

Double Payload

PART ONE

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DAY -1

Castor clicked his pen as he fumbled it through his fingers. He shifted, restless, in his seat. The beaver's tail barely fit through the hole in the back of the white plastic chair, one of a hundred identikit stools hastily jammed into the *Ardhanarishvara's* auditorium. He thought to himself: *Man, this could have been an email.*

The woman on stage in front of him, a sprightly opossum dressed in medical scrubs, was droning on about health and safety. "Now, for a lot of you in the crowd, tomorrow will be your first time going through a wormhole." It was true: his last gig was as the sole engineer aboard an Aldrin cycler, an ageing, creaking vessel that lazily plodded in never-ending circles to ferry its loutish passengers from Earth to Mars. Every day, there was some new problem. Or two. Or three. Sometimes he'd go to bed after six straight hours of refinagling his predecessors' faulty wiring, only be mercilessly awoken from his beauty sleep by news of a fire in the oxygen garden. He even

got a nasty gash on his right leg from a malfunctioning laser cutter. Never again.

The possum's pronouncements continued on until an ear-splitting digital screech shocked Castor back into paying attention. "When you hear that *delightful* chime, that means you have fifteen minutes to make your way to the inertial-dampening pods, which you can find here, here, and here," she intoned, gesturing to a holographic map located right behind a giraffe's neck. Castor didn't feel like craning to look. "The breathing fluid might get in your fur, but it washes out easily with regular shampoo if you give it enough time." Even from where the beaver was sitting, he could tell she was sheepish — she knew as well as anyone that the showers ran out after thirty seconds. Still, some gunk in your hair was better than turning into a red smear on the mess-hall floor.

"Once the lights turn red, that's the signal that there are only five minutes left, and any non-essential systems will turn off as we prepare to make the jump to Eta Geminorum. As your doctor, as your crewmate, and as your friend: please, stay safe out there." She flashed a grin as she awkwardly curled her hands into a heart, turning to face all the crowd before cheerfully transitioning into a fist-pump. "*Ad astra*, friends!"

Walking off stage, her pink tail swaying to and fro in the air, the marsupial handed her microphone off to a greying housecat. "Thank you, Doctor Polydefkis, for that insightful safety briefing. Now, as your captain, I'd like to make some remarks regarding..." Castor didn't stick around long enough to catch the end of the sentence.

DAY 0

Castor paced around his cramped bunk, deep in thought, a headset strapped loosely to his face. "Hmm... Hey, Ardha? I need your help making an important decision."

An electric blue tint filled the edges of his vision. As an engineer, he had unparalleled access to the core of the ship's on-board AI systems, and he happily used it for all it was worth.

“WHAT IS IT?”

“I figure that since there's only two hours left until the jump and management still hasn't given me any tasks, I'm probably good to slack off until we get to Planet Gemini.”

“NOT WHAT IT IS, AND NOT WHAT IT'S CALLED.”

“Whatever. The point is: should I watch *Return of the Night of the Living Weretaur*, or *Rut Slut Massacre 4*?”

A moment of dead air passed. Castor knew exactly what the computer was about to say.

“WELL, MR BOBRSKI, THOSE BOTH SOUND LIKE FINE CHOICES. BUT AS A NAVIGATIONAL ALGORITHM, I AM NOT CAPABLE OF...”

“Yeah, fuck you too, buddy.” He tossed his visor languidly backwards onto his bed and turned on the entertainment system. The *Rut Slut Massacre* flicks, he had decided, were *so* 2300-and-late.

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** ** **

“*It's just two guys in a suit!*” Castor guffawed to himself, cry-laughing so hard that he nearly impaled his lower lip on his buckteeth. Four hundred years of advancement in filmmaking, and these were still the worst special effects he had ever seen. His paw reached out to shovel another handful of nachos into his mouth, but before he even got to the bowl, the screen went dark, and his visor began to buzz.

“Oh, for...”

Reluctantly, dusting off the orange residue from his pyjamas, he strapped the augmented-reality device back on, this time firmly tightening the straps. Secure in the knowledge that noone could see them, the engineer sardonically rolled his eyes. “All right, what is it this time?”

Mechanical fault in Algæ Processing. Lobe 4, room B782. Fix ASAP!!!

Algæ Processing? That was all the way on the other end of the ship. The way it was designed, he'd have to go all the way around in a giant circle — he'd never get there in time. Unless...

“Ardha, plot me a route from here to room B782, going right through the zero-*g* core.”

“I'M SORRY, MR BOBRSKI, BUT I CAN'T GRANT YOU ACCESS TO AN OFF-LIMITS AREA WHEN IT ISN'T STRICTLY NECE—”

“...My dead grandmother used to read me routes through the zero-*g* core before bedtime, I have a legal warrant that makes you have to do it, and, uh, I'll kill myself or something if you don't.”

“RIGHT THIS WAY.”

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Theoretically, all that stood between Castor and his final job were two long ladders. As he clambered up the iron rungs, each step a little lighter than the last, he held his toolbox tight around his waist, conscious that the smallest bump could send a fleet of screwdrivers flying into microgravity.

He paused, taking a moment to huff and wipe the beads of sweat from his fur, and tapped the side of his visor. “Are we there yet?”

The algorithmic voice took some time to think. “I'D SAY YOU'RE ABOUT 40% OF THE WAY TO YOUR DESTINATION.”

The beaver grumbled under his breath. “Yeah, and maybe we'd be there already if you'd let me use the fucking elevator...” No matter. He continued launching himself upwards, each leap now carrying him a metre high, until his concentration was interrupted by an unmistakable chime echoing through the passage. “*Shit.*”

Undeterred, Castor kept climbing, the downwards pull of gravity now a mere suggestion. The crackling of the intercom's announcements faded into the distance, little more than clanging metallic echoes. Finally, he saw it: a dusty vault door labelled SHIP CORE.

Castor brought himself to a stop just before slamming face-first into several kilos of sensitive scientific equipment. “Ardha, open up. And don’t make me have to jailbreak you again.”

“AS YOU WISH.” With a puff of stale air and whirring of machinery, the door cracked open just wide enough for the engineer to make his way through to the core of the *Ardhanarishvara*.

Visually, it wasn’t any different to any other grimy mechanical area on the ship, but the core’s zero-gravity environment lent it a certain charm that meant Castor never missed an excuse to visit. Despite a bachelor’s degree in applied astrophysics, he hardly ever got to experience the full freedom of microgravity for himself in his line of work. It was all daring repairs tethered to communications satellites, or boring old electrical faults in 1-*g* centrifugal spinners. The core gave him a chance to float freely and soak it all in.

“Man, this never gets old.” He gazed out of the cupola, the only place on the ship where you could take a look at the inky black outside without it whirling past you at a million miles an hour.¹ Before him, stars shimmered and shattered into swirling refractions of themselves, and the Milky Way twisted itself into spiralling knots — the sure sign of the gaping maw of a wormhole.

...Which reminded him, actually, that he needed to get out of here and into a dampening pod *now* before he got hit with every type of cosmic radiation known to man. He fretted, partly to himself, partly to Ardha, and partly to noöne in particular, “Hey, they’ve got one of those fluid pod... thingies near Algæ Processing, right? I mean, they must do. Surely. They wouldn’t send me there ten minutes before a wormhole jump if there wasn’t...”

“SIX MINUTES.”

