exclaims, trying to move toward the wreck.

"When it's safe," he says, dragging her away, watching to see the attacker swarm out like locusts from the van and two other vehicles.

A golden tanned female human with black hair screams out commands for the others to follow. The large anthropomorphic people, many big muscular varieties, lions, elephants, horses, two varieties of whales, and others. They storm out toward the facility, overpowering the initial guards, some making their way into the building, gunshots ringing out just as Kaffee and Shirley rush out of the loading docks and deeper into the building toward safety.

The human female looks over the initial instruction going over to check on those on the van that didn't leave immediately, "Are you okay?" she asks, checking on the driver, a dark-skinned human male who grunts, pushing the airbag away from them.

"Ah yeah, I lost control of the van when the tires popped."

"You did a good job hitting their truck. Who knows what they had in it," she says, stepping away from the van looking over the cylinders seeing the warnings all over them, "What were they transporting here?" she mutters, body soaked in the heavy rain, water dripping from her nose and fingertips.

One of the containers is bent and cracked, an inch gap in the reinforced metal, a sleek black and red liquid oozes out of it, pushing and moving through the rain with a glistening sheen. The water is difficult for it to push against, but it manages to sense someone nearby, warmth of a person, the electrical impulses made by every movement they make.

It senses a drive and need within it. Instincts? Desire? Consciousness? It knew darkness for so long, isolation yet feeling others like it nearby, a community in isolation. A community of isolation. The amorphous blob moves through and past other metal containers, sensing others on the other side of the metal walls, yet not knowing what was separating them from each other. Simply knowing that they were able to be separated, but the drive and desire to find a thing for itself was overpowering any other 'thought' it could produce. Like a thirsty person's drive to drink, a starving man's desire to eat, all other thoughts are given away toward this one goal.

It reaches out, latching onto the wet cloth of the person who is still moving and looking at the containers, undeterred by the gun violence and warning sirens going off within the facility. She looks in that direction, stopping allowing the sleek mass to catch up to her, feeling around the inert cloth, knowing that isn't what it was looking for, but it was close, it slips under the pants, up their leg, finding contact with their skin, quickly spreading, finding more area of contact, sinking into them.

With lustful aggression it slides across their leg, and around their body within seconds, the human jumping and pulling back from the sensation, patting down her leg, "What the hell?!" she exclaims, the entirety of the entity already flowing across her, following her veins, nervous system, along her spine, sinking into her body, causing her to suddenly collapse.

The anthropomorphic lion rushes to her moments later, his fur soaked as much as the human's clothes, "Tila! Are you okay Tila?" he asks, picking her up, checking her over, seeing nothing visibly wrong with her.

A surge of adrenaline awakes Tila, coming to, her head is pounding, body aching, "Aha... what happened?" she mutters, getting to her feet.

"You fell suddenly. So far, we've been unable to break past the cargo area. They got this place locked in tight, Carl and Barnabee have been injured, but more of the company's tools are coming."

"This place is more heavily guarded than we realized," she mutters, her eyes aching, feeling as if they are about to pop out of her skull, vision shifting in and out of focus when she looks around, seeing the containers across the lot, noticing there are small, trapped animals in each one, pawing at the walls, eager to get free.

"We need to get them out of there, get some of the other muscle to break open the tops of those containers!" she exclaims pointing to the metal containers across the parking lot.

The lion looks at the metal containers, noticing the various warning signs on them, "You want us to break those?" he asks curiously.

"Yes I do! We need to free them from their containers! It's barbaric how they are trapped in there. This company has no respect for animals just like we suspected," she huffed

angrily, heart racing, hands shaking, visibly angry at what she's 'seeing'. All those cute fuzzy animals that have no purpose being locked in those cold hard containers.

"But what about those warning symbols? What's in there could be dangerous," he explains.

The female gives him a stern predatory look that sends shivers down the much larger lion's spine, "That's there to trick you! Can you not see that! Break those containers open now! They will not be left behind," she states, almost growling the words.

