

Double Payload

PART THREE

By Xanthe van Otterburn

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CONTENTS

Day 11	<i>A reunion.</i>	1
Day 13	♥ <i>Digital love.</i>	7
Night 13	<i>Castor drowns his sorrows.</i>	19
Night 14	<i>Polly dreams of Earth.</i>	26
Day 17	<i>A quick shopping trip.</i>	34
Night 17	♥ <i>One final physical.</i>	38
Night 121	<i>An epilogue.</i>	60

DAY 11

ALTHEIA POLYDEFKIS was staring at the ceiling. It was the morning of the opossum's first full day in quarantine, and she had hardly slept but for an hour or so at most of intermittent dreamless tossing, if she had to guess. She squinted up at the glass blocks, shining down uniform beams of cloudy white light — each one smooth, identical, free of any pesky imperfections that might dare lend them a hint of *character*.

A creaking yawn escaped her, arms and legs sprawled out in an achy pile across the stiff mattress. With a hiss and a stretch, she pulled herself together and down from the bed. “Good morning, world...” Intuitively, she reached to her side to reload her morning paper, only to come up empty-pawed. “...Oh, right,” she chuckled to herself. The light-speed delay meant *Science & Nature* always came in a fortnight late anyway, so it was no great loss.

Polly rubbed the sand from her eyes to survey the room she was to be locked up in for the next week. The e-acrylic walls played a crude loop of the snow-capped trees of Central Park: a default tailored to

her species, no doubt, although she herself had spent perhaps two weeks of her life in sum on that side of the pond.¹ Across from her bed: an air-gapped sliding door, a small desk of the kind that slid out from the seat in front of you on a maglev, and a shelf neatly stacked with the smattering of hardcovers from home she had packed for the long journey. Compendia of modernist poetry stood spine-to-spine against biological treatises and, to her mild embarrassment, erotic science fiction (a common literary vice among her scientific ilk).

Wandering over in her off-white, off-the-shelf pyjamas, she plopped herself down on a rigid stone-grey stool and slapped awake the automat recessed behind her new desk. An effete and chipper voice replied, “GOOD MORNING, MS POLYDEFKIS. HOW CAN I HELP?”

“Uhhhh...” She stalled for a second, still discombobulated, before rattling off her usual from the mess hall. “A large double-caff pistachio chocolate frappé with two pumps caramel, please. Oh! And a croissant.”

“...NO.”

The possum laughed uneasily. “Hah... what?”

“MS POLYDEFKIS, THIS IS A QUARANTINE, NOT A PATIS-SERIE. WE HAVE A DUTY OF CARE TO KEEP OUR PATIENTS HEALTHY SO THERE ARE NO CONFOUNDING FACTORS.”

Her face tensed up with a growl. She had come on this trip to advance the cause of science, and now here she was, reduced to arguing with a kettle over breakfast. Still, she kept up appearances. “Caffeine withdrawal could be a confounding factor!”

“CORRECT.”

The machine’s bottom retracted with a satisfied whirr, and when a bright blue mug rose back up, the *Ardhanarishvara*’s logo embossed on its side, Polly smirked — only for a spigot to sputter out

¹Polly had never known her great-grandmother, the last member of her family whose blood ran red, white, and blue; she had moved to Delphi in a fit of polytheistic religious fervour, of the kind that ran so rampant at the time, and was lucky enough to soon find a soul who didn’t think her completely mad.

a stream of steaming obsidian-black coffee; and, as if to add insult to injury, a pastry fell limply from a compartment at the top, narrowly avoiding a cannonball dive into the drink. “YOUR CROISSANT, MA’AM. LET ME KNOW IF YOU NEED ANYTHING ELSE!” the machine beamed, in that same fey affect.

Polly resigned herself to an irritated sigh. “...I will.”

Between cautious sips of the unappetising naphtha, she flicked through the yellowed sheets of a well-annotated polyglot of *The Collected Cavafy*,² chuckling to noöne at the haphazard translation on the recto before admiring the fine verse opposite. She resolved to keep Ithaca always in her mind — or, at the very least, to occasionally think of Thessalonica.

Just then, an almighty *thunk* and the harried rattling of a keycard hoisted her mind back to the stars, and when the inner door opened, there stood crouched an imposing figure clad in what resembled a gunmetal diving suit, as though it had just stepped out of some Victorian tale of adventure. The possum sat unfazed by its stiff upwards lurch; as it wiped away the condensation from its amber-tinted visor, she recognised the sallow human face inside. “Adam!”

Doctor Kuposov nodded curtly, his attention diverted to the beverage on her table. “Black coffee! I thought I would not live to see the day...”

She kicked back in her chair. “They wouldn’t let me have the good stuff.”

“Ah, don’t knock it. It’s the *only* stuff in Tsiolkovsky.”

“Is that with or without rocket fuel?”

“Don’t push it,” he grouched. “Anyway — there is someone waiting for you in the visitation room.”

Polly’s ears poked up at the news. “Who is it?”

“Mmm...” Kuposov did not speak — he only let out a halting, mirthless laugh, and walked back through the door.

²Four hundred years on, and there was still no beating good, old-fashioned dead wood.

* * * * *
** ** **

Castor sat sprawled over the scratchy blue sofa in the visitation room, fidgeting like a hyperactive child at the zoo. (The marsupial exhibit, to be precise.) A great plastic screen cleaved the space dramatically down the middle: his side, a subdued black antechamber with but the subtlest fixtures of light hidden where the ceiling met the walls; hers, a crude simulacrum of an English garden, an empty plywood bench set among astroturf grass and peeling cobble veneers.

At a quiet sound — not even a sound, a hunch — the beaver-*taur* stood still. His questing eyes followed Polly as she stepped cautiously into the faux courtyard behind the glass.

Inside, the air rode the line between a comforting cool and an aggravating cold. For now, the biologist kept her head down; arsenic-green un-grass crunching under her feet, she regarded with bemusement a two-dimensional pond of holographic koi. Finally, as she was about to take her seat, she glanced up at the figure opposite.

She froze in her tracks. *Oh, fuck.* She'd read her boyfriend's texts — an adrenal epic that went from sheer panic and terror to resigned acceptance in ninety-two parts — but, without any photos to accompany them, it was impossible to internalise the magnitude of his final change. She stared at him like a deer in the headlights, gaze darting back and forth between Castor's twin faces, unsure which to meet. With a wave and a squeak, he softly spoke as one, in harmonious duet: **"...Hi."**

"So..."

"...How was it?"

Polly stepped forward with deep, pounding breaths. The way his heads were choreographed together, in an effortless song-and-dance... It was like he had been doing this his whole life. She laid a furless palm flat on the plexiglass. Castor stared back, a clear concern playing on his faces.

"Babe, is... is everything all right?"

"Your eyes are twitching."

Tears welled up on Polly's face, still unready to spill down. She took one last deep breath, put her hands together, and exploded.

"I *FUCKING* WARNED HER THIS WOULD HAPPEN!"

Her voice bounced and echoed with metallic reverb off the walls, so loud it sent visible shockwaves through the screen between them. Her fists pounded against it with chaotic, arrhythmic force: "AKONA! THAT *MOTHERFUCKER!*"

Castor recoiled in shock. "Wait, you mean *Captain* Ako—?" His question was interrupted by the continued shrieks and hisses of the opossum, this time in something that was either Greek or the last gasps of a dying Broca's area. After one more war-cry, she retreated from the glass, sat down on the bench, and exhaled again, head cradled in her paws.

Polly looked back up at him, heavy bags under her eyes, trying her best to snap back to her usual perky persona. "...So how have *you* been?"

"Eh..." Castor crossed his forepaws. "Better than I thought?"

"I bumped into this guy Timo in the halls and shi's been a lot of help. Shi said you knew hir?"

Polly's eyes rose to a relieved smile. "Oh, thank god!" she laughed. "Shi's the best lab tech I know. Even helped me diagnose what happened to you. You *really* lucked out."

"That's what shi said! And..."

Castor flexed his muscles with a wink.

"Guess who has... *onetwothreefourf*... eight thumbs and is invited to virtual-telenovela night this week?"

The possum leaned back on the bench. "That's either a blessing or a curse, and I don't know which."

"I'm just going for the snacks," he shrugged.

"Oh! I forgot to ask — how was your... *thing*?"

Polly's face lit up at the ask. "Great! Great. Kinda wish they'd given me more than half a day's notice, but... great."

“Go on...”

“Astrobiology called me up and said they had found evidence of macrobial life down on Dave.”

“*Dave?*” Castor cocked his left head quizzically.

“That ice planet we were looking into! That’s what the rest of the guys called it, anyway. Officially it’s Priapus, but nobody wants to think about giant goat boners when they’re out in -30° wind, you know?”

“Timo would’ve.”

“...Shi’s an outlier.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“Yeah, but Timo’s, like... six sigmas,” she chortled. “Anyway — so you know what you were saying about me just wanting to put my name on a big scientific discovery?”

Castor rubbed his temples.

“...I think that was about six excruciatingly painful metamorphoses ago, but sure.”

“Well... Guess who actually *found* the stuff first?” Polly crossed her legs and sprawled smugly sideways in her seat.

The engineer’s eyes widened as he covered (one of) his gasping mouths. “Holy shit, that’s amazing!”

“It gets better! Guess who gets to *name an alien?*”

“...Me?” He pointed at his chest like a puppy asking for chocolate.

“Mmmm... Maybe next time.”

“**Aww...**”

“Who knows? They might let me get away with *Beavertwodickus rogercormanii*.”

The two of them laughed — and as three uproarious voices echoed across the room, the strangeness of their situation seemed to melt away from their perception, the wall between them up and gone into thin air. On and on, they chatted the morning away, like two ordinary friends in the park on an ordinary spring day.

DAY 13

POLLY WAS SOME hundred pages deep in a book by the name of *Alien Hearts: An Andromeda Romance* when an iron knock on the door snapped her out of her reverie. “Come in!” she shouted, slamming the volume shut and stuffing it under her pillow.

In marched Doctor Kuposov — still in that same bulky hazmat suit, clutching in his gloves a selection of items like a circus elephant trained not to pop the ball. “Good morning!” his stentorian voice crackled through the innumerable filters of his antiseptic armour.

“Morning!” beamed the possum in return. “Whatcha got for me?”

“First of it all... *the good stuff*, as you requested.” He handed her a clear cup filled with a cold, green, frothy beverage, which she happily imbibed. “Please do not tell Akona — she *will* kill me.”

Polly clicked contentedly as the chill taste of pistachio chocolate rushed over her tongue. “I won’t!”

“And second...” The man coughed, stalling for time as his face reddened. “*O, bože*,” he murmured.

“C’mon, spit it out. It’s not like it’s gonna be anthrax.”

“Okay, look.” Through his suit, Polly could just make out the choppy outline of a sigh. “HR asked me to give you these. It is not my business, it is not my monkeys, and I think we should never speak of this again. Yes?” With that, he deposited a pile of matte-black instruments and wires on the bed.

“Uhhh...” She twisted her head. Kuposov was already busying himself installing a small white device into a socket by the door, and she doubted he would choose to hear her. “If you say so?” The human doctor shrank out the door without a response, leaving her to inspect the technological mess in front of her.

She picked up a small, glassy puck from the pile, connected by thin wires to a slew of others, all identical but for the white block capitals printed on one side — “RIGHT THIGH”.

“Okay...” A sceptical look on her face, she gently rolled up her pyjama leggings. Cautiously, she placed the puck onto the soft back of her thigh, moving it around until it snapped into place with a dull but precise thudding sensation, like being firmly tapped on the leg. She grinned. *I see where this is going.*

Before she stripped off, Polly quickly flicked between the available wallpapers for her room, hoping to find something more apropos than the current wintry snowscape — she had little desire to become the first person to ever succumb to “frostbite by placebo”. After a few clips, she landed on a panoramic view of a modest Mediterranean forest grove³ — truly, a kingdom fit for a nymph! Or dryad. She’d double-check the difference later.

Having divested herself of her clothing, the cycle continued: pick up a puck, read the label, and wave it around until it thumped her in the relevant body part. After twenty-some iterations of this, leaving her more wired up than someone about to get a brain implant, there was one item left: a plain, black, two-pronged vibrator.