“What?” He chuckled, involuntarily, nerves racing.

¹He had once strung along management for a full hour pretending to repair a miscalibration in the fusion drive, just so that he could get a better look at Saturn while the ship was still parked in orbit. They never found out.

“IT’S SIX MINUTES, MR BOBRSKI. THE NEAREST INERTIAL DAMPENING POD TO YOUR DESTINATION IS—”

The room fell silent. A crimson glow washed over the core’s kevlar-blanketed walls. A scent like leather filled the air — Castor’s own sweat. “...Ardha?”

He tapped his headset. He tapped it again. He shook it, rattled it, and broke out into full-blown percussive maintenance. He saw nothing. No blue glow, no heads-up display, no live translation — nothing. It was as good as a brick.

Only now did the depth of his situation hit him. Dictionary words failed him. “Fuck... fuckfuckfuckfuck!” He bounced off the walls, tail quivering, looking for an out.

Castor dumped the contents of his toolbox out into the air, hoping to find salvation. *Maybe... Maybe if I could arrange all the stuff in here into a protective structure, like some kind of...* God damnit, why did his brain always have to come up with a dam? He grabbed a wrench from the pile and left the rest behind.

The hull creaked and groaned around him under the growing force of the wormhole. *Okay. I have a wrench. I know where the door to Lobe 4 is. All I have to do is bust it open, climb down until I can fall instead, and then break my legs on the floor. I’ll be in pain, but I’ll be alive. And maybe I can finish that movie while I’m in medbay.* Skimming the walls with his hands and feet, the beaver floated down the hall until he got to what he was pretty sure was the entrance to Lobe 4.

“Come on, come on, come *on*...” He gave the door lock a merciless twist with the wrench, straining and sweltering under the pressure. All he could hear was the vibration of the aluminium around him and the frantic yelling of his own thoughts. “Would you just—fucking—work!” With one last tug, something had to give, and it was the wrench. Castor watched in horror as his only hope of rescue splintered in two and floated away. “*Fuck!*” Looking back up at the cupola, he saw his sea of abandoned tools thrown every

which way, ping-ponging in the air like a pinball machine. Bright sparks flitted in and out of his vision. The ship lurched around him, sending him crashing into the full weight of the vault door. The last things he saw before he fell unconscious were the two cracks in his visor's glass.

DAY I

“Nghhh... Five more minutes...” Castor shuffled around in bed, unready to open his bleary eyes. Half of his body was completely numb, and the other half was in searing pain. He wasn't sure which was worse. At least he knew the painful parts were still there.

His ears perked up when he heard a muffled voice from outside. “It's a 29-year-old male, *Castor canadensis*. He got pretty shaken up, but he'll make it through... Good luck in there.”

A second, feminine voice, strangely familiar, piped up. “I'll try.” The beaver raised his head and opened his eyes to a click in the door.

Castor scanned the room around him and tried to get his bearings. This was medbay, all right. Sterile white floors, baby-blue walls, and a ceiling projecting a forest scene to try and trick you into thinking this was Earth. As for himself, he counted his blessings. He might have been in agony, but peeking under his blanket, it seemed all his parts were still there. He could tell — he was, inexplicably, totally in the buff.

The door unlocked, and in walked none other than the opossum from the other day, a clipboard in her hands and a polite smile upon her face. “Castor... Bobinski?”

He sighed a little, hoping it wasn't loud enough for her to hear. “Bobrski. Rhymes with ‘turkey’. Kinda.”

The possum blushed and froze. “Oh! Sorry. I didn't mean to—”

“Eh, it's fine. I get it all the time.” He furtively told his unresponsive hand to wave in dismissal.

“No, no, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be so bad with names. Lord knows people get mine just as wrong...”

“Can’t be *that* bad.”

The possum tugged at her lanyard as she sat down beside the bed. “Aletheia Polydefkis. But, uh... I just tell everyone to call me Polly.”

“...I think I would too.”

The two furs shared an awkward chuckle. Polly broke the ensuing silence. “So, you know why you’re in here?”

“Well, unless my nightmares suddenly got a lot more realistic, I think I have an idea.”

“You got bashed up pretty badly back there. I checked the records, and you’re actually the first person to survive an unprotected wormhole trip in eighty years.”

“That long?”

“Well... Generally people on board scientific expeditions follow the safety instructions we give them.” The marsupial gave her patient a wink, a lock of black hair falling over her open eye.

“I still think that could have been an email.”

“Sure. Anyway — your medical records say you have a scar on your right leg, right?”

“... Why?” Castor tilted his head quizzically, straining his neck in the process. “Ow!”

“The treatment we give our patients spikes them with self-healing nanobots that fix up any wounds they have within a day or two. I just wanted to see how it was going!”

The beaver’s eyes narrowed. “Okay, first off, don’t, like... don’t just *do that* to people while they’re unconscious. And secondly, actually, now that you mention it, *why am I naked?*”

She shrugged. “Your jumpsuit was totally shredded. Dr Kuposov said it looked like a war zone in there. You’d probably have bled out there and then if we hadn’t injected you.”

He could only move one arm, but still, he moved it into a position that suggested it should be crossed. “*Fiiine*. You can have a look. Just keep my groin out of it, all right?”

“All right.” Tenderly, she rolled his blanket up, exposing Castor’s paws and calves to the cold air.

A silence followed. Polly looked back and forth. Her eyes darted to one leg, then the other, then back to her clipboard. “I— You’re *sure* it was on your right leg?”

“Yes! Good lord, I had to limp around a spaceship for two weeks after I got it. I know what my own body looks like!”

“I know, I know, but... could you double-check for me?”

Castor heaved himself up until he was firmly in a sitting position. Sure enough, when he looked down, the fur along his scar was working its way back to life, fizzling and bubbling away with reborn cells... on his left calf.

The two looked at each other, befuddled. “...Castor, I think I’m going to have to run some more tests.”

NIGHT I

The dreaming Castor tossed and turned as pixellated rain pattered on the ceiling above. The numbness in his limbs had given way to piercing hellfire pain. Two nights ago, he slept like a kit. Tonight, a quadrillion miles from anyone he’d ever known, he chattered and squeaked the whole night through, tail batting against unseen foes.

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** ** **

Gently, Polly placed a strand of her patient’s fur into the machine. She had been up for seventeen hours, and the coffee was starting to wear off. *Why him?*, she thought. The beaver’s records listed no place of birth and no next of kin. He seemed to her a sort of interplanetary layabout, endlessly drifting from one gig to the next. *How on earth is this guy still alive?* Whatever the case, she decided, she was glad he was.

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** ** **

Castor ran as fast as he could, the dark trees nothing but a blur beside him. He didn't know where he was going, or why. He just knew he had to get away. Sticks and leaves were crushed beneath his feet. Then he blinked.

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The loading screen was mocking her. The possum could feel it in her veins. *42.1% analysed. 42.2% analysed. 42.25% analysed...* It was as if the patient's entire body had been flipped in transit, and its "real" orientation was fighting for control. Stranger things had happened — she recalled an incident in the early days of wormhole technology, in the 2200s, when two test pilots wound up with their bodies "forcibly intersected through one another" (as the report had put it). The poor fellows had to spend the rest of their lives at a freak show in New Orleans. As she contemplated the possibilities, she looked back up at the monitor. *42.9% analysed...* It was going to be a long night.