"I got it, I'll get it done right away," he says, whistling to get a few of the more muscle-bound anthropomorphic people's attention. They grab their sledgehammers and begin to smash into the metal containers hitting at the top of each one.

The human sees the small animals at first scurry away from the place being hit. She tenses, growing fearful for their safety, but as the caps of several of the containers are broken, she 'sees' the animals rush out. She feels a sense of relief.

While those doing the breaking, leap back upon seeing various multi-colored ooze out of the broken containers, "What the heck is that?" one of the mutters before a dark blue and red liquid from one container leaps and attached itself to the lion who after a few moments stumbles and falls.

"What the fuck is that!" exclaims another, the liquids spreading out to grab onto their needed hosts while a few wiggle and squirm against the rushing water, finding difficulty in grabbing anyone before being washed down the drain.

The security guards finally begin to come in force, Tila noticing the turning tide, calls for people to come back. She gets others to help those who have lost their 'nerve' in her mind, ones infected by the strange creatures into the still intact vans, piling as many people up before driving off, leaving some of the members there as they make their getaway.

When the guards finish apprehending those left behind, tending to the wounded, the battle report rushing into the Kaffee who listened intently while Shirely paced, fearful of what is going on, "What if they are injured?" she wondered out loud.

Kaffee shakes his head, responding, "They're amorphous, there's nothing to injure."

"What if those hooligans took them?"

"They aren't hooligans, those were terrorists of some kind," he states.

"What if they took them? Kidnapped?!" she states, tensing.

"They aren't people to be kidnapped, and there is no way they know the value of them. To them it's probably industrial waste. They'd ignore it and continue on. Damn these simple-minded people. They have no idea what they are doing," he grumps, rubbing his bald head.

"What if the containers are cracked and they get washed away? In this rain they can't fight against that much water."

"They're fine. The containers are strong and can take a hit."

"But that van hit them really hard," she replies.

"Everything will be fine..." he responds when over the radio they hear, "We have a containment breach. Several of the containers have been cracked wide open. We're calling for a

containment crew for the toxic waste. I recommend we contact the city for an infected water supply.”

Kaffee tenses, “Shit.”

“Oh no... they are going to be lost, they aren’t ready for this!” she exclaims.

Kaffee responds, “Keep a parameter, everything will be handled,” he says, looking at her, “Not a word about this. We’ll check it out and assess the situation.”

“I just hope they are okay...”

“I hope we can find them. The higher ups aren’t going to like this at all,” he states. The two along with a dozen people in hazmat suits swarm the area, checking the containers, seeing the damages.

Shirley rushes to each container to check them, and is only stopped by Kaffee, “Take it easy, they could still be within them,” he says, as they use long tools to stand the containers up, “They can’t climb the walls.”

“But they could drown.”

“They won’t fill up with water that fast,” he responds, as they are secured. The Gorilla and the Rhino are taken to a secured location for medical attention and observation, secretly held as prisoners under the guise of needing special attention due to the chemical spill caused by the accident.

Kaffee and Shirley look over each breached container, taking stock of the situation, “One missing container, eight cracked and emptied, and three undamaged. This couldn’t get any worse.”

Shirley runs her gloved covered hands across the secured containers, “It’s alright. I’m here and I’ll make sure nothing bad like that will happen to you again,” she says, escorting the three intact containers back into the facility.

Kaffee shakes his head looking over everything, “It looks like they attacked them to break them open... but why?” he asks himself, looking around, up to the security cameras, “Perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye. And it’ll all be good to know what happened to that twelfth container,” he says, feeling a weight press down upon him, working with the cleanup crew to make sure that nothing is left out in the open, while also organizing the review of the security tapes, “*I have to do all the tedious work,*” he thinks.

That twelfth container had a journey indeed. When the van crashed into the truck it shot out of the vehicle like a bullet, flying out across the lot, bouncing off the hard asphalt denting one edge of the metal yet remaining intact as it flew over the fence, rolling out into the streets where it rolled down the gentle hill, containing some of the momentum from the initial crash.