The possum looked at it, flummoxed. Getting marsupial sex toys anywhere but Australasia was always a nightmare — yet, apparently, they were deemed an essential enough item to pack on an interstellar voyage, presumably in the same cupboard with painkillers, anti-addictants, and prebreathers. “Akona has *such* weird priorities,” she muttered.

She held it in her hands, feeling up its contours with a scientist’s eye. It was soft, foamy, medical-grade silicone; firm to the touch, but pliable with effort. Conspicuously lacking were any instructions to the user: no buttons, no labels, and no blinkenlights bleeping away. With nothing else to do, and trusting the good judgement of HR (if not necessarily Kopusov), she slipped the device into her crotch.

The second Polly let her fingers from it, her sly smile contorted into a pained gurn. The device dramatically swelled up, hitting every

³A city beach would have been homier, but, as few qualms as she had about public nudity in theory, she drew the line at outright exhibitionism.

sensitive nerve ending like a punch to the plexus, before just as suddenly shrinking back, its shifting surface suspended millimetres away from everywhere, clinging on only by a few precarious suckers on her skin. “*Gah!*” Buckled over on the bed, she bit down on nowt but empty air. “*Why the fuck would you design it like that?*”⁴

As she recovered from the ignominy of being kicked in the groin by her own vibrator, her ears turned to a thin hissing noise leaking out from beside the door. A fog began to trickle in, so fine, so *not there*, that only the blooming glow of the lights tipped her off to its presence.

“Nggghh...” Polly turned to face the ceiling, where dusk had fallen on its cloudy grey glow. On its underside a constellation of projectors slid round in an elegant mechanical dance, scanning the air, tracking each minuscule particle of mist, readying for... something. “Is this—”

A gong chimed from nowhere. Rays of colour blasted down before her to form a cocoon of light in the hyaline fog. The baffled possum scuttled back against the headrest. Her throat drew shallow, accelerating breaths. Bit by bit, the beams of light focussed themselves. and took on more identifiable shape.

“Cas?” she cried, as confused as she was relieved, an emotional melange only heightened as she got a better look at the picture in front of her. Sitting pretty on the sheets, there was Castor — as he was two weeks ago, untouched by the whims of cosmic chance. Two arms. Two legs. One head. Like he had just left the shuttle.

He coughed hoarsely into his fist. “Hey, uh... is this thing on? Can you hear me?”

“...I can hear you,” the slack-jawed possum squeaked. Hear him she did: his shying voice rang omnidirectional from every corner of the room, unmoored from his projected form.

⁴If Kopusov had bothered to read the packaging, he might have noticed the following wording buried in the small print: *The Australis v900 Televibrator is calibrated for Earth pressure. Use in other habitats may require manual adjustment.*

“Oh, thank god.” As Castor tried to wipe his forehead, his arm followed down a laggy path, unnaturally displaced in space, somewhere between the “real” positions of the limbs on the other side. “I’ve been here troubleshooting with Timo for *hours*. I was starting to worry they’d ban us from the entertainment deck.”

Polly relaxed her arched shoulders and giggled. “Come on! I bet that’s not even the weirdest thing someone’s used it for *this morning*.”

“I guess not,” he awkwardly laughed. “...Unless you want to change that?”

“Wow, you’re really getting right into it today, aren’t you?”

“Well, I figure we both know why we’re strapped into these dumb gizmos, so we might as well.” He fell coolly back on the bed beside her, landing with an unbouncing thud. A puddle of light glowed sear-bright where his “body” met the fabric.

As he softly nuzzled the nude possum’s shoulders, a rumbling frisson coursed through the sensors on her back. She rolled on her side to face him, and as she ran her palms across his furry cheeks, she marvelled at how real the soft touch felt, accompanied by a gentle pushing sensation — not too strong to overcome, but enough to complete the illusion that he was right there beside her.

Castor returned the favour, caressing the rim of the possum’s pouch, until she laid her hand on his. “...Stop.”

“Babe, what is it?”

“Something about this... it’s— it’s just not right.” Maybe it was the eerily straight trajectory his hand followed. The too-perfect grain of the fur on his face. Or perhaps she just missed his warm, four-armed embrace. “I don’t know what it is...” He shied away, gaze nervously slipping from her eyes. “It’s like there’s something... fake.”

Castor turned to stare up at the ceiling. At the array of machines beaming down this simulacrum of a body. “...I’m sorry,” he half-whispered.

“It’s not your fault, I just—”

“...No, no. It’s on me. My avatar in the VR system hadn’t changed, and I... I just wanted you to see me as I really was. What I was for all those years. Before... you know, everything.”

“Well... I think you’re beautiful as you are,” she blushed.

“I know,” he sighed, “and I try to think so too. But... ugh, fuck.” He covered his hands over his face, though their translucent surfaces did little to shield him from the world outside. “Look, I try to be a rational person.”

“Go on...”

“I’m an engineer,” he continued, hanging on every word like it might be his last. “It’s kind of my job. I think... I *like* to think that I see the world for as it is.” Polly heard him drink in two deep breaths. “But these past few weeks... God, I don’t know if I can still believe it.” He moved his hands down to his chest, assuming a posture like a that of a patient facing his therapist.

“Because the *way* I see the world, the basic sensory pathways of my being — it’s been fucking ripped out. I can hear a pin drop from across the hall. Every step I take, I can feel the bumps from four feet at once. My centre of gravity has been knocked half a metre back. I can stare myself in the goddamn eyes, which... look, doing that shit puts the fear of God in you, okay? But that’s not what scares me. You know what scares me?”

“What?” the opossum inquired.

“It’s that it’s all so... *normal*.”

“But that’s good, right? It means you’re settling in well. I mean, I never thought you’d get this far! It’s incredible.”

“Yeah, but...” A well of tears clouded Castor’s eyes as he gestured skywards. He choked on words lodged stuck in his throat. Finally, he yelled. “I don’t know what the *fuck* I am any more! I don’t know how to live like this! How, in four months’ time, I’m gonna waltz back down to Earth and explain *any* of this shit to *anyone* in my life, when I barely even remember how I used to walk on two legs after a week! You’re lucky. You saw me as a person first. Strangers on the

street? They're just gonna see me as a thing. A damned thing. And however proud I tell myself to be, however much I tell myself I don't care what anyone thinks, that's not going to change."

Polly turned to stare at the ceiling above with him. "Well..." She cleared her throat. "I guess I don't know what your friends back on Earth are like, or your family. But you've already told two people here, right? Timo and Beuce? How did they take it?"

"Well, I didn't know Timo beforehand, and we've already established shi's an outlier, so I don't think hir being *relatively* chill about it means all that much."

"And Beuce? You said you were friends, right?"

"Oh, man..." A slight smile crept back onto his weary face as he reminisced. "He's the best friend I've ever had. Met him back in college. He let me stay at his place after my mom and dad kicked me out and everything."

"...Why was that?" she pried.

"They, uh—" Castor cringed in recollection. "...Quakers. They were fine with me being bisexual. Hell, they were too. But when they found out I was *bi-premarital*-sexual... hoo, boy."

"...I'm so sorry."

"Sweetest little old Polish beaver lady in the world, calling me the 'Whore of Babylon'... imagine that." He paused, hoping to redirect the line of conversation. "But, uh... Beuce. He's the guy who helped me get this job, actually. I was down on my luck after quitting that Mars cruise, but then he called me up, saying, hey, there's this interstellar ship that's hiring for engineers and astrophysicists... I always wanted to go on one. I liked the idea of being a part of something bigger, not just a delivery driver for drunk Marsniks."

"And how did he react?"

"It was... weird. Either he was trying to ignore it, or he genuinely just didn't care. You know what the first thing he said to me was?"

"What?"

“He asked me how I ripped my shirt.” He lay there, eyes in a blank stare, still trying to process that reaction six days later. “So obviously I was like, ‘What the fuck?’ And he said he just assumed I went to one of those crazy plastic surgeons they have around Uranus. This is a guy who *grew up on a farm*, and he’s just like, ‘Oh, yeah, Brazilian centaur butt-lift, seen it all before!’”

“Crap, I knew I should have looked those guys up!” Polly snapped her fingers. “They never publish in the medical journals, ’cause it’s all hush-hush, grey-area. Might have helped while you were still adjusting.”

“Wow, thanks,” he deadpanned.

“You’re welcome,” she winked. “You see what I mean, though? He’s from Buttfuck Valley, U.S.A., and *he* doesn’t care. I know $n = 1$ here, but you’d be surprised at how many people are gonna be just like him! My mama always used to tell me...” Puffing out her cheeks and gravelling her voice, she put on the most theatrical Greek accent she could muster. “Aletheia, *most* people are *mostly* nice, *most* of the time — and damn the ones who aren’t!”

The haggard beaver couldn’t help but laugh. “I guess...”

“And if that doesn’t work, well...” Quietly, she ruffled the fur of his chin. “I’ll buy you a ticket on the train to Europe.”

“If you can find me a seat that fits.”

“Oh, there’ll be room for us both in first class.”

He couldn’t hide an unavoidable growing smile. Maybe she was right. Maybe he could leave all that baggage back home where it belonged. Throw it in the Cuyahoga.

“Now, come on.” She clutched him close by the arms. “I want to see you. Not the shield you put up, not some old avatar, not the way you want to be seen — the *real* you.” She continued in a blushing whisper, “...You know, with the two dicks and stuff.”

Castor took a deep breath. “...Okay.” He stood from the bed and, for the final time in his life, stretched two legs straight and two arms to the ceiling. Polly watched as the luminous avatar froze, stuck

mid-blink and posed in victory like an ancient statue of a heroic youth, and his colours faded away into the glassy nothing. The lights went dim. For some time, as she lay atop that creaking, rigid frame, her only companion was the dull green glow of the woodland walls.

Then: light.

In grainy reflection Castor appeared on the bed, legs buckled under himself, and with a curious expression examined his four hands. They flickered and shifted in un- | A thin halo of grey shone round even stop-motion, as the cameras | them, revealing thin glimpses of around him raced to catch up. | the entertainment deck behind. It wasn't as pretty as his old professionally scanned guise — but god damnit, it was *him*.

He shuffled around, maladroit, at a loss on what to do with himself. “How do I look?” he asked, with two shaky smiles.

A dizzied Polly gazed on at the taur's immaterial form; standing aglow in the dark, he lit up the room with a brunet flame. She choked out the only response she could think of. “Perfect.”

She inched towards him over the sheets. His tails fluttered in the unmoved air. She went in for an embrace, and he held her tight, four arms pressing hard on the clicking possum's ash-furred back. So well did the haptics work their magic that, as they dragged each other down onto the bed, Polly swore she could feel the warmth of the beaver's body on her chest.

He ran down her arms with six-fingered touch, rocking her gently whilst she stifled contented purrs, and as she fondled his back where new body met old, he went in for a delicate kiss on the cheek — then another. Polly's heart practically melted at the feeling of him giving her his love in stereo, her fur puffing up in goosebumps as simulated breath rolled over her face.

“*Mmph*. You know, I knew I loved you...”

“...But seeing you like this really puts it into perspective.”

Quivering, she moaned in soft sopranos with every kiss. “G-god, it feels so *real*...” She tried her best to match his energy, but fundamentally, this was now a game of two against one. She could only hope he was enjoying this as much as she was.

With a loud moan on his left and a silent smirk on his right, Castor backed off, just a little.

“There was something else I think we wanted to try—”

His sultry voice softened to a dextral whisper.

—“But I can’t quite put my *finger* on it.”

Polly giggled. “All twenty-whatever of them?”

“...You’re killing the moment, babe.”

She rolled her eyes with a coy simper. “Just shut up and fuck me.” He gave her back a wink and a nod, and got to work.

The beaver’s upper arms still held her tight against the fluff of his chest, freeing up his lower pair to explore the canvas of her dense-furred marsupial nethers; all the while, he quietly nuzzled her shoulders, licking up the ambrosial scent of her rose perfume. | his chest, and, as he charted the contours of her slender body, he distracted her with a sopping French kiss of shocking tactile fidelity, their muzzles pressing against each other in loving unity.