* * *
** ** **

Castor's torch had nearly given out. Its intermittent pulses and flickers of light did little to illuminate the dark cabin he found himself in. He cried out into the nothing before him. "Hello?" No response. "Is anyone there?"

A bolt of searing pain hit him. The body crumpled and fell to the floor. This was *a* body. He was in it. But he knew it was no longer his. Waves of flesh undulated beneath the skin, desperately trying to push out. He watched, helpless, as a second thumb made its way through the blistering skin of the hand. Castor tried to scream.

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** ** **

Polly squeaked and covered her face as a crack of light came through the lab door. "Polly! Relax, relax, it's just me!" cried a reassuring androgynous voice. "I just wanted to make sure you hadn't fallen asleep in front of your laptop again."

The possum blushed and got back up. “Oh my god! I’m so sorry, Timo. I’ve been up for like, an entire day. I was starting to see things.” She awkwardly glanced back at her binturong colleague.

Timo shrugged his shoulders. “Eh, it happens. Anything you need help with? I only got up because I got the munchies.”

“Ugh, not really. I’m just stuck on this case and the DNA dingus is taking forever. It’s the engineer who got stuck in the core during the jump.”

The bearcat put his hands over his mouth. “Oh my god, Vyv told me about that! He’s *still alive?*”

“Just about! I just... can’t figure out what’s wrong with him. It’s like the trip jumbled him up and everything in his body got flipped. He’s got this scar that suddenly switched sides.” She surreptitiously poured some more of her energy drink into her coffee.

“Oh, yeah. Hox problems?”

A dim light of recognition went off above Polly’s head. “*What* problems?”

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The beast crawled its pathetic body through the blood-soaked manor. Its malformed paws scratched and pulled it up the stairs, lit only by candles bouncing off of Gothic arches. As it moved through the house, it did so with clumsy, rhythmless gait, as though it were but a piece of fabric manned by two puppeteers.

At last, after an age, it made its way to the top, before a portrait of the man who once owned this decrepit house — a teak-furred, aristocratic beaver. The beast mewled in pain as the portrait disappeared, leaving behind only a mirror, where, for the first time, it saw its bloodied form, a crazed abomination standing on four legs. *The Weretaur*, it thought to itself, if what it did could still be described as thinking.

Castor woke up.

* * *
** ** **

“Hox problems. Problems with your Hox genes.” The binturong continued as shi grabbed a handful of popcorn out of hir pocket and stuffed it in hir mouth. “Ifft’s the reafvn — **abem** It’s the reason we stand on two legs like civilised people and don’t go around on four like livestock. Controls your body plan.”

“Wait — wait, wait, wait.” Polly put up her hands in disbelief. “*I’m* the geneticist here. You just troubleshoot the computers. How come I didn’t think of that?”

Timo shrugged nonchalantly. “Oh, it’s way more common in hermaphrodites. I think it’s ’cause our genes already have to do some freaky shit to give us two reproductive systems. This one time, yeah? My sibling’s tail hair kept falling out, and shi went to the doctor, and it turns out hir body just threw out the part of the gene that said ‘oh, hey, remember to add a tail here.’”

The opossum sat there, slack-jawed. “That’s *horrifying*.”

“Yeah, but it gave hir a big dick, too, so, hey. You win some, you lose some.”

“Timo?”

“Yeah?” shi asked, already on hir way out the door.

“You’re a lifesaver.”

DAY 2

Polly burst into the room with effervescent energy, carrying by her side a stack of printouts. “All right! I’ve got good news and bad news.”

Castor scowled irate in his hospital bed, his arms crossed — all four of them. “Think I already got the bad news.”

She stopped and stood aghast, her orderly sheaf of papers falling into a pile of mess on the floor. “Oh. Wow. That’s— I—”

“Yeah, yeah, gawk at the freak of nature, why don’t you?” Castor tried to wave his upper right arm around, but, inevitably, its lower counterpart followed in a limp copy of its motion.

“It’s not like that! I just... it’s, uh, progressing a lot quicker than I anticipated! You know?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Wait, *progressing*? I get this shit happening to me and you’re telling me I’m not even done yet?”

“Uh... maybe?”

Castor put one of his left hands up to his chin, jabbing himself right in the solar plexus with the other. “Hmmm...” He weighed the ups and downs. “Do I at least get PTO if I’m gonna be stuck here?”

There came a drawn-out, exasperated sigh from the possum. “...Yes.”

“I can live with that. Anyway — what’s the good news?”

Polly perked up, visibly, and set out to pick up her dropped sheets. “The good news is I’ve figured out what’s wrong with you!”

“Is it the arms?” Castor asked drolly.

“The arms are a symptom. I think you’ll find *this* is the cause.” With pride, she shoved a piece of paper into the beaver’s face.

“...That’s a spreadsheet.”

“Aaaaand, it’s *also* the most exciting medical case study of the twenty-fourth century!” Her voice gained a sing-song inflection as she took the paper back to read it for herself. “Look at this! Exposure to a hundred light-years’ worth of cosmic rays at once. A patient’s body gets totally sagittally flipped, *and* their Hox genes get so scrambled that they’re trying to build two bodies in the exact same space. That’s three billion-to-one occurrences, all in the same patient, on the same day!”

It all reminded Castor of why he went into engineering instead of staying put in academia. There was nothing worse than a geologist talking your head off about igneous rocks like they were the second coming — except a biologist talking about beetle dung. “Oh, god, am I gonna be famous?”

“Pffft, nah. You’ll just be ‘C. B.’ in the paper.”

He knew exactly where this was going. “Let me guess: I stay anonymous, and you get the name ‘Amelia Polytechnics’ plastered on every news feed in the ’net because you found the boy with four arms?”

Aletheia Polydefkis scratched the back of her midnight hair and grimaced. “Eeeehhh...”

“C’mon, I’ve met scientists. I know the game. It’ll be the biggest high of your life.”

“The thing is...” A rosy blush shone through her face’s gossamer white fur as her voice lowered to a timid squeak. “I can’t really put my name in it, because this whole thing is kinda my fault.”

“There it is.” The beaver tucked his arms back into a comfortable folded position.

“You were really banged up, and the nanobots seemed like a good idea at the time, and, you know...”

“Hey, if it’s between being a sideshow attraction and a corpse, I’ll take the circus life.”

“Sure, but—” A lump formed in her throat. “If we’d just patched you up the old-fashioned way, none of this would have ever happened. Maybe you’d get an extra layer of fur back if you ever scraped your knee or something, but, uh, the way it is... the bots use your genes to try and restore your body back to the way it ‘should be’.”

Castor glared at the doctor, impatient but sympathetic. “And the way it ‘should be’ is...?”

“Two of everything.”

“*What.*”

“Yeah. We can turn the bots off for certain regions if we want... you know, for trans patients, patients with cyborg arms, that sort of thing, but once they’re in there, they’re in there.”

“Jesus.”

“Sorry.”

Just then, the beaver doubled over in pain. “Augh, *fuck!*” His arms flew every which way in a vain attempt to clutch his chest. “*Gab!* Just— *fuckfuckfuckfuck!*”

Polly bolted to her bedside and picked up a watch-like device. “Crap! Okay, uh... recording on!” A red diode flashed on her wrist.

“This is A. P., case-studying patient C. B. Uh— are, can you describe the pain?”