It rolled right into traffic where a semi nicked it, sending it flying out once again, hitting a light pole right in the center, denting it there cracking it open, but it was impossible for the creature within to do anything as the container spun, eventually finding itself half buried in water, the crack facing down into the water, allowing the sleek silver, black and red goo to steadily wiggle itself out. The crack is so small it was slow moving, but the desire, drive, and instinct to escape its container to feel what this cool wet stuff against it was, but also to get out of



it as it felt a danger from so much of it, and the force of it pulling out towards a drain. Inch by inch it slid through the opening, oozing out like someone squeezing a blackhead.

It's unsure what else to do, doing what it can to be free, not that it knew what it was, it just wanted to be able to move more than where it was, and to attach itself to something. Not sure what, just *something*. It fought to squeeze through the crack and against the water, slowing it down, tiring it, which slowed it further. Only managing about two thirds of itself of the container when it was suddenly hit hard by a passing car that couldn't see it buried within the water. The container spun quickly, flying out over the curb and bouncing into an alleyway.

The creature tensed and squirmed, being whisked away down into the drain, feeling a portion of itself still trapped within the container growing farther and farther away from itself, while what's left in the container feeling less than it was, an urge to reconnect now bubbling up in its being.

New sensations it tries to process and figure, the cool water against it, the now emptier container, that separated itself from itself. Flowing down the water, into the smaller drain it moved through the twist and turns of the gravity fed drainage system which was being overloaded by the ever-increasing load of water.

Too much liquid around it, too much. Can't get the other thing, air to continue. The creature feeling a panic rush through it, reaching out to grab something but finding no purchase of anything that it can use to fight against this resurgence of water. It's far too much, its body weakening as there's little it can do. It has to relax, trying to stay together, float along the surface grabbing moments of air before it's shoved back through the water, down the drain, following gravity to wherever it's being taken too.

No agency, no control, making it want to do more, but too weak to do so, searching, feeling through the cold water for any warmth, anything it can latch onto, make a connection. The drive grows stronger than its own desire to reconnect to what remains of itself trapped in that container that it can only vaguely feel, like two twins who can 'sense' each other's presence, if you could even call it that.

Rushing through the tube of water, feeling the change from stone to metal, moved through grating, partially separated again before congealing back together. Water pressing all around it, unable to breath, feeling its consciousness slipping when suddenly...

Isaac pushes through the ever-heightening waterline which is now up to his waist, "This was a terrible idea," he says to himself, looking at his phone, "Okay, looks like I am getting close, but I need to find a way out of this tunnel. There has to be some kind of ladder or manhole to climb myself out of," he says, pocketing his phone, using his flashlight to look around, "This is darker than the devil's piss I drink," he says, pressing down the fear he feels within him.

Each step saps him more of his strength, panting heavily he presses on. Water rushes down the large tunnel while more is added every so often by smaller pipes funneling water into it, "I think the water is getting shallower than before," he says, his belly down completely soaked through.

Looking ahead he catches a glimmer of hope, a metal ladder that is just visible at the very extent of what his flashlight can reveal, “Oh thank whoever should be watching. I’ll make another report when I get out of here,” he says, pressing his way forward, seeing two streams of water flowing out. One of which suddenly reflects silver, black and red for only a second, “What the heck?” he wonders, moving straight toward it as it’s on the way toward his freedom from this hellish water tunnel.

The creature about to lose consciousness breaths in the air once again, but now it senses something. Electrical impulses, warmth that’s quickly approaching. It sees someone standing out from the liquid, able to resist its pull. That must be strong, powerful. Its instincts kicked into high gear, it had to grab, it had to attach, connect. There was no other option, it would perish otherwise. Life and death struggle. It feared for its continued existence. It reaches out with all its strength towards this source. No words, only desires, wants, instincts, the only way to survive.

Isaac catches the reflective colorful liquid in the water moving toward him. He quirked an eyebrow, taken back for a moment, his flashlight following it, “Is that moving? What the heck is that some kind of animal snot?” he asks, moving to get out of its way.