A murmur of, “Well, what have we here?” passed through Polly’s ears with little notice as she pulled away from Castor’s locked lips to gasp for air and ecstasy. Oh, he had found what he was looking for, all right, and every little movement of his digits on the folds of her vulvæ was simulated with ecstatic clarity by the technology wedged inside. “*Gamóto*...” came the creaking moans, linguistic clarity no longer a particular priority of her mind, and she buckled back with joy.

A giddy smile of a slightly maddened kind played on Castor’s faces as he watched his partner moan and writhe on the bed — indeed, she did so with such force that he could feel his forelegs rumble front and back as her limbs clipped through their intangible mass. With gritted teeth he carried on, cocks flapping against his trunk,

hardening his vice grip around her as if she was about to explode, and teased the hoods of her clits for all they were worth, kneading them in synchrony with pulsing, staccato breaths.

Polly's body crackled with aphrodisiac passion as Castor moved further inward, marking the walls of her pussies in search of the holy grail. This was it — she was about to burst. She could hardly think about anything else. And when his dextrous hands reached out to stimulate both her G-spots, she felt the white-hot light of climactic ecstasy overtake her, for just a split second — only to disappear as quickly as it had entered. From beneath her chimed a matronly voice: “*Simultaneous glandular stimulation detected. Switching to Mode Two...*”

“Wh... huh?” the biologist slurred, as the condensation of fog on her mind subsided.

Castor loosened his hold and pulled back with a confounded expression. “**Is that...** meant to happen?”

Polly looked down at her loins with something of a thousand-yard stare, reeling from being cockblocked by her own sex toy. Her vibrator thrummed as it remoulded its shape, inverting itself from an “innie” to an “outie” with two tapering prongs on its front. Two increasingly *phallic* prongs.

She looked up into Castor's green eyes. He looked back. A gulp worked its way down his right throat. With a twinkle in her eye, she beamed at his twofold visage. “All right, cowboy... looks like we're going for a ride!”

Expressions of disappointment and arousal duelled for space on the sweating engineer's faces like two masks outside a theatre; still, he squeaked out a tentative “**Okay...**”, his voices hovering and wavering a semitone apart.

“But, uh, first...” Polly licked her lips, sat straight up, and broadly did her best to posture that she was absolutely, 100% not making this up as she went along. “...You're gonna suck 'em.”

She stood up, slim feet precariously balanced on the mattress, and backed herself up against the wall. With a grunt, he shuffled back and splayed his legs across the covers. Staring him in the face as he looked up was the possum's mischievous grin. "You ready, babe?" she asked, with her arms held up to the setting forest sun.

he looked ahead were two long, smooth, jet-black pricks, pointed right at him. He wondered — *Who asks for head from a rodent?*

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"...What he said."

That was that, and so, with some trepidation, Castor embraced his partner's strap-ons, each head taking its turn to suckle her gift, all while desperately trying to keep her sensitive equipment out of the way of his vampirine incisors.

In the cold and misty air, Polly still sweat. Every suck, every kiss, every sensitive touch; each was translated to just the right sensation in just the right place, a kind of universal adaptor plug for the art of love. As he groaned, she wailed; "Keep fucking going!" she yelled, to little avail. He was being overcautious. She had to take matters into her own paws.

With a mighty thrust, she rammed her cocks down the beaver's throats, forcing his eyes wide open in shock and sending another throbbing pulse down through his rear end. Like a knife to cardboard, his jittering teeth sailed straight through the unharmed members. (To his surprise, he only felt that ever-present nauseous gagging feeling on his left.) Unable to speak, he expressed his love the only other way he could, giving humid glottal massages to the tips of her toys while rubbing them softly at their base.

Polly's members made one more heave and her vocal cords made one more primal scream before she ripped them from their Turkish baths and slid haltingly down back onto the bed with a hefty sigh. "I *really* didn't think that would work..." she huffed, in a quiet, creaking groan.

"I was kinda expecting there to be more of a mess."

“I guess that’s one benefit of doing it digitally.”

“You sure?” Polly tore the vibrator from her insides with a satisfying *pa-thwump*, revealing a sticky, translucent melange of fluids and lubricants. Castor felt his stomach turn inside-out in his chest.

“...I’m suddenly really glad this thing doesn’t do taste and smell.”

“Hey, *some of us like* the smell of our partners.” Tossing the toy away, she took her partner by the chest and dragged him down on his side once more, rubbing the dense tufts of his lower body’s belly. “There’s a reason they make perfume from it...”

Castor let out a hazy chuckle. “I guess so...” Fog-brained and frustrated, he gnashed his teeth against one another. *She* was done. *He* had unfinished business — and she knew it.

The medic delighted at his chitters and purrs as she continued down towards his rump, softly stroking all over his auburn fur. “You know...” She lay down beside him as his luminous body reached the end of the bed, cupping his four fat testes in her hands. “...I’m pretty sure you still owe me a ride.” With a gentle nuzzle, she remarked, “Yep — can’t smell a thing!”

“***Huoooooghbbb*** I didn’t think so...”

Counting all the technical setups and false starts, Castor had been waiting anxiously for that tantalising climax since... well, since he had woken up, when Timo pounded at his door to give him a parcel. He suspected she was relishing dragging this out for as long as she could.

“Oh, you poor thing!” Polly teasingly cried, affecting either her best or her worst bedside manner. Sappy moans of anxious lust rang out when she patted the edgy beaver on his thick sheath, before moving on to the unmissable target: two stout, beet-red cocks that had already turned the fur around them to a rainforest through pre alone.

She grabbed the right one, the vibrating puck on her hand doing its damndest to replicate its squelching touch, and jerked it up and down. An cacophonic duet of huffing and groaning immediately

ensued, only loudening as she took his other member to hand and began caressing them both in synch. She could have done it for hours — but once she started, it only took him about five seconds to finish, with a roaring sound one could only describe as...

“It’s like a dinosaur giving birth. Maybe two dinosaurs.”

“...Love you too, babe.” Castor lay keeled over in a sweating heap, legs hanging in mid-air off the bedside.

Polly pat him gently on the back. “You still wanna talk? I don’t really have much else to do.”

Between deep breaths, he replied, his huffing voices staggering in and out of synch. “**Yeah! Yeah. I’m just—**”

“—I’m just gonna, like, turn on the passthrough on this thing so I can see how much time I still have booked here.”

From the possum’s perspective, all she could see was his hand reaching up to his right head to tune an invisible knob — only for his expression to freeze in shock with an aback stare that soon spread to his other side. “Is everything okay out there? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

Castor stammered. “**...I think the cleaning robot’s gonna kill me.**”

NIGHT 13

IT WAS A SLOW NIGHT at Parsons’ Bar, as it so often was, nestled in a far corner of the *Ardhanarishvara* that was never worth the trip except for engineers and electricians, and Bucephalus Strathclyde once again found himself the establishment’s only patron.

“I’m telling you, dude. I know everyone *says* they can tell the difference. They’re wrong. It’s the exact same stuff on a chemical level.” A slow but spirited argument was playing out between the stallion and the grey-muzzled badger behind the bar.

“And yet! Every time we run out of freshies and I have to change the menu to manufactured beer... Poof! Business bottoms out. Like

it was never there.” As the bartender spoke, he tended to accompany his words with an array of wild gesticulations of the kind one might see from the conductor of an uncoöperative orchestra. “But, eh, what the hell, huh? I’ll always have—”

“You’ll always have the telescope, yeah. I know, Illya.”

“Until they rename it! You know what they do to people who get too close to the truth, my friend. And given what happened to your colleague, I think we’re getting pretty damned close to the truth here!”

Beuce took a resigned quaff from his lager. “Every time you start on this centaur-alien stuff, another citation of your work gets an asterisk.”

“And we all know why,” he winked.

Parsons’ was as cramped as anywhere on the *Ardhanarishvara*; on a good night, it could fit fifteen people, and twelve of them might even be able to get out again. Beuce liked that about it. It didn’t have any pretensions of being something it wasn’t. No fake mountaintops, no vacua of décor, no VR treadmills: just a tiny room with some decent grog. Even the stools were genuine Belarusian beech, a gift from a woodcarver who’d spent a long trip to Gliese 581 as a “payload specialist”.

He wondered if it was worth getting into this argument again. But what else did he have to do at this hour? However eccentric Illya’s ramblings could be, he was an invigorating figure to talk to, and it wasn’t like someone was going to walk into this dead end of science at half past one in the morning and save him from arguing about UFOs with the father of extragalactic planetology.

A golden bell tinkled above the entryway, and Beuce whipped his head to the right quick enough to break a weaker man’s neck. “Would you speak of the devil!” the badger cried, overjoyed to have another customer at this wee hour. Or two.

Into the room’s smoky embrace trundled Castor, languid and unclothed. He snaked his way between the tables and tchotchkes,

looking every which way in both fields of view yet nevertheless knocking over every chair and seat in his path. Arriving next to Beuce, the taur shoved a stool to one side, rested his lower arms, and groaned.

“Uggghhhh...”

“Well, damn. Never thought I’d see the day. I thought you said you didn’t drink?”

“I don’t drink *with engineers*. But...”

“It’s been a *long* fucking week.”

Castor looked at the trinkets that dotted the wall, each a memento of a mission long past. His eyes wandered to a statuette of a winged centaur taking flight, a perfect jet-black on one side, a blinding ivory-white on the other. Carved below in a golden plaque: “EXPEDITION 001 — BELLEROPHON.” Maybe it was destiny.

“Guess you just didn’t have a head for it yet,” Beuce smirked, to a begrudging half-scoff from his friend.

Illya carefully stacked another glass onto the ultraviolet cleaning rack, fiddling with his greying moustache before turning his attention to the new arrival. “Engineers or no engineers, you’re here in the pit! So, what can I get for you tonight, *druzi*?”

Castor didn’t even have to think about it.

“A PBR, please. ...And a refund on this guy’s joke.”

The bartender nodded, before looking over to his right head. “And for you?”

It took a moment for the machinery in Castor’s brains to connect the dots: getting mistaken for one’s own conjoined twin was not generally a common experience, and he rather hoped it would remain that way.

“No! No, no, no. I—”

“It’s just me in here. One guy.”

Illya crossed his arms. “Well, that doesn’t make *any* sense.”

“And everything else about this *does*?”

Beuce made a silent slitting motion at the beaver, as if to ward him from the inevitable topic of conversation, but it was too late. An excited grin had infected the badger's face. "You see, my friend..."

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"I'm j— I'm *jussaying* I think the guy has a point!" Castor slurred, seven pints deep, haphazardly switching between his heads without rhyme or reason. At some point in the night, he had got the idea that if he had twice the body, then he should logically imbibe twice the booze to get the same effect. This was (politely) a brave assumption, but it was too late for his liver now.

"Oh, *come on!*" Beuce wailed. "You just think that 'cause it'd be cool *if*. This is some four *a.m.* internet shlock binge horseshit; it's just coming out of the mouth of someone with a PhD."

"And a Nobel prize." Illya leaned against the bar, snout rested smugly on his hand. "For the four-hundred-and-thirtieth time, the astroarchæological evidence for centauroidal alien contact in pre-spaceflight Earth is clear! Centaurs, lamassus, kinnaras — the same motif pops up everywhere. You can't explain that. Nobody can! And now we have that dormant gene reactivating in front of our very eyes."

"You see what this guy is pulling, Cas? He has a doctorate in physics and he's tryin' to... he thinks he's an authority on anthropology and dormant genes and shit now."

"Well... Maybe I just like the — like, like to *think* it's true."

"Oh my god." Beuce buried his despondent head in his hooves. "Sometimes I wonder how *either* of us ever got a degree."

"Are you doubting the indell... int... *educational* prowess of Armstrong Tech?" asked Castor, following it up with a deep, duetting, and absolutely sloshed belly-laugh. The stallion left his response at a sympathetic snort.

“Hey, half the ship is from Cambridge, England, and the other half is from Cambridge, Massachusetts. We might as well be eating crayons next to them.”