“It’s a ten! Jesus! Whatever scale you’re using these days. There’s — *nghhh* — It’s like there’s ants crawling around under my skin!”

“Okay. And are—”

The writhing beaver yelped in interruption. “Could you *shut up and help me?*”

Polly took a deep breath. “Okay. Is it all right if I take a look under your blanket?”

“Yes! Just — whatever you can do to *fix it!*”

“All right. Uh, patient is displaying signs of agitation and indicating extreme levels of pain.” As she swept the duvet off the bed, in between spasms, she rolled her watch over her patient’s back. “I’m just taking your measurements, okay?”

Castor groaned. She took that as a yes.

“Okay. Patient has, uh, rapidly increasing heart rate and blood pressure; temperature is stable and lungs are pumping air as normal so far... Turn around for me, Castor?”

He rolled over. “Ggh... I thought you said—”

“We’ll bleep it.”

“Fine.”

Again, she waved the device over him, now from a distance. “Patient’s head is morphologically stable as of now. He recently developed two supernumerary arms beneath his existing set — no alterations to the exterior pectoral anatomy, but...”

It was the first time she had actually gotten a good look at the beaver’s transformation. The bots, to their credit, had done an immaculate job. His fur was an even, unmatted auburn, perfectly coifed to even length (barring his now-four bushy armpits). Following his new extremities down to his hands, they seemed to get glossier and shinier, as though they hadn’t quite finished growing in. They didn’t even have proper claws. All four were now fitted with an extra thumb on the opposite side of his original, an addition that had

passed both of them by in the chaos. She gave the one on his upper left hand a curl to see if it worked.

“*Augh!*”

“Sorry, sorry! Just wanted to make sure. Uh... both patient’s original and supernumerary hands contain a second opposable thumb near the pinky finger. Moving down to the bottom of the torso, we—”

She tapped her watch, pausing the recording. “Were they always that big?”

“What?”

“I mean, I’d always *heard* that about beavers, that their... you know...”

“My body is — *hrrk* — fucking melting in front of me and you’re asking me about my balls right now?”

“Just doing my job!”

“Oh my god. Yes, they were always ‘that big’.”

“Thank you.” The possum looked in closer. “Actually, I think they might be shifting a bit too... can I—”

“*There’s a time and a place!*”

Polly started recording again. “Patient’s genitalia remain as normal. There are some signs of tissue reorganisation, but patient advised against a more detailed examination at this time. Moving down to the legs...” Her visage took on a puzzled expression. “Turn around for me again?”

Castor grunted as he turned himself to face the mattress. “As long as you’re not asking to touch my ass nex—” Right on cue, his glutes surged with burning agony. “*Gyah!* What the fuck, man!”

“Well, C. B., looks like we’ve found your problem area.” Polly took her wrist off his hindquarters, easing the pain from an eleven back down to a ten.

“W-What’s that supposed to *ffuuuuucking* mean?”

She ignored him, aiming her recorder’s camera squarely at the patient’s backside. “As you can see, patient’s, uh, posterior-inferior

quarter shows signs of rapid, large-scale tissue regeneration and restructuring.”

The analogy to ants proved apt. The fur on Castor’s back pulsed as it warped and woofed, bones cracking, veins rewiring, twisting into new shapes. Polly cringed at the sight. “Oh, god.”

He clung on to the bed for dear life, his new hands digging into the bed as claws finally forced their way through the skin, his voice now breaking up into but an intermittent rasp. “T-tell me what’s going on back there!”

“I... I don’t know. It’s... I...”

An unearthly gelatinous crack echoed across the room. She moved down to his side, half to better examine the scene, half so she could look this poor soul in the eye. “Patient’s— uh, *your* legs are... bifurcating.” Fur ripped loose and muscles twitched, his lower limbs coming undone from the bottom up like a jacket zip.

Castor kicked his newborn feet and cried. “Everything hurts...”

“Try not to move them! They’re still coming in. Just... just breathe. It’ll all be over soon.”

The beaver grit his teeth, eyes clenched shut and welling with tears. “You don’t know that.”

“Castor. Look at me. Please.” Inch by inch, the new mass around his pelvis grew backwards, a second torso taking shape.

The pained rodent inched his head back to face her. “*Nggghh-bbbokay...*” The smallest movement was a jab to the soul; each tired pant came drawn shallower than the last. His fur scraped and tangled against itself as his new legs travelled backward.

Polly rolled her watch off of her wrist, loosely placing it down on the floor. “I’m not recording any more. Okay? You don’t have to worry.”

“Okay...”

Their eyes linked when Castor’s wearily fluttered open. Polly gazed into him, her shining cerulean eyes an anchor in a flickering

halogen sea. “I want you to think about the forest. The soft sound of the drizzling rain. Can you do that for me, Castor?”

His weak voicebox struggled to provide an answer. He could hardly think about anything but the pain of his body’s contortions. “I don’t know how much longer I can... hold on...”

His eyelids fell limp again. Polly trembled. “Castor?” No response. “Castor...?”

Finally, the writhing came to an end. The beaver lay motionless on the bed, his second torso falling off the back onto the floor. Polly gently placed a pink hand underneath, praying for a pulse. “Castor...”

At that moment, he bolted upright, eyes wide open, hands clutching the headrest, gasping loudly for air as if he’d spent his whole life underwater. “Hooooly *fuck!*” he yelled, with force enough for the entire vessel to hear.

The possum stepped back, stood up, and patted her hands on her surgical gown. “Are you alright?”

“Are you kidding me?” For the first time since Polly had met him, the beaver’s voice brimmed with vigour and ecstasy. Two fat tails batted happily on his lower back. “I feel like a million bucks right now! I mean, yeah, I can’t walk and I still don’t know how *these* fucking things work,” — he flexed his lower arms and posed them by his side, though their upper counterparts inevitably copied the movements alongside — “But other than that, I haven’t felt this good since... since...”

He stared into the middle distance, rewinding the tape of his memories.

“Since what?”

Four shoulders shrugged in unison. “It’ll come back to me.”

DAY 3

“Do we *have* to do this in the entertainment deck?”

Polly pouted, her eyes obscured by a headset, as she leaned back in the corner of the all-black room. “If you know anywhere else on

the ship you can yomp around on all fours without the whole crew getting a look at your butt, I'm all ears." She had, at last, found the time to change out of her day-old scrubs into a form-fitting blue jumpsuit. Castor wasn't so lucky.

The beaver was sat right in the middle of the empty expanse, his legs buckled under his new body. "Yeah, but... it smells weird. Sticky, too. I dunno if I want to relearn how to walk somewhere I wouldn't even want to shine a blacklight."

His impromptu physiotherapist sighed. "If it was that bad, you'd put on the visor."

"I'm not going near one of those things again unless I have to. Anyways, it makes you look stupid."

"I disagree!" She walked over to the taur, making sure she was squarely in the centre of his field of vision, and crouched down. "Okay, remember what we said? One leg at a time."

Polly stared intently as Castor unfurled his right leg and slowly, shakily, stood it up. "You're doing great! Now do the other one."

As the other front leg rose, she dictated notes under her breath. Even beyond the duplication, it had undergone major changes. It was thicker, stockier, now that it had to support twice its normal load. His thighs were to die for. "*Strike that last one*", she muttered.

Castor had risen into something resembling a sitting position, his forelegs stood but his hindlegs still planted firmly on the ground. "Am I doing all right so far?"