The source of the warmth, the electricity, its survival reacts to its presence? Or did it just move. No time to think. Only act. It must move toward it. Reach out, grab, hold onto. Only chance. Must grab. Must attached. With a burst of strength, it reaches out, latching onto a skin surface, contact! Spread, pull itself out of the deadly liquid. Survive, connect, feed on the warmth. Moving along the electrical impulses. Connect, attach, spread.

Isaac watches the liquid move toward him against the current, “What the fuck?!” he exclaims, the liquid springs out of the water attaching to his hand, he shakes it, “What is this?!” he exclaims, trying to shake it off, the liquid spreading along his hand, up his arm, part of it flinging up, remaining attached, latching onto his face as it coils around. He screams out, “Help! Help!” he ‘runs’ at a snail’s pace toward the ladder.

It’s lifted out of the liquid, pulled by the creature. Helping? Could it lose its grip, spread, attach, wrap around, its ‘body’ bends through the air, too weak to fight the motions, but more of itself attaches to the warmth. Air rushing past it, noise, vibration, spreading more. Need to find attachment, need to be secure. Find shelter. Be safe. Survival. It slides across the warmth, the rough and smoothness of the surface, across the air rushing opening, sliding into a safe space, following the electrical impulses, so much so close, get closer, get secure, get safe.

In his panic Isaac drops his flashlight, splashing into the water, the light’s glow fading quickly as its swept downstream. Going from memory he’s rushing toward the ladder, stumbling almost falling into the water, one hand trying to grab and pull the stuff off him, fingers sliding across the slick surface, unable to pull it away as he screams out for aid. His voice echoing down the tunnel but is silenced as the sour liquid flows into his mouth, around his head, along his spine, squeezing and pressing upon him, making it difficult for him to breath.

The death liquid is close! Must get safe, must attach more, must bind, must be complete. The liquid drives itself deeper into the host, away from the water that was drowning it, almost snuffing its life. Must be safe, must go deeper, attach, go to where it needs to go.

Pain shoots through Isaac the creature forcing itself deeper into him, along his skin, pushing through, blood dripping down his skin, while his lungs burn a need to breath, in his mind he feels he's close to the ladder. He reaches out into the darkness feeling nothing, heart pounding, the stuff spreading across, the pain growing, eyes growing heavy, feeling his air being recycled back into him, his uncovered hand feeling the cool metal of the ladder...

Attach. Safety. Almost there. Continue to spread. Grow. Danger close. Survival is close. Need to spread. Warmth against it. Keep warmth in. Keep it good. About to finish. It feels as if it's doing so. There's no telling how far it is, it's only a feeling, a sensation that it's almost where it needs to be along the things body it's attaching to.

Isaac's fingers slip from the ladder he falls into the water with a splash, his consciousness fading, darkness enveloping him.

Liquid DEATH is back! Hurry, hurry, the creature moves as fast as it can, completing the attachment, connecting to the host body, feeling it in the cool water, flowing back along the water away, down, flowing like it did before. It gets a sense of something. Fear? It was afraid? The thing it was attaching to was afraid. Why? This not normal? This is something else? Wait... air... breathing. Survival. Can't breathe in water. Breathing for this thing comes from head.

What is a head? Yes... that is a head but it's down... that's bad. Bad for survival. Need to wake, need to move, how to wake? How to move? The creature figuring this out. It isn't sure, it shifts around through the body noticing the body shift in weight. It continues to adjust and move, growing, ripping through some clothes, till suddenly the body rolls onto its back a cough and a gasp, the host body is breathing. That's good. But not awake. Not awake. Must wake. How? How? New body. New host. New things. New feelings. What is this? What is itself? What?

Confusion, the concept becoming known, the immediate danger passed, but for how long? It's warm and cold now. Still pulling away, helpless, unable to do much of anything, except understand what it's attached to. A curious yet complex system. Understanding trickling down into it. How does it work, function? Life, death, concepts becoming known to it, slightly above pure instinct. A revelation that there is such a thing, but no time to dwell upon it. Danger is still above.