“I will have you know *I* read physics at Oxford,” Illya butted in. “We know, dude. We know.”

Castor sighed, tails flopping limply on the Mercurian-carpet floor. “Actually— you know, this whole thing, the, uh... college, reminds me of something. ‘Cause, like, I had a talk with Polly earlier, and I’ve been thinkin’ about stuff and stuff, right? The, uh, the...” He glanced over at Illya and futzed nervously around with his hands. “...Centaur... thing.”

“Honestly, I’m sort of jealous,” Beuce shrugged. “You make it look kinda fun. Even the second head thing. I thought you’d be having a 24/7 existential crisis about it.”

“Weeeeell, hey, maybe I am a little. Sometimes. It’s in there somewhere. Bouncing aroun*owww*...” Amidst absent-minded gestures, Castor had banged his upper right elbow straight into a tap of lager, scraping off the label of whatever brand it was pretending to be. “Is— am I gonnahafta pay for that, or...”

“Pay for it?” Illya scoffed. “Maybe I’ll add a plaque commemorating it! It adds character.”

“Imagine that,” smirked Beuce. “*At this very bar, in the year of our Earth 2338, Castor Bobrski experienced the seventy-fifth most embarrassing thing to happen to him all week...*”

“Aw, c’mon, it’s at least, like, forty-somethingth.”

Illya was intrigued. “Could you go back to what you were saying about university? I’m, ah, too curious now. Gossip is a barkeeper’s greatest weakness, as they say.”

“I don’t think they do say that,” remarked the stallion.

“Hhhey, maybe they do at Oxford. But... uh... yeah. I think I was — it’s like you said to me that one time, Beuce. Beuce-man. The Beucester,” Castor bibulously giggled to himself.

The stallion set aside his intoxicated nickname-rattling. “You’re gonna need to be a *little* bit more specific, Cas. Just a bit.” He pinched his fingers together with a wink.

“Yeah, sure, hold on. We were— wait, hold on.” Castor took a deep breath, held a finger in front of each of his faces, and got his story straight. “Okay, so...”

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It was back at college, when I was crashing at your place, and we were just bumming around, lying on that scratchy-ass blue couch, doing nothing. I was high, you were drunk, and the ceiling fan didn’t work. (Not *this* drunk. Just a little.)

We were swiping through shitty holo-vids, like we always did when we were too fucked up to even turn on the movie stick. I think there was one where a sea otter did a backflip off the Bering Bridge. And so somehow, at some point, we ended up on this trashy documentary about these underground Uranian plastic-surgery places, and it had us both *hooked*, in that “500-mile-an-hour maglev crash” kind of way. You just couldn’t look away.

You look at me now and it seems kind of quaint, but at the time, it was the *craziest* shit. People getting their tails split in three. Chicks with artificial gills who had to be submersed in these float tanks on their way back to Earth. Dicks so long they had to rewire the blood vessels just so they wouldn’t pass out. I know the jokes and all about Uranus being some “pleasure planet”, but shit, man, I thought that was just about base jumping and thrust races, you know?

I was pretty blitzed, and it was freaking me out, so I blurted out something like, “I just don’t understand why you would *do that*.” And I didn’t! “I’m all for freedom of form, and all, but... I don’t know how I could live like that. I mean, the stares these people have got to get, just for going about their daily lives! People on campus look at Lachlan like he has two heads, and the only weird thing about him is that he’s a kangaroo.”

You thought about it — actually, I think you even narrowed your eyes at me, like I'd just said something offensive — and then you told me something that's been rattling around my head (heads, I guess) ever since the accident. "Dude," you said, "maybe they just don't care."

"I guess so."

"I think they know people are gonna look at them funny. Maybe they like that. I dunno. It's Uranus; they're freaky like that out there. But they probably just don't care. Why should they? It's everyone else who's being a dick. They're just being themselves. It's like the campus nudists. I respect it."

"Yeah, but, like... when they get home, what if their friends are weird about it? Or their family?"

"If their friends are dicks about it? Fuck 'em. Get new friends. Hell, get a new home. They've clearly got the money to travel interplanetary, and there's a million colonies of weirdos looking for recruits. Chances are, someone's gonna welcome them with open arms, even if they have four legs and two dicks."

"That's some deep shit, man." So, I swept the crumbs of space cake from my fur and got back to swimming in the trash. I think they were interviewing someone called "the Uranus Flytrap".

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"An' you can— you can, like, guess what her whole deal was."

Beuce quietly adjusted his specs. "Didn't you try calling her?"

"Shit, maybe. I dunno. She coulda been on Earth at the time. Doin'— oh, *fuck*, you're right, I did." Castor's faces flushed with embarrassed recollection.

"Yeah, you did! It was, like, two in the morning where she was staying in Europe. One of her friends picked up and told us to fuck off."

"I couldn't look an elephant in the eye again for a year..."

Castor's eyes were drawn upwards by the flickering of a glass-blown lamp, hand-made in the form of Eta Carinae's bulbous nebula. As one head stared up, the other looked over at Illya. "Is that your way of saying it's closing time, or..."

"Oh, no!" The badger injected himself with a vial of... *something* in his arms, which seemed to revive his flagging vivacity. "The lights here are merely... temperamental. *We*, on the other hand, can stay here all night if we want to."

Castor leaned against the bar with wistful, wavering smiles. "I just might, man. I just might."

NIGHT 14

EARTH. THESSALONICA, more precisely. A heaving, whipping metro train. Polly held on like glue to the straps above with every twisting curve. She clutched tight a designer tote from a prestigious American magazine that put dots on its ö's and still used capital letters.

Somewhere far to the east was her daily destination: a shining campus of science and learning, where the laboratories were spotless and the library curled into the sky as the Tower of Babel. When, five years ago, she first stepped onto its grounds, she feared she would one day grow sick at the sight of it. She never did. Yet here, when the doors chimed open and a voice on the intercom spat the words *Lefkós Pýrgos* like it was cursing an enemy, she stepped onto the platform without a second thought.

Past the old ticket gates, amphitheatrical stairs of glistening marble fanned up and out from the entrance hall and into the world above. Eagerly, Polly dashed up, jostling crowds parting around her, and escaped into the open air.

The park outside was stirring with life. Gulls and swifts twittered overhead, taking turns to besmirch Alexander the Great's patina-covered face. Dour-muzzled buskers looked down at their pittance to the fuzzing tones of their microtonal bouzoukis. A pack of teen

wolves in velomobiles nearly ran over her feet, whizzing by so fast her whiskers felt it. She smiled — what more could you ask for?

She found a spot on the grass by the plinth where she could watch the world go by, and as she sat there, slowly staining the mycelium fabrics of her jeans, she looked up at the sun in the east like an old friend that had just returned from the war. She bathed her fur in its cleansing light, baring her pouch with a bright-yellow crop-top — she felt like she hadn't been outside in months. It *was* a long shift in the lab last night, she supposed...

Polly noticed the gentle touch of two furry hands on her shoulder. She turned around, and four dewy eyes stared back. “Hi, babe,” Castor’s left head purred.

A thousand baffled questions entered her mind, but on the way from her brain to her throat, they all collapsed into a simple, “...Whuh?”

The throngs of passers-by seemed curiously unbothered by the naked beaver’s presence as he fanned his right head, donning on it a pair of sunglasses.⁵

“You said you wanted to show me around your hometown, right? Figured I’d finally show up.”

“Yeah, but that’s— that’s not—doesn’t— *Why are you talking to me in Greek?*” Polly puzzled. “...Wait.” She held her arm out in front of her and pinched its fur as hard as she could. Nothing. The world around her shivered and rippled in hazy watercolours. “Oh, I see...”

“So — where do you want to go first?”

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“Why are we doing this again?”

Castor teetered down the leafy thoroughfare of Tsimiski Street with all the grace of a drunken wild hippo, juddering around the

⁵Polly suspected the only reason he wasn't wearing a Hawaiian shirt was that they didn't make them with four arm-holes.

opossum strapped to his back. As Polly scouted the area like a ship's captain looking through a telescope, he muttered a mixture of sorries and excuse-mes to a crowd that couldn't seem to get out of his way.

"To get a better view of the deals!" she chirped. "See? There's 20% off on smart fur dye over there." She pointed off in the distance to a storefront hidden behind a thousand faces for the beaver below. "I always kinda wanted to try the lava-lamp one out... didn't go to enough raves to justify it."

"Hey, if you see an autotailor up there, tell me, 'cause I'm starting to miss wearing shirts."

"You tell me! You're the one with twice the eyes." She gave his inner cheeks a playful ruffle.

"Somebody's jealous."

"Mmmh... I'd call it a more of a curiosity," Polly mused, still juddering up and down like an old-time tramway. "On your right!"

Castor dutifully ducked out of the bustling promenade and turned onto a lane whose buildings' marble-white walls were slathered in decades' worth of accumulated graffiti. With a hop and a grunt, Polly dismounted, leaving the two to walk beside each other as equals again.

"Do I even want to ask what's back here?"

"Well," she shrugged, "I *was* gonna show you around the old Roman forum, but I think this place might be even cooler. Beats the crowds, too!"

"So, what, you're gonna—"

"Oh my god."

"Behold!" In front of them, ensconced by a crescent of quiet cafés and still-to-open bars, there stood the anachronistic ruins of a stony palace of great repute. Projectors all around traced glassy white lines showing the outline of what once was, an intangible façade of chalky paint and clayey tiles belying an interior of little but air and grass. "The Palace of Galerius! They did it up with these light-show

things for its two-thousandth birthday a while back. My dad thinks they're tacky, but he hates *everything* newer than the nineties.”⁶

Castor's faces froze in wide-eyed contemplation, leaving the starry-eyed possum beaming with satisfaction. “What do you think?” He crossed his lower arms and stroked his chins in synchrony.

“Hmm... Yeah, I think they had one of these down in Muncie.”

“You are *so* full of it!” she scoffed.

Castor feigned a coy innocence.

“Full of what?”

Polly smirked as she strolled beside the ruins. “Oh, after the other night, I'd say probably a mix of—”

“I think we both know there's only one person getting filled with anything around here.”

With that, he nonchalantly leapt from the pavement up onto what remained of the palace's ancient walls, flailing his four arms around for balance until they settled into a steady biplane pose. Polly was always mesmerised just by watching him move around — he controlled that lumbering form with a gymnast's poise and grace, and yet he never seemed to think much of it! (Other than, perhaps, a mild disdain for the process of relearning to walk.)

One head turned to look at her.

“Hey, I see you staring back there.”

Polly pointed at her plexus, as if to say, *Who, me?* Castor chuckled back.

“What was that about not being jealous?”

Polly clambered over the wall, ignoring her ingrained instincts not to mess with millennia-old protected sites, and followed Castor as he tiptoed beside her. “I'm not jealous! Just curious. It's part of the job to imagine myself in patients' shoes, y'know?”

“...Hm.”

⁶That's the 2290s, of course.

Castor's tails stuck up in the air as a light seemed to flicker on inside his heads.

"You really wanna see what it's like?"

"Is that... an option?" She tilted her head.

The beaver shrugged.

"It's your dream. I just work here."

"I guess so," she mused. "So, what? You just... make a deal with God, swap our places, that kind of thing?"

"Sure. But, ah..."

Castor stopped in his webbed tracks and gestured down at her shirt.

"You're gonna need to take those off first."

"*What?*" Polly recoiled.

"Hey, either they get ripped or you can sell 'em online! Those are the options here."

"Yeah, but— *in front of everyone?*"

"...There's nobody here."

Polly turned every which way. Sure enough: not a soul in sight. The background chatter of coffee-sippers and suntan-slatherers had fallen silent, as if the Gods had unplugged one channel of their stereo, leaving only the rustling of leaves and buzz of delivery drones.

"...*Hub.*"

"So, what do you say?"

He extended a lower hand down to her level. Polly took a deep breath, closed her eyes — and shook on it. Shivers ran down her spine despite the heat as she divested her crop-top, tossed it on the ground, and unbuckled her bra, sunlight glinting off the barbells on her chest. With gritted teeth, she looked warily around her, suspicious that any moment now some intruder was going to puncture the moment, but none came. She sighed, unbuttoned her tail-hole, and, with one press of a switch, unspooled her belt, letting the white strands of her trousers fall smooth to the ground. Black knickers and tawny sandals finished off the pile.