Polly gave a thumbs-up from her still-crouched position. "A little wobbly, but so far, so good!"

He took a deep breath, his voice wavering with uncertainty. "Good... good. Alright, and one, and two, and— *brrk!*" He hoisted his hind right leg up, extending his shaking arms outwards as he tried to maintain his balance. "All right, and... *hup!*" His left leg followed. His whole body trembled. "...Did I do it?"

The possum rose and tilted her visor upwards. "Looking good."

Castor exhaled in relief and let his arms fall down to his sides. “Oh, thank god.”

“You know, I had a look with the ol’ x-ray vision while you were getting up” — she mimed turning a dial — “and there’s some incredible stuff going on down there! I mean, there’s a whole second set of lungs, this *gigantic* heart, even—”

The beaver held his palm up to his trainer and looked aside. “I, uh, don’t really want to hear about how my guts got rearranged right now.”

“Hey. You know what that is?”

“What?”

“Progress.”

Castor’s eyes turned back — and widened. Sure enough, his upper right hand was telling Polly to stop... and his lower right was still slack by his side, unmoved. “Well, would you look at that!”

“See? I knew you could do it.”

He smiled. “I guess I could. Now, uh... how do I move around with these things?”

“Oh! Right.” Her headset fell back onto her face as she looked at her references. “Well... I’m not sure, because as far as I can tell, you’re the first person whose body has ever ended up like this.”

Castor chuckled. “You know, when you said that last night, I felt like a science experiment, but the more you say it, I’m kinda proud.”

“Atta boy.” She reached out for a fist bump, to which the beaver gave her two back. “But I think I have an idea. I’m *pretty sure* the best way to do it is, uh... kinda like a horse!”

He looked at her blankly. “...My buddy Beuce is a horse, and I don’t think he moved any differently to me before the other day.”

“No — I mean, like, livestock horses. The kind they used to ride into battle.”

If Castor had a drink, he’d have spat it out. “The kind they used to...’ Are you, like, nine hundred years old or something?”

She leaned in and playfully scratched the beaver's chin. "Patient-doctor confidentiality goes both ways, you know."

"Sure. Sure. So what were you saying about five-hundred-year-old horses?"

"What you do is you move both your left legs at the same time, and then both your right legs. Wanna try it out?"

Without saying a word, Castor cautiously put one paw in front of the other and stepped forward, then again. "I can work with this..."

"Good! Ardha, activate treadmill."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Without warning, the ground shifted under Castor's feet, nearly knocking him off kilter. Polly stifled a giggle at the sight.

As he regained his balance, Castor continued to step determinedly forwards. As the floor below him slipped further away, he broke from a cautious waddle into an accelerating stride, and from an accelerating stride into a confident gallop, his four feet dancing in concert as they leapt off the ground. A week ago, the act would have exhausted him.² Now, he didn't even break a sweat.

The possum watched on in awe. "That's incredible! If you keep making progress like this, you might be back to work as soon as the transformation's finished up."

Polly's voice broke the beaver-taur's concentration and his hind paws slipped, sending him tumbling and skidding across the floor. He cried out: "*Finished up?*"

NIGHT 4

Timo stared up at the blinking light in front of hir, intermittently shading the sterile lab's walls a sanguine red, and shook hir sleeping possum friend on the shoulder.

²Truth be told, he was still irritated at the ship's AI for not letting him use the lifts.

Polly bolted upright, leaving a splotch of saliva on her keyboard. “I’m up! I’m up. I’m up.” She ruffled her hair in a vain attempt to make herself look presentable. “What is it?”

The binturong pointed at the light. “‘Emergency in Ward 103.’ It’s your boyfriend.”

She glowered back. “He is *not* my boyfriend! I’m only taking care of him because it’s my job.”

“Girl, I’ve seen your case notes. You said he had ‘glistening, lustrous fur’.”

“That doesn’t mean anything!” Polly’s skin blushed beet red, so bright it was visible under her neck fur.

“I’m not judging. Just telling it like it is.” Shi leaned back in his office chair and quaffed a cup of iced coffee. “So, uh... shouldn’t you be bolting out the door to go help this patient you’re so fond of?”

“Ugh.” Polly rubbed the sand out of her eyes. “I think the only thing the genes predicted that hasn’t happened yet is him growing another head, and given how he reacted last time... I’m not looking forward to it.” She paused, looking down longingly at her desk. “But... he’s all alone in there. Whatever it is... I need to be there for him.”

As Polly got up and cracked open the door, Timo waved her goodbye. “Hey, if you’re right, at least your man won’t be alone for long.”

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Castor grunted as the orange cord jerked wildly up and down, yanked around hopefully by a succession of two-thumbed paws. “Come on, come *on*...” He grit his teeth against one another, voice quivering, rump shaking. He tried to raise a quaky hindpaw up to his undercarriage, only for the endeavour to send him crashing back down to the floor.

The tinfoil-thin wall crumpled as the beaver bashed his head against it in frustration. Quite simply: the man was het up. It had

been six long days since he had had any sort of sexual relief — which for him typically consisted of an embarrassed off-white squirt into swiftly flushed toilet paper, but the point stood — and if his physical body had doubled, then his libido must have quadrupled.

Much to Castor's irritation, when his new legs came in, his loins had followed them back, rendering them unreachable by his own hand. There was still only one meat and two veg back there, he presumed, although he hadn't been able to get a good look at the package without awkwardly craning his head in the mirror.

Salvation came when the tell-tale sound of a fumbled key card reached his ears from across the wall. Titanium-white light flooded into the dark bedroom through the open door and a grey-furred opossum entered.

"Hi, Castor." She put on her most maternal voice, a gentle squeak just a decibel or two louder than a whisper. "Is everything all right?"

Castor turned red as he looked back, legs still sprawled messily on the ground. "H-hi..." What was he even going to say? God, he was getting butterflies in his stomach. Both of them. "I, uh... I-I think..." Slowly, he lifted himself onto his feet, holding on to the emergency cord for support.

The door behind Polly slid shut, leaving the deep blue of the digital night sky above the only light in the room. She wandered nearer to the taur, scoping the room around her for clues to his condition. "You've redecorated."

"Heh, y-yeah..." A baby-blue mattress lay on the floor, its sides still imprinted with quadruplicate sets of claw marks. "I... tried to get to sleep, but I kept bumping my head."

Polly sat down on the improvised divan. "Did you just want to talk? I don't want to be mean, but... the cord *is* only for emergencies."

"N-no, no!" Castor panicked, still unsure of how to explain his predicament. His brain was so fogged up he wasn't sure he even

could. “It’s—” He bit his tongue and turned so his backside faced his caretaker. “It’s still... burning. Like the rest of me was.”

Her eyes opened wide. “You poor thing!” She waved him over to the mattress. “Come on down here and we’ll get you checked out. I don’t want you freezing your paws off on the linoleum.”

Castor complied, inching his nude body backwards until all four paws were firmly on the cover and tucking in his arms to maintain composure. “Promise this isn’t going in the paper?”

Polly, now straddled firmly underneath the beaver like a car mechanic, laughed, taking a small flashlight out from her pocket. “Castor, I’m not even writing the paper any more. I like you too much to treat you like a test subject.”

“Holy shit, you do?” he blurted out, the sentence out of his mouth before he could even give it a second thought. His underbelly lit up with the soft glow of Polly’s torch.