Faster they flowed down the water, the higher the waterline got, the human's head barely kept above the water thanks to the creature's trial and error, but nothing past that. Then dung! The ringing out of metal sometime later. How much time? Unknown. The body is forced upright, pressing against something hard that it can't squeeze through... but it squeezed through it before. Why not now? This is strange, why doesn't this work?

Isaac coughs and grunts, feeling the rush of water against him, face splashing up with water, he gasps for breath, trying to fight against the constant flow of water, finding it nearly

impossible as his body is pressed against the bars, *“What happened? Who, what where why?”* his mind unable to bring together the events that led him here. All he knows is he’s in danger. Adrenaline shooting through his system, body working harder against the water.

The creature senses the natural responses the body is giving its host, the effects on the system. Learning, figuring, studying, realizing that this liquid is bad for the host too. This... what is it?”

*“I’m going to drown. Damn these water tunnels,”* Isaac thinks, heart racing, trying his best to keep his head above the water but he’s barely able to get gulps of air as he’s constantly splashed with water.

Water tunnels, that is what is going to kill us. This water tunnel. Must escape from this liquid water tunnel. Thing behind stopping us, can’t squeeze through. Not able to. Strange, but need to change, need to fix.

Isaac feels the panic rushing through him. He turns his body, back now to the water but still barely able to breath, he faces the outside, face smooshed against the bars, his head feeling it's going to crack if it's squeezed through any harder. He tightly holds onto the metal bars before him, seeing the twenty some feet drop below into the river. Freedom is so close, yet so far, but then even the river looks dangerous with the high level and the torrent it's going through, *“I’m really going to die here. I wanted to impress her so much but now I am going to die for it. I don’t want to die. I have so much I could live for if I tried,”* he thinks, straining himself against the bars, trying his hardest to pull at them, needing to break free.

Host is pulling at the constraints, the bars? A way to escape the water tunnel, but more water tunnel before them, but not as constricted. A chance of freedom? To live. Could die here. Mustn’t die, must help, must save. The creature spreads across Isaac’s body, silver, black and red liquid oozing out of his skin, coming from every pour, covering his hands, changing them, transforming them, arms growing in thickness, monstrous feral yet humanoid enough to keep a grip on them. Arms thicken more, attaching to his chest, adding for greater strength, muscles, tensing, creature pulling.

Isaac feels pain shoot through his hands, arms, chest. His body strained to its very limit. His lungs burn, begging for more oxygen, feeling as if he is on his last legs, consciousness trying to leave him as he pushes through, tugging with all his might before darkness takes him once again.

When Isaac awakens, he feels water lapping at his feet, sand clinging to his face. He jerks his body looking up and around, finding himself on some sandy riverbank. He looks around seeing trees and overgrowth around him. Checking over himself he finds his clothes are tattered barely clinging onto him, *“I’m alive? Holy fuck I’m alive!”* he exclaims in excitement jumping up and down, some clothe pieces falling to the ground, yet he is still barely ‘dressed’ at this point, with one shoe, torn pants, and shirt. *“Damn I really need more of my devil’s contract,”* he says, letting out a sigh of relief, reaching for his phone to check what time it is to find it no longer in his front shirt pocket.

“Fucking damn it. When the payment for the contract comes due... it's paid in blood. Or in this case my cell phone,” he mutters, his head aching. Unsure what to make of the situation. He looks at the water, feeling a rush move through him, fear bubbling up in the pit of his stomach, he moves away from it quickly.

Tunnel water bad, bring death, too much, bad, get away, the creature within Isaac wordlessly urges him, relaxed when the host moves away from the water tunnel's edge.

Isaac feels a sense of relief, looking up still to see some stars in the sky, but light of the new day already breaking in over the horizon. The rain is now down to a soft drizzle, far more manageable than before. His stomach growls, body aching for food, and so much more. For now, Isaac feels relief that he's alive. Mind still not processing all that happened, unaware for the time being that he's no longer alone in his own body...