With a mighty yawn, she stretched her slender arms to the sky to bask in the nude sunlight — but as she arched her back, she felt as though she had suddenly fallen five steps forwards and five steps back all at once. Her inner ear rang out a five-alarm fire, paws skittering out of control on the dirt, and, when she dared to look down, she let out an unearthly soprano squeal.

“*Fuck!*”

“Yeah, welcome to the club.”

Her head — she was fairly sure she still had just the one, thank god — whipped and panned frantically around, trying to scope out just what she had got herself into. Four prehensile paws stood planted unevenly on the ground, a second, animalistic body attached awkwardly at her backside. “Geez.”

An intrigued Castor watched from his stony perch.

“How’s it feel?”

“Uh...” Polly took a cautious step forwards, begging her right feet to move in concert like Castor had picked up so easily, but only her forepaw complied, leaving its hind counterpart kicking up dirt. “Harder than it looks?” she grimaced.

“Hold on...”

The beaver rolled his eyes as he clambered down to ground level. He was still a good half a head taller than her, Polly noticed, but her hind body stretched considerably further back (discounting his tails). She was happy to call it a draw.

“Can you try again?”

Castor crouched down to get a better look, leaving his rump sticking up in the air. Again, Polly moved a foreleg gracefully forward. He watched intently as her hindleg performed the same motion and jammed up against its own structure, stopping and starting in uneven spurts, and gave a dextral laugh of recognition.

“Yeah, I did that too! The problem is you’re still *thinking* like you only have two. You’re moving the back leg like

it's just another version of your front leg. You gotta just...
treat it as its own thing."

"Okay..." In all honesty, Polly wasn't entirely sure what he meant, but knew that any attempt to clarify would only make it worse. She tried again, thinking of every little muscle and bone as its own cog in some great machine, and, at last, took her first steps.

"See? You'll get the hang of it in no time."

Polly nodded, continuing into a kind of limping trot, Castor following alongside like a proud dad teaching his daughter to ride a bike. An alien tactile sense of grass and stone flooded in from her new appendages. She wasn't sure she liked it: she had lived her entire life with an entirely adequate proprioceptive map of herself, knowing exactly where all of her was at all times and what it did, and the knocking back of her centre of gravity was but one part of a many-layered imposition which filled her with unease.

She held her hands out in front of her, all four of them, and was awestruck at the sight. This was easier to handle — she had interfaced with robotic surgery machines before which functioned much the same, giving her new limbs of iron and silicon rather than flesh and blood. She could at least live with it, she thought — until Castor went in for a cheery, four-armed handshake, and, still trying to keep up with the input from her limbs below, she shivered at the disquieting rush of double sense through her young nerves. Her face must have shown it, as the beaver's lovey-dovey visages soon curled into a more concerned expression.

"...You okay, babe?"

"Eh..." Polly struggled to find the words for her predicament. "It feels... weird, I dunno. I think I liked my body as it was." She looked up at Castor — who was clearly doing a better job hiding his disappointment on the right side of his consciousness than his left. "...No offence."

"Eh, none taken."

"But... just one thing, before you go back."

“What is it?”

“I just... wanted to feel something from someone like me.”

Castor coloured as he wrapped his arms around her, and she hugged back, feeling the warmth of his thick fur from a thousand angles. She held on tight, four grey arms against his back, as he purred more sweetly than she had ever heard before. She closed her eyes and pecked him on each cheek. “Love you, babe.” His words echoed back in both ears: **“Love you, too.”**

Polly felt herself fall back onto a coarse sand. She opened her eyes to find the sun setting in the night, rippling over the winy sea to light the fading façade of Mount Olympus; behind her, she felt nothing but her tail.

“...Cas?”

In the distance, a ukulele quietly strummed. Lifting herself up, she dusted the grains of olivine from her jeans and gazed out over a deserted city beach lit only by a crackling campfire, where sat the undeniable silhouette of her boyfriend. He waved a free arm, still noodling with the strings, beckoning her over.

As she strolled along the seaside, crossed by the quiet meltemi, Castor began to properly play, and Polly swore she knew the tune from somewhere. Its name stood at the tip of her tongue, but whatever it was, it was old; older than her, at the very least, and perhaps even older than the beach she roamed.⁷

She sat down beside him, campfire roaring in the dark, and yawned. “*Hough*... I didn’t know you played guitar.”

He shrugged.

“I can’t, really.”

“Aww, don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re great!”

“Oh, I just picked up a few chords in college. It’s the song that’s doing all the work.”

⁷Her grandfather took great joy in telling her that when *be* was a wee lad, this was nothing but open sea, and he knew friends who had protested over the “sickening” green colour.

“That’s your opinion...” Polly nuzzled his sides, to which he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “What song is it, anyway?”

“It’s an old American love ballad... from California, I think. It’s meant for a trio, really, but... hey, I got two out of three.”

Without another word, the beaver cleared his throats and sang like an angel.

“I may not always love you...”

“But long as there are stars above you...”

Polly stared up at the evening sky, cradled in his arms. The Milky Way was clearer than ever, and Venus shone brighter than the sun, like a view plucked straight from the darkest Saharan sky. The fluff of his fur, the calm of the winds, the heat of the fire... she could stay here forever.

Castor continued on, softly petting the possum’s fur as he crooned, and as she drifted off, their three voices sang as one:

“God only knows what I’d be without you.”

DAY 17

POLLY TRIED HER BEST not to spill any drops of blood in her coffee as she stabbed herself in the pinky with a lancet. A week of immiseration and isolation was drawing to a close, and she was aching to bolt out of the door and get back to work. There were moss samples to analyse, papers to write, and patients to treat. But first: the waiting game.

She smeared her bloodied finger over the test kit, praying it would come up clear. There was still an hour left until she’d find out — so she kicked back in bed, grabbed a book from the shelf, and had almost made her way to the end of the first sentence when the lights went dim again.

Polly set the text aside with an awkward dog-ear and looked up. A familiar chorus of projectors sprung into action to beam down silky rays of light onto the motes and speckles of the air, slowly

coalescing into a shape that seemed to float a foot above the duvet, gently rocking back and forth. It reminded her of a certain someone's sleeping arrangement...

"You really couldn't wait two more hours?" the possum glibly asked.

"Nah." A glitching projection of Timo looked down at her from an ochre hammock, arms and legs hanging languidly to the ground while his tail wavered quietly to and fro. "Just wanted to check in! Figured you'd be busy later, lah."

"You have *no* idea," she sighed. "Good busy, though! Busy for a cause, not just busy doing admin. You?"

"Not much," smiled the binturong. "You know how it is. Fix some spreadsheets, ask a bunch of PhDs if they've tried turning it off and on again, record a message for my aunties... the usual."

"Did you ever tell them about Cas?"

Timo's face curdled as the possum sipped her frappé. "Uh... is that a question or an interrogation?" she asked with a nervous un-laugh.

"It's fine if you did! I'm just curious."

Shi groaned. "I tried, lor, but I just ended up wasting a week's worth of comms time trying to explain what he looks like."

"I could have done it," she smirked.

"There's no Martian Creole word for 'parasagittal plane', babe."

"There would be by the end of the call!"

"...If you say so." Timo flashed her a sceptical look from above. "Oh, yeah — how's it been with you and Cas, actually?"

"Aww, it's been nice. We've been planning something for when I get off work tonight, actu—"

Hir tufted ears snapped up at the news. "Can I come?"

"Uh— I'm— I, uh, I don't think he—" Under the fur of the sputtering possum's cheeks, a telltale rosy glow began to shine.

“Oh, so it’s *that* kind of ‘something’,” Timo purred, flopping hir head over the side of the hammock. “So, when you’re ‘planning’, does he send you two aubergines or one?”

Polly buried her face in her paws, buried her paws in her duvet, and was just about ready to bury her remaining self-esteem in the ground. “It’s two baguettes...”

Shi briefly considered noting that they were more like French rolls, if anything, but elected not to press the issue. “Hey, if you’re looking for any *accoutrements* for your little something...”

“Yeah?” She pulled the blanket from her cringing face.

“I know a guy.”

* * *
* * * * *

B801 | HENNING DAS Humane Resources

Polly stared at the plaque beside the door with a quarantine discharge in her pocket, a black starch bag in her hand, and a lump in her throat. There was every chance that, right now, Timo sat tucked away in some server room in the bowels of the ship, laughing hir arse off about the greatest prank shi ever pulled. (God knows it wouldn’t be the first time.) But, with few better options and an hour left for cytopins and thermocyclers to whirr away, she raised an uncertain paw to the doorbell and swiped.

An exuberant voice rang out through the tinny speakers — “Please, come in!” — and the door slid open to an office whose every nook and cranny was covered in garishly coloured wares. Inside, at a comparatively humble antique mahogany desk, a grinning honey badger beckoned her in from a plush chair upholstered with glittering purple.

“H-hi!” Polly squeaked, taken aback by the warm welcome, and made her way in.

“Don’t mind the decoration,” Henning explained; “I get a little homesick.” He ran a loving claw across the year’s Unofficial

Annual Neo-Schlager Wall Calendar. “So what seems to be the issue, my darling? Colleague problems, fighting, cabin fever, medical accommodations...?”

“Actually, uh...” She sat down on a distinctly unglamorous plastic chair. “Timo sent me? My colleague. I don’t know if—”

“Ah, Mx Tjokrosutenturuno!” he laughed. “A frequent flyer around these parts.”

“Shi must be if you can get hir name right first try.”

“Honey, I’m HR. It’s my job.”

The possum nodded, an uneasy smile grinding down her face. *There’s really no good way to ask for this, is there?* “Anyway, uh, the reason shi mentioned you is because... uh... me and my boyfriend were gonna... kinda... need some... uhhh...”

He sighed. “Spit it out, darling. Honey badger don’t care.”

Polly breathed in, bit down, and blurted it out. *“Doyouhaveanysextotyswecoulduse?”*

Henning stood up from his seat and snatched a small key-drive from his pocket, baring his incisors with a mischievous grin and a glint in his eyes. “What kind?”

* * *
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Captain Akona simpered at the violet vixen across the table. “Ngaire, you’re the best damn shuttle pilot this ship has ever had. I mean it.”

Ngaire Rayner gave a short, composed bow in response. “Thank you, sir. I try.” Of course Akona could plainly see the schoolgirl excitement buried underneath — everyone on the ship had it. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t have gone interstellar.

“Don’t get cocky,” the calico warned. “That says more about the competition than about you. It’s like our shuttles are piloted by the fucking Donner Party out there.”

“I wouldn’t say a bad word about my colleagues, sir.”

“You can believe whatever you want,” she shrugged. “Still. Keep this level of performance up, and maybe you’ll end up on the navigation deck.”

Ngaire’s eyes widened. “Really, sir?”

“No promises,” the captain winked.

“Well, whatever happens, I want to recommend Ximénes and Polydefkis for some kind of commendation. Without them, we might be dead — or worse, we’d have come back empty-handed.”

“I’ll *consider* the cacomistle.”

Ngaire raised an eyebrow. “Sir, what about Polydefkis? She is the one who *found* the alien lifeform.”

“Ngaire, let me ask you something. What do you think Aletheia Polydefkis is doing right now? Right this second. As we speak.”

“I suppose... last I saw her, she was still analysing samples down in Astrobiology. She works late nights a lot and she seemed pretty in the zone, so she’s probably still there? I guess medbay could have called her down.”

With a swipe of her claws, Akona summoned up a glassy display, sternly issuing commands to it like the vixen wasn’t even there. “Ardha, pull up the camera feed for wherever Aletheia Polydefkis is right now.” She took one look at the results, pawed at the screen, and turned it around to show Ngaire.

“...‘Maintenance elevator?’”

Akona nodded.

“And that’s—”

“Yep.”

“Oh my god.”

NIGHT 17

C ASTOR HELD HIS four arms tight as he shuffled through the narrow close. The maintenance corridors were less the arteries of the ship and more its unloved capillaries, omnipresent yet barely registered by anyone without an engineering badge.