“I guess I must do! Timo says so, at least.” The possum stuck her tongue out as she craned in to examine his groin, shining her torch right down his thick, furred sheath.

“Who’s Timmmmmhbhpbhptbhghbnggh...” He purred in exhilaration at the touch of Polly’s dainty paws against the fur of his crotch. It hurt — but it hurt *good*.

“A friend. Can you hold still for me? You’re kneading too much.” Castor’s animal paws grabbed and moulded the bed, softly bouncing his examiner up and down.

“I’ll try...”

Polly’s attention now turned to the tennis-ball-sized testes hanging from the beaver’s rump. Looking closer in, she noticed something. “All right, Mr ‘Really-That-Big’; it looks like you’re about to get a little ‘Really-That-Bigger’...” She softly cupped them in her hands.

All Castor could do as his broiling balls mitosed was moan. He moaned in ecstasy; he moaned in agony; he moaned in emotions unfelt for thousands of years. “K-keep g-g-going...”

“I will. I will,” Polly whispered in soothing tones as she worked her magic. As she caressed his metamorphosing sac, gentle hands rolling over soft mahogany fur, it slowly split apart, each gonad diverging apart from itself until she could see four clearly identifiable balls. “Everything okay back there? How’s the pain?”

A vein of drool trickled down Castor’s jaw as he tried to speak. “Like... *buff*... a ten and a zero at the same time.” His weak words did it no justice. The sensation was akin to a thousand highs, all felt at once, while set ablaze in the deepest pits of hell.

“Good. Good. Just concentrate on the zero!” She moved up to his sheath, caressing and rubbing the prepuce to coax Castor’s shy manhood out of its hiding place. Or manhoods. There was only one way to find out.

The room was clogged with the stink of thick vanilla musk. Sweat dripped from the beaver’s back down onto the darkening mattress; a droplet or two would occasionally land on Polly’s unfazed face. (*They should really fix the HVAC in here*, she mused.) Castor’s brain was too preoccupied to even pick up on the scent, his inner monologue turning to static as his throbbing crimson member inched its way out into the open air.

Polly gazed up with a scientist’s awe. Of but average length, his cock distinguished itself in girth — a girth rapidly rising as it split in twain. The moans and mewls which echoed from above shifted unpredictably between pleasure and pain. She reached out to touch it.

Castor let out a high-pitched yelp of pain as his right hindleg booted her off the bed and onto the ground. He glanced back apologetically, still barely able to form a coherent thought. “S...sorry... it’s, uh, s-sensitive...”

Polly stretched and got back into position. *Time for plan B*. “Just let me know if this hurts at all, okay, Cas?”

The rodent approved with a whimpering nod. Polly raised herself up to meet his thrumming prick, hair brushing against the

fur on his underbelly, and lightly ran her tongue along its length, to which he groaned with delight.

“God, you’re getting big.” Twin streams of clear pre sputtered from his dick, its two sides still stubbornly sticking together.

“I-is it done?” Castor asked anxiously. He was kneading so hard his front paws had clawed straight through the mattress and into the fluff inside.

Polly whispered sensually. “Not yet... but it will be soon.” She opened wide, letting the beaver’s cock into her warm maw. She ran her tongue along the seam where its halves met, musky saltwater dripping down her throat.

Every part of Castor’s body was overcome with euphoria. The pain of his transformation melted away, leaving only raw, carnal rapture. Adrenaline coursed through his arteries. Nerves crackled with activity. And his cock—

His *cocks* finally came apart as the possum gently sucked their tips, pulsing with energy. Castor buckled. Polly’s eyes widened. Two volleys of seed exploded into her mouth.

She fell away, leaving them to dribble white-hot in the smoky air. He collapsed in a panting heap on the floor. She coughed into her fist.

“*Fuck,*” breathed Castor, senses coming back to him as he lay there, hearts racing. He stared over at Polly, similarly doubled over. “So... same time next week?”

DAY 6

Polly’s gaze darted around the room as she sat, the cold walnut stool like ice against her fluttering tail. Compared to the spartan whites and metallic blacks of the rest of the ship, the captain’s office seemed like a time capsule. Electric candles flickered golden light from the arts-and-crafts walls, bookshelves on all sides lined with tomes on topics from teambuilding to astrophysics. Alien constellations turned lazily

above through the skylight window, Eta Geminorum's twin suns just rolling out of view.

She tried to take her mind off of what was right in front of her. An array of holographic displays hid her busy superior's face, but the gold-embossed nameplate on the desk left no room for doubt. In blunt, unfussed letters, it read:

CHARLOTTE AKONA.

CAPTAIN.

With the click of a mouse, the vitrail of monitors disappeared. A grizzled calico, her fur wiry and faded, stared the medic dead in the eyes, her paws folded together on the table. "Doctor Polydefkis."

Polly gulped down and bowed her head. "Captain Akona."

The opossum tried not to stare at the wedge in Akona's ear as the captain spoke, her gruff voice sanded down by decades on the job. "Do you know why I called you in here today, Aletheia?"

"No, ma'am—"

"*Sir.*" The slits of Akona's pupils drew narrower.

"N-no, sir, I don't. I was just told it was urgent."

"You're damn right, it is. It's about this beaver."

Oh, fuck. A drop of sweat ran down the opossum's nose. Did she know about two nights ago? Was she about to get fired in the middle of an expedition? Was *he* about to get fired? "Sir, I—"

"Pipe down and listen." Akona's body barely moved as she talked. The only anchor Polly had was the glint of the light off her shining yellow eyes. "At 0430 hours this morning, two engineers got wheeled into the Lobe 4 medbay in a coma because an algæ tank exploded right in front of them. Simultaneously, every engineer in Lobe 2 called in sick because of a stomach bug. That's a third of our engineering team down in one day." The captain leaned in, snout millimetres away from the opossum's whiskers. "I need you to tell me: How soon can you get that log-gnawing layabout back on the *fucking* job?"

Polly's eyes skittered away from the housecat's hard stare. "Sir, Ca...*Mr Bobrski's* condition is highly unstable. He's adapting remarkably well physically, but there's no telling if his body might have another adverse reaction to the mutation. I really don't think I can do what you're—"

"Aletheia, how long do the nanobots you use last?"

"...About a week if we don't top them up."

"And how long has it been since the accident?"

The geneticist's tail darted up in shock. "Captain, you can't be serious!"

An unimpressed Akona did nothing but rest her chin smugly upon her hand.

"...With all due respect, sir," Polly hastily added, "'a week' is just an estimate. For a case as complex as his, it could take..." Her speech trailed off as she ran the numbers in her head.

"It could take what?"

"...I don't know, sir." The geneticist looked down in defeat. "It could be a week; it could be a month; it could be a year. For all I know, they could be trying to rebuild his body forever."

"Well, I'm not having him holed up in there forever just so you can fuck him. Tell him his ass is back to work tomorrow."

"...You *knew!*"

The captain broke in to a self-satisfied grin. "Oh, I knew; I just didn't really care. I have better things to worry about than policing my crew's fun. Now, shoo. I have a spaceship to run." Akona put her wall of screens back up, waving the opossum away with an arm clipped through the display.

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Castor hurled a ball at the dark walls of the entertainment deck with his upper left hand, catching it with his lower right. "Bullshit!"

"Hey, you're getting pretty good at that!"

The engineer ignored Polly's attempts at keeping the mood up. "I get a disease nobody else has had in a jillion years, and they send me back to work on the sixth fucking day? Fuckin' A, man." He sent the bouncing ball flying back, and caught it without much effort.

"Look on the bright side! Dr Kuposov says the new body might help you. More arms to engineer with, you know?"

Steadfast, the four-legged beaver ranted on. "I mean, Jesus. What do they even want me to wear? It's not like any of the jumpsuits are gonna fit."

The possum piped in, chipper as ever. "You could just tough it out," she said, growling and flexing her muscles to illustrate the point. "There's lots of countries back on Earth that don't wear clothes on the job! Besides, nobody cared about you being naked while we were on the way here."

Finally acknowledging her, Castor put down the ball behind him and turned to face his friend. "Maybe if I worked in therapy or some crap like that, but as an engineer, I don't really want to get stabbed in the balls on the job without some protection." He idly kicked the plaything back with his hindpaws. "And just to be clear: every single person we passed was staring at them."

"Well, suit yourself. Or don't!"

"I *will*. ...And anyway, what countries even are those?"

"Norway and Greater Zambezia." Polly leaned up against the taur's side. "I have an uncle who went on holiday there — nothing but butts!"

Castor huffed. "Yeah, but you don't generally think of those two as having their shit together."

NIGHT 6

The doorbell to the old bunk lit up in alert, its screen showing a grainy feed of an expected visitor. "Come in!" Castor shouted, resting his nude body on a pillow-covered futon which he had accepted would never be rolled up into the sofa position again.

The entry slammed open to the pitter-patter of possum footsteps on the corrugated hall floor. Polly gave a meek but cheerful wave. “Hi, Cas! Just wanted to see how you were holding up.”

“Eh, you know how it is. Sorry about the mess.” His quarters’ minuscule floor space was taken up by the dissembled contents of a cardboard box with his belongings, tools strewn all around and a mutilated jumpsuit he had cut in half. Band posters and “ironic” movie merch covered the wall behind him, where he sat opposite an immersive deep-screen display mounted right above the door.

The biologist politely dismissed his apology. “Oh, it’s fine! I’ve seen *so* much worse. My lair mate at uni was a mathematician and I don’t think he took a shower *once*.”

“Oh, so he smelled like the average guy here after his thirty seconds are up!”

“Strong words from a guy who’s been holed up in bed for a week,” snarked Polly, parking herself next to him on the futon. “You got any plans for tomorrow?”

“I figure I’ll take it as it comes. I’m just looking forward to the look on Beucey’s face when he sees me.” Castor gently placed a hand on the opossum’s back. “So, you need anything? There’s booze in the fridge by the kitchenette,” he asked, pointing over to a dimly lit countertop in the corner.

“I’ll live.” Polly fell back on the bed, hands behind her head, and stared up at the pop-cultural detritus around her. “You know, I don’t think I’ve even heard of *any* of these.”

“That’s because you’re not *cultured*,” Castor playfully retorted, crossing his lower arms. The beaver heaved himself up, resting his forepaws on a wheatpaste flyer for the Grateful Deer, and rummaged around the overhead cupboard, tongue stuck out in concentration. “A-ha! Found it.” Arms still crossed, he plopped back down, jouncing the possum up and down for a second, and held up a small black storage drive between his doubled thumbs. “Behold... the holy grail.” As if to accent the point, he pointed his upper right arm at the disk,

all four limbs now employed for the sole purpose of flexing on his girlfriend. “There are twenty thousand movies on this bad boy, and they’re all *complete garbage*.”

“Oh, god.” Polly shrank back into the bed in embarrassment. Maybe if she played dead he’d let her go.

“Hey, don’t knock it. A raccoon buddy of mine gave this to me back in Indiana.” The engineer stared out wistfully into the middle distance. “I tell ya... nobody could pick out the trash like him.”

“If you want us to watch a movie, could you at least make it something *good*?”

Castor gave it some thought. “Nah.”

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The opossum could only peek through Castor’s fingers as she laid her head on his shoulder, sat astride his lower body like a jockey, his hand covering her eyes. “*Eep!*”

“Aw, c’mon, it’s not that scary. The stuff looks like liverwurst!” Flashes of red gore and gunfire light illuminated the dark room.

“It’s different when it’s in 3D, okay! And you can take your paw off my face. I’m not eleven,” said Polly, her feigned composure belied by her jittering legs.

“Fine by me. More hands for the popcorn tub.” If the room was a mess when she came in, it was a blast zone now; cans of soda and bags of confectionery littered every corner. The beaver grabbed another bite from the bucket of snacks beside him. “You should get scared more often, by the way. It feels nice on my back.”

The medic put her hand up to his muzzle. “Sh-sh-sshhhh... I bet it’s about to get good.”

A camp melodrama was playing out on the screen in front of them. Blasts of neon pink shone on the final girl, a “saola” — clearly a doe with horns cheaply glued onto her head — revving up a chainsaw, ready to take her revenge. Her shouts were drowned out by the blare of synthesisers, though if the subtitles were any indication, it was

something to the effect of, “*Come and get it, you lousy poaching son-of-a-bitch!*”

Polly turned to look at the beaver’s hazy green eyes. “You said you had twenty thousand of these?”

“It—” Castor’s response was interrupted by the simulated sound of explosions and blood splatters. “It’s actually twenty-*three* thousand.”

“Are they all this great?”

“It’s like I said, babe: nothing but ab-so-lute trash.” The saola sliced her saw through a human hunter’s neck, exploding his gullet into a substance resembling birthday cake.

“Wow. I mean, who *makes* this crap?”

“People,” Castor shrugged. “I think there’s a space station around Jupiter where the whole economy is just *this*.”

“No way.” The opossum hopped off her boyfriend’s back so the two could talk face-to-face. “How does that even *work*?”

“Beats me.”

The bovid held the severed head aloft, framed in shadow against the rising sun — and as the camera zoomed in, our heroine oblivious, the undead human winked at the audience. Fade to black. “*The Demon Poacher Will Return.*”

Polly’s eyes twinkled with excitement. “Did he?”

“Nah. I think the production company went bust.”

“Awww...”

The beaver twirled a remote control around in his hand. “You wanna see what else we got?”

“Mmmh...” The tiring possum let out a hissing yawn. “I dunno. I’m getting kinda tired, and I have to work tomorrow...”

“C’mon, we have all the time in the world! These flicks are only ninety minutes each anyway.”

“Maybe tomorrow.” She stretched her arms out and snuggled up next to Castor, nuzzling his fur. “Right now... I’m just happy spending time with you.”

The beaver's tails shot up as he blushed. "Thanks..."

Gently, unsurely, he leaned in for a kiss, and as the two's lower lips touched, a fire kindled inside him. "Well, geez, if you are gonna stay here... how long have you been wearing that thing?" he inquired, taking notice of her stiff ultramarine uniform.

"Too long, Cas. Too long." The pair embraced, each held softly in the other's arms, and Castor's stray hand caressed her back until it found the key of her jumpsuit's zip. He whispered in her slight black ears, "Then let's get you into something more comfortable."

Their embrace continued, his warm fur rubbing up against her cold spandex, as he guided the zip down the curves of her spine. One hand unzipped; the others he dedicated in turns to soothing her body and unfolding the intricate garment like a paper crane. When his handiwork was done and she kicked her clothes away, he inched himself back to appreciate her form.