“I never even knew these were here,” Polly marvelled. She glanced around from her perch on the beaver’s naked back, still clutching that same plastic bag. A dim crimson strip hung loosely from the ceiling, illuminating the tangled mycelium of pipes and fibre-optics that ran along the walls.

Castor chuckled, craning his right head back to talk.

“That’s the idea! You don’t want your engineers getting held up in traffic when they’re trying to fix your jillion-dollar science equipment. Instead, we can just... slip by, unnoticed.”

He paused for a moment, before adding,

“...Kind of a tight fit these days, though.”

Polly gently ran a hand across the fur of his flank. “I bet you don’t go *unnoticed* much these days, either.”

“Not really, but...”

He blushed, struggling to summon up the words, until, in a whisper from his left, he muttered,

“...I kind of like it that way.”

She smiled. “Atta boy.”

The two wandered on until, at last, they arrived at their destination. At the very end of the hall, where it split off left and right to heaven-knows-where, stood a simple metal sliding door. Above it, an equilateral triangle pointed straight to the sky, and in flickers and flashes, the old modernist type dimly shone: “ZERO G”.

Castor stared up at the sign, a curious, wistful look glazing over his eyes. Here he was, back at the scene at the crime. His baser instincts would have him call it the worst day of his life, but... He glanced back at Polly with a bashful smirk. Just the sight of her could wash away a million

Castor stared down at the card reader on the wall. White-hot images of the accident rushed through his mind as he slowly unclipped his lanyard from around his necks. His right arms tremored with as much terror as excitement. Why the hell he was going back for more? Perhaps, he

fears. Maybe — just maybe — that day was the best thing to ever happen to him.

Eyes wide open, he watched as the lift’s hulking metal doors gracefully folded in on themselves like origami paper, leaving the two free to enter.

mused, it was the same perverse thrill that drew him to horror.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and slid his keycard across the reader. The lift doors

across the reader. The lift doors

A great grunt of relief echoed across the room when Polly hopped off of his back onto the not-quite-plywood veneer below. She kicked off her boots, tossed them out the closing gate, and began sizing up the arena for the dance to come.

The lift opened up into an octagonal plaza; four thick plastic windows lined its chamfered corners, while its silvery walls offered more than enough space for all the equipment a research team could ever want. “You know,” said Polly, “this is pretty snazzy for a— *gab!*”

And just like that, she was on the floor, pounced upon by a beavertaur three times her weight. “You *really* couldn’t wait, huh?” she croaked at the four puppy-dog eyes staring back at her.

“Nope!”

Castor beamed down in that usual mousy way of his, orange gnashers on full display.

“Need any help?”

he asked, reaching down an apologetic paw.

“I’ll take what I can get.” She took his hand and held on tight, savouring the warmth of his thick fur as she clambered up with her back against the cold, metallic wall.

She gazed into him with dewy, sky-blue eyes. Even now, she found herself wanting to pinch herself, as if the past two weeks were just an idle dream. “Sometimes, I just — I can’t believe this is real.”

He laughed.

“Trust me, babe...”

“...Neither can I.”

He scooped the possum up and enveloped her in his arms,

soothing the hills and valleys of her back as he unbuckled the fastener on her uniform's tail-hole. The zipper beneath he drew slowly up, unveiling her back from tail to nape, until all fell down to earth with a tug.

nuzzling her gently on her lily-white cheeks. Quietly, he laid a head on her shoulder and began to lick at the fur of her neck. He savoured her delicate, shivering coat, soaking up drops of sweet yuzu perfume...

Polly did her best to stifle her moans down to intermittent purrs. (Sometimes it even worked.) Her tail hung down to graze the floor as Castor cradled and caressed her, each touch of his balmy tongue sending fresh frissons up her spine.

He pulled back and glanced down. Not a bra or pair of knickers in sight — just her, her piercings, and an increasingly sly smile. He blushed:

“... Well, that’s a nice surprise.”

“Merry Christmas,” she winked.

“It’s April.”

“...It could be Martian Christmas?”

“That civet’s a *terrible* influence.”

“And I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she murred.

“Neither would I.”

Her attention flitted left and right, between two beautiful beaver faces bearing down on her with equal looks of guileless love. In the moment it made her feel sheepish — how could she ever hope to satisfy all of him?

Polly resolutely closed her eyes. Somewhere, deep in the back of her mind, a coin flew into the air. *Tails*. She leaned in to his right and went in for a kiss. All the beaver could do was watch — turning to look, he admired the gorgeous curves of her snout, senses from all angles combining like a demoiselle of Avignon. He stifled a

went in for a kiss. The beaver shuddered, taken aback, and let out an involuntary gasp of air. Her delicate paws grabbed on to his back, pulling at his fur like they had somewhere to be, and,

chuckle at his own cartoonish | lips still locked, she felt his four-
gasp of surprise. | armed vice draw tighter.

This must be what heaven feels like, the possum thought. *Or hell.* That was, she conceded, probably where she was going after tonight, as her tongue found its way through his soft lips and past the Scylla and Charybdis of his chiselling teeth. She could taste his breath, the brimstone-hot, humid air, and for a moment, there was nothing else in the world — then, in her ear, there came an unmistakable guttural chitter.

Castor could scarcely concentrate. The pathways of his mind were spilling in a million different directions, drunk on libido and the ecstasy of love. On his right, he huffed and puffed, as he and Polly continued their passionate embrace. On his left — he leaned in to her slight black ears, nearly buried under her hair, and growled the first primal thought that came to mind:

“I want to fuck you like an animal.”

A subtle smirk showed on Polly’s sweating face, as if to say, *You first.* Her hands moved up to his shoulders. His head moved in to her cheeks, kissing her softly from two angles at once. The gentlest touch of his tongue sent her whiskers haywire. *“F-fuckh...”* she murmured, as best she could, still occupied with his right countenance; as he gave her all his love, she caressed the sides of his necks, to a chorus of relieved purrs.

Minutes passed like hours. Polly briefly opened her eyes, and spotted something as she glanced in the space between Castor’s faces — a thin, unfurred patch where his necks met. *I wonder...* She placed a hand between his heads, and, with all the force of a feather from an angel’s wing, pressed down her pinky finger.

A laser pointed directly at his third eye⁸ — that was what it felt like. Castor buckled under the sudden flush of libidinous fury. Blood rushed from his heads back to his loins. He grit his teeth, paws squeaking and sliding back on the piny veneer underneath; trying to

⁸Fifth eye?

maintain his balance, he released Polly from his grasp and slammed a lower arm down to the wall — which, to his surprise, pressed in with a satisfying **click**.

“Oh, shit.”

The lift lurched into action with a sickening upwards jolt. Unseen displays and panels flashed to life, and ever-greater slivers of starfield descended down the windows around them. Polly gulped.

“What — *was* that?”

“...Acceleration?” the dizzied beaver slurred.

“I mean, uh, that... *thing* you did.”

“Oh, it’s, uh...”

He shook his head.

“I think the ’bots left an exposed nerve ending or something. I dunno.”

She clasped her hands over her mouth. “Oh my god.” Jesus Christ. She might as well have thrown the Hippocratic Oath into a shredder. How the hell was she going to apologize—

“...Can you do it again?”

What?

“It felt... kinda nice.”

...*Oh. Oh, okay.* The opossum mulled her options. “I have a better idea,” she coyly smiled, before slipping quietly across the room.

Castor turned back to look.

“Does that mean—”

“Don’t look!” She rummaged through her black bag of tricks, lying in a sad heap by the door.

He rolled his eyes — only one of him was looking at her, but she was pretty sure it was with all four. “I won’t...”

“Good.” She glanced up at a glossy screen overhead. 0.96 g and falling... she could work with that. “All right, got it!” Throwing the bag over her shoulders, she beckoned the beaver over.

Begrudgingly, mind still swimming out of an overstimulatory haze, he complied, and as he gradually trundled towards her, he felt

his thoughts begin to wander. He stared at her. She bore a smile like a kid with a water pistol held behind their back. He suspected she'd been waiting quite some time for this moment.

"So... what's the plan?" he asked, trying to play it cool in the face of his thrumming boners.

Polly snapped her fingers in the air, as if trying to wake him from a trance. "Castor. Babe. My eyes are up here."

"...I know."

"Could you at least have said that with the half of you that *isn't* staring at my boobs?"

"Nah."

She sighed. "Well, the point is, I've been thinking... *You* still owe me a ride."

"But I thouuuuugggghhh..."

Polly reached up and pressed down as hard as she could on the beaver's nape, her mischievous smile turning into a smug bedside simper. She whispered up into his ears: "Bad boys don't get neck scratches."

Castor purred at the buzz of conflicted ecstasy surging through his sinews. "**Hhbbbhokay...**"

And, as suddenly as she had grabbed on, she let go. "See? I'm glad we could come to an agreement!" she said, in a saccharine squeak that could turn a glasshouse into a police cleanup zone, before, just to rub it in, playfully bopping him on both snouts.

"Now, where were we...?" Her nimble hands reached into the sack strapped round her shoulder to pluck out two garish, lime-green dildos.

"Jesus, they're huge!"

Castor instinctually blurted out. The smaller of the shafts was humanoid in shape, and in its length measured “only” twenty centimetres, if he had to guess. This was patently reasonable compared to the other implement, a girthy equine staff as long and thick as his forearm. Actually, it reminded him a bit of... *Never mind*, he shuddered.

“I know, right?” she grinned. “They’ve got some *crazy* stuff in the supply closet in HR.”

“I— I mean, I know we gamed it out and everything, but—”

“—I don’t know if there’s enough lube in the *universe* to fit both of those things up there!”

Polly blankly cocked her head. “Who said anything about taking them up the arse?” She slapped them both onto the silvery wall behind her, landing with a gelatinous *thwap*... exactly at Castor’s eye level. *Oh, fuck.*

“I still don’t know if I like the look of them.”

“Oh, that’s fine!” Polly beamed. “You won’t have to look.” She reached into her bag to grab two thick, carbon-black blindfolds. “These the ones you wanted?”

“Uh... I think?” Castor squinted down with his left head. Any sense he could have got of their dimensions was hopelessly obfuscated by their tint. They were black, all right: blacker than charcoal, blacker than jet, blacker than the pin-pricked night outside; so all-encompassingly dark that all pretence of three-dimensional light or shadow simply dissolved into an inky void. He shrugged.

“Yeah, that’ll do.”

“All right — well, giddy up, then!” She slapped him on the flank, and with a hop, a skip, and a featherweight jump, climbed back in the saddle.

“You know, you could have just *asked* me to put them on.”

Polly stuck her tongue out, her snout curdled in concentration. “And ruin the fun?”

Castor became aware of a tugging behind his ears and a darkness dripping into his field of vision. He tilted up to view, only to be rebuked by an irritated, “Hold still!” from behind — the last thing he heard before his world went black.

at the edge of his field of vision. He turned left to look, only to be rebuked by an irritated, “Hold still!” from behind — and not long after, she draped the curtain over his eyes too.

The air went quiet. Devices buzzed and motors chugged as the lift continued in its path, unbothered, unhurried. Castor breathed deeply. He leaned forward, spreading his arms out in saltire formation to firm the balance of his intricate body — but before he could lay his hands secure to rest on the wall, Polly yanked them away for her own designs. “*Not so fast, cowboy,*” she whispered between his ears.

Higher functions failed to suppress the pathetic, erotic whimpers that escaped his trembling lips. The possum behind him made no such attempt to stifle her own amused chortle. Maybe that just made it hotter.

“I didn’t even know I was into this shbaaaaaahhh...”

Another short circuit in his brains fried as the touch of a dainty hand rolled up and down the valley of his necks. Iridescent hallucinations flitted through the eigengrau. “*Hands behind your back, babe,*” came a crackling voice. Like God shouting at him. He complied, of course; what else could he do?

As he crossed his arms in a hash, the touching turned to licking — her hands needed freed for other purposes. Rough hemp rope ground against his wrists, any pain eased by the bath of her tongue against his most sensitive fur, until, at last, she whispered, “*Done,*” and returned to the floor.