All he could say about the ineffable sight before him was a, "God, you're beautiful," muttered under his breath. In that moment, under the golden glow of dim LEDs, everything about her was perfect. Her bashful grin. The way her wispy grey fur played with the light. How that simple black sports bra matched exactly the bluish tint in her hair. The subtle dimple of her pouch across her belly, all in that svelte, flat figure. He had gone through hell and back to get the body he had now, yet here she was, just as the heavens made her.

Kneeling down on the divan, Polly stared back at him. She had grown used to the sight of him in the buff, but something in the light made it seem like the first time. At first she had seen him with the dispassionate eyes of a scientist, nothing more than a body to document and an affliction to pity — a medical accident. But over the course of five long days, she had reconsidered. Eyes once welled shut with pain had grown confident. The way his brown fur matted and gnarled over a day's work had a certain blue-collar charm. And those thighs! She had watched as he went from quaking with every step to making thundering strides without a sweat. She hated to

invoke the term for a condition she was meant to treat, but... he was beautiful.

Still, a silence filled the air. Cheeks flushed and tails swished. Sure, they had gotten right into it last time, but that was clinical, medical. Tonight was different — a second first time.

Castor punctured the pregnant pause. "...I think you're gorgeous. All of you."

Polly shifted, nervously, duvet crumpling under her knees. "...I, uh... I think you are too. It feels weird to say that out loud."

"Shucks." He scratched his back and chittered. "Honestly, I never really got many compliments in the first place, so... I had kinda thrown out the idea completely. That anyone would say that about me, I mean — of all people..."

"Heh. Guess that's what happens when you, you know, get to know someone that personally..."

He laid two hands on her shoulder. "When—when I say 'all of you', I really did mean it. And I... I think I'd like to see all of you. If that's okay."

The opossum obliged, slowly lifting off her sports bra to uncover the gentle slopes of two A-cups underneath, each teat accented with a golden piercing on either side. "I got them back at uni," she meekly explained. "I think I was just trying to tell myself that there was *something* under there... I wanted to get some in the pouch, too, but the tattoo parlour wouldn't let me."

"Wow. In the pouch, huh?"

She laughed him off. "Yeah... It's one of those marsupial things. A lot of people just assume we're like big rats or whatever, so I figured, hey, why not take some pride in what set me apart?" She continued, her voice now taking on a more toying timbre, as she slipped her black knickers down her calves. "Actually, another thing a lot of people don't know about opossums is..."

"Whoa." Castor didn't know whether he was more shocked or aroused, though a growing dampness under his groin would answer

that quandary for him. “So do they both...” Under her thong, Polly’s body opened up into two clearly identifiable, distinct grooves.

“Oh, yeah.” The biologist locked eyes with her mate, dead serious. “It’s like a combination lock. It’s why you don’t see many opossum or kanga hybrids around.”

A worrying thought entered the beaver’s head. “Oh, fuck, does that mean I—”

“No, no no no! You’ll— we’ll be fine.”³ A devious smirk worked its way across her mouth. “But that does give me an idea...”

“Oooo-kay, partner; let’s not get ahead of ourselves, now.” Castor picked her up by the waist and dragged them both down into a lying position on the futon. Momentarily distracted, he cracked his back with his lower arms — it was the first time in days that his upper half hadn’t been totally pole-upright. “*Hooh*, that feels good...”

He cradled his partner every which way. His arms locked around her torso as he nuzzled her cheeks; his forepaws pet at her slender hips; his furthest extremities, too far for her feet, leisurely played with her wiry tail.

Their dancing bodies pulsed with anticipation, and as they swept each other under the covers, the air trapped within grew humid and hot. Pupils grew and veins tensed, their reddening groins bathed in hot water. With deep breaths, Polly popped the question. “How should we start?”

“I’ve always been curious...” Castor whispered directions in her ear. The possum gave no verbal response, but the swelling forth of her clits surely meant he was doing *something* right. His arms and legs guided her clamber down his body, retreating inch by inch until her toes nearly poked off the bed. *Here goes nothing*, she thought, as she felt the meat of his cocks throb warm against her pouch. Polly whispered up, hoping he could hear. “All right, so do you...”

³Initial DNA tests showed that the barrage of cosmic rays had rendered Castor completely sterile. It would take another week for Polly to work up the courage to break the bad news.

The thought trailed off and she yelped with joy as his soft member worked its way inside, the other, unable to fit, flapping moistly against her fur. Each rub against her teats provoked rapturous squeaks from below and soft grunts from above, each entranced by the contours of the other's unadorned erotic skin, and when he at last pulled back out from her jostling pocket, a trail of pre clung all the way up her chest.

Polly clambered back to meet the taur's gaze and catch some fresh air. She winked at him, wet hair draped over her eyes, same as that fateful day, and he kissed her neck. "Polly... Thank you so much for this," Castor quietly moaned. He held the possum close in a four-armed embrace, the cold metal of her piercings brushing against his pecs, her pussies a hair's breadth away from the joint of his two torsos. With a playful lick of his ear, she said, "My turn."

The engineer knew exactly what she meant. As she descended down his front, pulling against his fur, he steeled himself for the climax of the night. His eyes jolted open when she reached the bottom, giving the signal by batting her tail against his tensing scrotum. Closing them shut, he counted down in his mind. *Three...*

Two... It was a broiling thirty-seven degrees, but Polly still shivered. *I hope this works*, she thought, while her brain still had space. She imagined this was how the ship's navigators felt when they docked to a station. *I guess they're not too big, but... will they fit?* Her previous partners' slender hemipenes were built for her body. *His fat pricks were built by cosmic accident.* She crossed her fingers.

...One. Castor bit down and bucked right into her soft sexes. It was a perfect fit.

Tomorrow, he would remember nothing past this. For now, he was too busy failing to make sense of the rapturous sensation that flooded into his body. He had fucked. He had, once or twice, *been* fucked. But no bedroom rap sheet could prepare him for the tidal wave of pure sense that now overcame him.

His twin members pulsed in stereo, nestled in their warm dens, sending crackling shockwaves of ecstasy through his body. His front paws held on to Polly for dear life. He knew nothing like this and nothing of this, except that it was the most intense signal his brain had ever received. He thrust again.

Polly gasped as the beaver plunged into her sopping chasms, balls bouncing against her clits. It was a tighter fit than she'd ever had. It was a *better* fit than she'd ever had. As his flesh rubbed against her sensitive walls, she intoned the beaver's name into the mattress unheard.

The blankets did little to muffle Castor's loudening shouts of incoherent delight. This ecstasy was giving him a migraine. He didn't care. The two crewmates rocked each other back and forth — until the dam broke. The beaver, cocks dripping, neighbours be damned, screamed joyous curses into the air. The opossum, pussies overflowing, milliseconds later, moaned glass-breaking tones into the bed.

As he pulled out, he collapsed onto the mattress in a panting heap of limbs. “*Fuck* me, dude...” Polly snuggled up next to him, both their faces raining with sauna-hot sweat. She squeaked, “...Do you think they heard us?”

Castor rubbed his pounding temples, still frazzled, slurring as he spoke. “I'on't... I dunno, but... *buff*... I don't really care.” He looked into her eyes with a shaky grin. “You wanna go again?”

“I thought you'd never ask.”

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To be concluded

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