He tried to pull his arms apart. Nothing. He budged, he grunted, he tried all the Houdiniesque tricks eight opposable thumbs could muster; still, the bonds stayed put.

“...Wow, you did a pretty good job back there!”

he nervously chuckled. No response: just the echoes of his voice into his own ears. Maybe she preferred to admire her handiwork in silence. (Truth be told, he preferred it. The two-headed life was so rarely one of sensory quiescence.)

Alone with his thoughts, he stepped forwards. He only intended it to be a shuffle, but gravity had other ideas — he felt easily fifty kilos lighter than when he had got in! — and as he lunged ahead, he shivered at the cold silicone that brushed up against his right cheek. A tell-tale dampness was manifesting underneath his trunk. He sighed and grit his teeth. *Ab, fuck.*

Cautiously, he leaned in and opened wide. His mouth embraced what turned out to be a long, uncut simulated human prick. It was funny — humans were gifted with a dick that was always hanging free, and yet they were always the shyest to show it!

He gracefully suckled at the inanimate schwantz, rocking back and forth, tongue playing with its dull tip. *Polly, I swear to god, these had better be wireless or something...*

Suddenly, he spat the plaything out and scooped up deep, voracious breaths, coming like he had just run a marathon, hoping to pick up the slack. What the hell was half of him *doing?*

A playful slap on the rump reminded him of the existence of the outside world. “You still good?” Polly chirped from behind.

He stuck out his tongue and worked his way backwards, feeling up the ridges of the thick equine shaft. A perfectly ordinary equine shaft which was not making him think discomforting thoughts about any of his lifelong friends. Definitely.

As he reached its flared head, he took a deep breath. He leaned back. And he rammed it down as far back as it would go.

He wanted to choke. He should have. His... *its* fiery rim tickled and scraped the back of his throat. But what was one unhelpful windpipe when he had a perfectly functional backup? The least he could do was enjoy it while it lasted.

“Yeah,” he huffed. “Green light.”

He felt his tails being shoved apart — it gave him a strange mental image of Polly as a pith-wearing old-Earth explorer, pushing through the branches and leaves of the jungle in search of gold. Except the gold was up his arse. Something like that, anyway. His teeth bit down on Beeee’s cock with an achy groan at the sudden slathering of lube, cold and wet, around his tailhole. *Man, I’m gonna miss being able to do that by myself...*

No matter. There remained business to attend to. The beaver, still asweat and ahuff, went back to nuzzling and bathing the toy’s firm shaft with his tongue. *I’m leaving this shit wetter than the Venerean jungle if it kills me. Hell — maybe it will.* Again, he tilted back, hyperventilating like a fish out of water, but before the fog around his mind could lift, he found himself overtaken by the sense of a lithe opossum grabbing him by the hips and grinding against his hind legs.

hands starting to chafe against his hemp restraints, tried his best to soothe the colossal cock wedged in his throat. He imagined himself looking up at the figure he was pleasing, with six-pack abs and a face he couldn’t make out. Every atom of him was quaking with anticipation, but soon, he

“Come on...” Just an overheard whisper was enough to send him to ecstatic palpitations. Under weakened breaths, he cried her name, his thighs quivering as fur rubbed against fur, arms squirming, begging for release, and, when two hot tips of her electronic pricks entered his arse, the pressure that had been building up inside of him for hours finally burst free.

“**Fuck!**” He screamed in joy; he screamed in pain; he screamed in ire. His body bucked back sans voluntary command, forepaws scarcely holding on to the floor as his back half kicked up into the air; twin streams of seed rocketed out from under him as the restraints around his wrists tore like cheap pulp. Wheezing, coughing, he spat out his spittle-dripped stocking-fillers, and once more, in a

synchronous monosyllabic groan, he uttered what was still the only word on his mind: ***Fuck...***

Carefully, with four burning wrists, Castor slipped off his blindfolds and turned around towards his sparring partner, who stood nonchalantly undoing her strap-ons.

“I... Polly, what are you *wearing*?”

She tipped a chestnut stetson at the beaver with a wink. “I was getting into character!”

He rubbed his foreheads in weary bemusement.

“...A character I **bech** couldn’t even *see*?”

“Sure,” she grinned.

He sighed, cringing.

“...Okay, whatever. Look, I— **the point is**—”

“**The point is**... I’m sorry.”

“What for?” She cocked her head.

“Coming early. I fucked it up, man. I mean, you know, we had a *plan* and everything, and now—”

“Pfft, don’t worry about it.” Polly dismissed his worries with a wave of the hand. “I figured it might happen. Besides... I brought spares.”

“*Spares?*”

“Yeah!” Castor stared, exhausted and baffled, as she took off her hat and flipped it to reveal a set of small, indistinct blue plasters. “Refractory patches! Just put one of these on and you’ll be good as new.”⁹

“...How *big* is that fucking closet!”

“Oh, these aren’t from HR,” smiled Polly, as she unwrapped one of the patches and knelt down by his forelegs. “I just took ’em from the cupboard in medbay. Next to the spiramycin and semaglutides.”

⁹Note: Sale of Revigo® Fast-Acting Oxytocin Blockers is prohibited in 41/60 U.S. states without a prescription by a licensed physician. Ask your doctor if Revigo® is right for you. (Unless you live on Mars. Then you can just waltz right on down to the sex shop.)

“Do you... *regularly* take random crap from medbay without telling anyone?”

“Eh, only for telenovela night.” She squinted, paws hovering over his thigh. “Hold still — aaaand...”

“I don’t... I don’t thi...”

Castor strobed in and out of consciousness to the backing of a crescendoing postcoital stupor — until, at once, the clouds in his mind parted and the comedown halted, dead in its tracks, as though the hand of God had reached down to turn him off and on again.

“...Oh, *fuck*, that’s weird.”

There was a brief moment of what one might call post-post-nut clarity before the machinery of his body swiftly whirred to life again, diligently pumping blood back away to where it was so *clearly* needed most. He muttered to himself in an irritated groan, “*Okay...*”

Excited shivers suffused his body as Polly rose from her knees, massaging him with kisses on every step of the way up. “See?” she toyed, “Good as new.”

She had made it to about armpit level when his lower arms locked tight around her and he threw her up to meet his eyes, midnight hair bobbing in the air under gravity’s loosening grip. Two harried faces stared back, loving as they were lecherous, licking his lips in idle fantasy. He cleared his throat, and mustered up the most authoritative tone he could.

“Okay, babe, here’s how it’s gonna go.”

Polly chuckled. Briefly. “You sound like—”

She fell silent. Two hard, unbending stares drilled into her like clay. Her laughter turned nervous. He opened his mouths in a deep, discordant wolf-tone growl. “**What you’re going to do, Polly, is *get down.***”

“O-okay...” His voices together were mesmerising, awful, beautiful. The nails of Helen of Troy, scraping down a Stradivarius chalkboard.

“I’m going to pin you down to the floor under me.”

“You’re going to stick your ass in the air.”

“And then I’m going to *fuck you stupid.*”

“Until gravity stops working.”

“Or until my balls run dry. Which, as you’re so fond of pointing out...”

He licked his lips, savouring the moment, and kicked his legs theatrically back.

“...Is *highly* unlikely to happen any time soon.”

“Understood?”

The blushing opossum swooned. “Yeah...”

“I’m glad we could come to an agreement.”

Castor smirked and let go, leaving Polly to float gracefully down to the floor. Droplets of spunk fell onto her fur from his still-dripping cocks as she crawled under his quadrupedal frame, inducing tiny gasps with every spit and splash. He slammed his paws onto her wrists, the weight a little lighter than she had expected, but still cause for her to tense up and gurn.

She pitched her rear into the air, her wiry tail brushing against his belly, pussies wet-hot with excitement. “Do your worst!”

In a sense, he did. He thrust forward — and upward, causing the two to bounce in the air, and his pulsing pricks to merely graze over her cheeks. **“Fuck!”** rang out a bipartite yell from above, as the pair descended back to the ground at a sickeningly leisurely pace. As his toes touched the floor, he thrust forth again — this time, missing her completely.

“God *damn* it! Jesus! I can’t even — *fuck!*”

“Are you okay?” Polly pushed herself off the floor.

“Yeah, yeah, I just — you expect ‘until gravity stops working’ to take *a little longer* than that, you know?”

She shrugged. “I did genetics.”

“...Right.” Castor sighed. *Okay, hold on. I can still save this.*

“So... what else is in the bag?”

Polly furrowed a brow. “Uh... more refractory patches, mostly. And these fancy smart gloves.”

“...And what do they do?”

“I dunno! The HR guy didn’t say. He just grinned at me and said it was a ‘fun surprise’. The packaging’s in Japanese, so...”

“We have the worst HR team in the universe.”

“Or the best,” she winked.

“I’m sure *they* think so.”

Castor’s feet but skimmed the ground as he galloped over to grab the crumpled sack. Rugged beaver claws shore through the flimsy plastic with ease, leaving all that remained within to float through the air — unbound, untethered, and unfalling.

He blinked. His ears poked up. Up above, hydraulic machinery whispered and puffed. Two broad grins of confelicity overtook him, as he stared up at the ceiling and across at Polly. *Oh, she’s going to love this.*

A chorus of industrial groans echoed across the lift, as the shimmering metallic mirror overhead split into a dozen curving slices, spiralling out from the centre like an antique camera lens. The possum hovered still, centimetres off the ground, her mouth agape, watching entranced as the roof over her head dilated open. “That’s... incredible.”

“Yeah,” concurred Castor. “They *way* overengineered this thing.”

“Not that I’m complaining! Means I have more excuses to come up and... watch the stars go by.”

“You ready?”

Polly nodded, grabbed onto the wall, and launched herself up, her poise belied by the sways and shakes of a climber still learning the ropes of the gravitational terrain. *Just don’t look down*, she told herself. ... *Wait, which way is down?*

He snorted. “You good up there?”

“I do this, like, once a year, okay?”

“Allow me to demonstrate how the *professionals* do it.”

The engineer quickly grabbed two strips of refractory patches and the boxed gloves from the air before crouching back — and pouncing into the air. He flew across the room in slow motion, arms splayed out behind his back, his forepaws providing a boost as they pushed against the top of the lift’s walls, and, having sailed into the zero-*g* core, swang forth his upper left hand to grab one of the plentiful handles that dotted its cylindrical walls.

Polly golf-clapped. “Bravo.”

He panted out a bagpipe’s worth of air, each half of him oscillating between breath and speech.

“I’m gonna be real—”

“—I had—”

“—*No idea*—”

“—If that shit was gonna work or not.”

“I just thought it would look cool.”

He looked around. Tried to compose himself. The air was cold — though he’d make sure it wouldn’t stay that way for long. At the frayed edges of his sight, pits and patched-up holes marked the new craters and valleys of the core’s else-blank walls. If he squinted, he thought he could make out a pattern of ghostly, off-pink streaks... A trick of the light, he told himself. It had to be.

near end of the long and vacuous expanse, out the window, ten thousand glittering stars twinkled brighter than he’d ever seen before, lent room to breathe by rings of dim amber light whose placid hum provided the only sound.

Polly watched as he floated there in silence, tails shivering, one flimsy handle the only thing holding him in place. “...Hey, are you still okay?” She swam up behind him and placed her hand on his shoulder, joining him in staring at the stars. “We don’t have to do it here if you don’t want to. I get it.”

He sighed.

“No, it’s fine. Just... it’s a lot. Being back here.”

“Where all that shit started. The worst day of my life...”

“...And the best.”

He cradled the possum in his arms with a contented smile.

“And, yeah, maybe some stuff sucks now. Maybe I’ll never fit in a plane seat again. But, from where I’m standing... it’s a beautiful world out there, and the stars are shining twice as bright. So I say: we get back to it.”

Castor brushed his hands through the tangles of her hair, admiring each toss and turn as it flowed and parted in mid-air.

“Anyway! There’s sex toys to open.”

He tossed the gloves’ garish packaging to his upper hand, and drolly read out the only English text he could find:

“*Ero-Gloves... One pair for you, one pair for them.*”

Polly perked up. “Oh, that’ll be fun!” Even with only the vaguest promotional blurbage, the possibilities were running through her head, and... He peered at her with a glib smirk on his face, of the sort which said, *I am absolutely taking all four of these for myself and you can’t stop me.* She pouted as his right head began to gnaw and gnash at the packaging, making light if ugly work of the cardboard.

“Look, if the Tanabata Corporation *really* wanted us to have one each, they would have made three pairs.”

He released her from his arms, spitting out one last bit of chewed-up cardstock, and got to work putting them on. “Gloves” was a kind word to describe the implements — they were more akin to a net of interconnected, wired-up sensors, placed on top of the pads of his paws and his his fingertips; at the realisation that his extra thumbs would remain unenhanced by the tacky, hot-pink wonders of technology, the beaver gave an audible grumble.

The possum floated back behind him, watching, when his hand idly brushed against his thigh. He tensed up. Gaped. He looked down, sweating, clearly flustered — then that damned smirk returned. Castor let go from the handle and turned towards her.

“Right — where were we?”

“Something about fucking me stupid, I think,” said Polly. “And some weird stuff about your balls.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

It began with just a teasing touch. He leaned forward, stuck out his tongue, and gently stroked her on the shoulder. That was all it took.

She moaned and shuddered, “*W-what the fuck?*” Each touch of her fur came as a fresh electric shock, vivid and intense as his fingers against her clits. The slightest brush breathed life into new zones of pleasure wherever his hands might land — and there were plenty to go around.

He embraced her fully, pressing her against his chest, and pushed off against the wall, sending them tumbling and turning in the air, the stars outside a dizzy blur. He softened her up by brushing the gloves against her cheeks before going in for twin soppy kisses, to raucous, halting moans.

Polly felt more alive than she had in years. The air grew thick with sweat and hot musk. In the corner, a yellowed vent creaked and choked. He kissed her again. He pulled on her tail, to rapturous gasps.

Castor’s back half curled round, free to stretch beyond the tyranny of gravity, her bare feet tickling against his tangled fur. In between the ecstatic moans and excited grunts, she reached back and fondled the pit of his necks again. “Two can play at that game.”

He groaned. “I think you’ll **buff** find... **buff** **two are** **ngghb** playing **at that game.**” He turned her around, her back laid against her belly, and decided to up the ante.

Polly squealed at the touch of his hand working its way into her pouch. “Hhhholyyfuckholyyfuckholyyfuck...” (God, she had waited a decade for a partner who’d even acknowledge it existed!) His second thumb anchored firmly in place, he navigated the crevasse as only he could, each sensitive stroke magnified a thousandfold.

She panted as the grip of his lower hands reached her pelvis, setting a million hairs alight as he caressed the fur around her thighs.

Still toying with her pouch for all it was worth, still making ecstatic squeaks and moans, he went in for the kill, and plunged his fingers into her pussies. He teased her | into her pussies. The walls he clit up and down, massaging and | explored as delicately as a prehistoric soothing her most sensitive parts | toric cave, feeling up her G-spot — combined with the gloves... frankly, her brain felt like someone had shoved an ice-pick into it, but she didn't care any more.

Hyperventilating, barely comprehensible, she yelled, "*Cas, babe, I'm gonna come...!*"

He whispered in her ears: "**No, you're not,**" and, with his only free hand, slapped an entire strip of refractory patches onto her thigh.

Time stopped. She moaned in delight and yelled all the Greek curses that came to her head... but, after a second, she didn't feel any different. "Aw, come on!"

"Hey, it's like you said. Two can play at that game."

"Indeed." She reached down behind her, the beavertaur's body curled up into a ball, and groped his erect pricks. As his forelegs limply batted at her thighs, the resulting moans made a perfect fifth.

Though one half of him was still in ecstasy, Castor's right head lapsed into a concerned expression. "Wait, babe, I think—" Before he could finish his thought, with a dull thump, his back collided against the wall and Polly flew to the opposite side, ending their delicate dance.

The beaver manoeuvred back to his feet, grabbing hold of the nearest handle. Polly pushed off, floating weightless before him as he hung upside-down by his upper left arm.

"You know, I think you look prettier this way."

"...Shut up."

"A-ny-way—"

With a strained grunt, he swung over and grabbed his right hand onto another latching point, stabilising his posture at least a little.

"—I have a plan."

“...It involves me getting fucked stupid, doesn't it?”

Two heads nodded in unison. “**Yep.**”

“And, because I'm a man of my word...”

He grabbed a last strip of patches from the air and stuck them across his chest.

“Until. They. Run. Dry.”

He punctuated each beat with a jab in the plexus for good measure, seemingly unaware that his point was being rather undermined by the barely concealed sighs of ecstasy from his right.

Polly licked her lips. “Well, if you're not gonna be using those...” She swam down (up?) to his lower left arm, and, with some effort — most of it spent trying not to moan whenever she touched the bloody things — managed to peel the hot-pink haptic pads from his hand. “See? I'm not even gonna take a whole pair,” she winked, slipping them on herself.

Castor grit his teeth as she bopped him on the nose.

“Just... get down.”

“If you say so!” Hands pawing against the walls, she swam over his undercarriage, his hindlegs locked firmly in place. “Wow, you're fluffy.”

“*What?*”

“You'll see!”

“I still don't know wh...”
Castor trailed off into overjoyed chitters and purrs as the gloves ruffled the thick fur of his belly, rolling through the damp and bushy heath. *Damn*, he thought. *I guess it is pretty fluffy.* As she softly sucked on his left member, he panted, overtaken with ecstasy, drowning in a sea of erotic stimulus, growling, huffing, hyperventilating—

Castor's roaring groans bounced off the walls as her bare hand masturbated his right cock. “F-fuck...” All that pent up energy — and he still had, what, four orgasms to go through before the patches ran out? As the possum

Polly spat out the surge of his salty seed that thrust into her mouth. She turned around to see a second jet of spunk rocketing off to splatter over the cupola window. “Uhhh...”

“I’m gonna say that’s someone else’s problem.”

“...Agreed.”

“Well, now we’re even,” she smiled, “so... you just say the word!”

“Hmm... well, I—”

“Both of you. It’s hotter that way.”

Castor’s eyes rolled into the back of his skulls. **“I’m sorry, who’s fucking domming here?”**

“You are,” she squeaked. “As of five seconds ago.”

“Okay, look. **You’re gonna hold on for dear life. You’re gonna take what I give to you. And then we both keep going until our brains fall out.** Got it?”

“Got it!”

She grasped on tight around his flanks, sniffing at his soaking, leathery fur, making the beaver melt into contented sighs. His paws chafed against the handles’ plastic as he struggled to fasten his body in place, splaying out his arms like the Vitruvian Man.

He bucked forward and, at last, shoved his aching cocks straight up her cunts. **“Fuck!”** he screamed again, this time not in pain or embarrassment but in glorious, sublime relief at the banishment of a week-long yearning from his mind.

For Polly, every twist and thrust was a challenge to stay still. She rolled and rocked with the curves of his body, shaking to the euphoric sounds of carnal hisses. *“Gamóto!”* she screeched, overcome with orgiastic passions; she continued, *“Keep going!”* — she may have come, but a hijacked libido had no time to rest — and keep going he did, filling her with his hot seed over two excited grunts.

The beaver struggled to form so much as a coherent thought against the overriding sensual force of Polly’s gloved fingers digging into his fur. With each

as his cocks thrust rhythmically	back and forth, his body and
hers coupled in a hypnotising,	

thrust and slip, she exposed new parts of his body to maddening, never-before-felt sexual fervour. To him, all there was, all there *could be*, was here and now: the universe devolved to a joyous mingling in a cabin. He came again. He hardly noticed.

Droplets of juice and spunk spilt from Polly's loins as his essence flew forth into her once more. "*Hhbbob my god...*" she cried, eyes rolling back, growing weary but determined to finish what she had started. *One more to go.*

Amid all of the thrusts and the jousts and the passionate grunts, Castor's bicameral mind was coming apart at the seams. He looked over at himself. No — *him*. His nerves were too choked to pass any signal between the two. He whispered: "Hey."

He was beautiful. Messy, but beautiful. Fur the colour of old mahogany. *I thought you were...* "Yeah. Enjoy it while it lasts."

But thabaaaaahbbb... He chuckled, letting go of the handles so he could softly stroke him on the cheek with the back of his paw. "She's great, isn't she?"

I know. He was so cute when he was flustered. "I love her. And I— while we have this — I just wanted to say that, uh..."

Fuck. *Spit it out. I know what you mean. I'm you.* He struggled to respond as the opos-

libidinous dance. In his primordial id, he wished it would last forever. For all he knew, it might.

libidinous dance. In his primordial id, he wished it would last forever. For all he knew, it might. To him, all there was, all there *could be*, was here and now: the universe devolved to a joyous mingling in a cabin. He came again. He hardly noticed. He looked out at the stars, his vision blurry, lost in lusty glee, when he heard a quiet, familiar voice, coming from his left. *Hey.*

His lower arms slipped from the walls in shock. "I thought you were..."

Yeah. Enjoy it while it lasts. "But thabaaaaahbbb..." Polly nuzzled lushly against his belly, unaware of the soliloquy unfolding above. He bristled at the surprise of his own hand fondling his cheek. *She's great, isn't she?*

He blushed. "I know."

I love her. And I— while we have this— I just wanted to say that, uh....

"Spit it out," he reassured him. "I know what you mean. I'm you." His gloved hands

sum underneath him and beaver to the right both lit new parts of his body ablaze.

“...I love you too, man.”

He reached up with his lower arms and ran his fur along the joint of their necks, purring. He hoped it felt as good to him as it did to himself.

Their cold snouts touched. With age-old longing, they met each other’s eyes. Each tug at their tits, each searing stroke between their necks, each thrust and pull from Polly, only made it clearer what they had to do. They whispered—

“I’m so glad this happened to us.”

“To *me*.”

Their lips locked. Their tongues met. His world went white. The symphony of his and Polly’s orgasms combined nearly knocked the two-and-a-half of them stone deaf.

The possum finally let go. “Holy *fuck*, that’s the best lay I’ve ever had...”

“Y-yeah...”

Castor stuttered. A tidal wave of horrible clarity washed over him. He looked over at the spunk-stained cupola. The globs of fluid floating all around them. The clumps of fur left on the walls.

“Oh my god.”

“What is it?”

“We’re *so* fired.”

NIGHT 121

“I STILL DON’T KNOW about this new uniform.” Castor shifted uncomfortably in the elaborate fabric garment that covered his body. “I mean, I didn’t really mind being naked by the end of it, you know?”

Polly plonked two cups of coffee onto the table with a sigh. “Yeah, well, your coworkers did.” Passers-by strolled past the quiet café, invariably with a quizzacious double-take at the sight of a two-headed, centaurine beaver in the streets of Kourou. “Just be lucky Akona even let you back on! That took a lot of grovelling on my part.”

He sipped his americano with his left head, leaving his right half free to keep talking. “They wouldn’t stare if they didn’t love me,” he murred.

“I guess I can’t argue with that.” She could. She just didn’t want to waste time doing it. “Anyway... there’s something I need to show you!”

“What is it?”

She ruffled around inside her handbag before pulling out an off-white tablet and bursting into a giddy grin. “Guess who’s on the front page of *Science & Nature*?”

Castor looked down at the display. Sure enough, there she was, proudly holding a Petri dish up to the camera, with the headline:

Castorbiota ardbhanarishvare: A novel extraterrestrial species with triple-helix genetic structure

“You named it after me after all!” he beamed, nearly spitting out his drink. “I really thought you wouldn’t get away with it.”

“If anyone asks, it’s a Greek-mythology reference.”

“Of course,” he nodded, “of course.”

“By the way...” She idly stirred her frappé. “The first crew launch is tonight. You wanna watch?”

Her answer came in four thumbs up.

* * *
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Polly sighed. “Yeah, I think they must have scrubbed it.” It had been an hour and a half, the sun was but a distant memory, and the towering visage of the rocket still loomed in the distance, unmoved.

Castor’s paws kneaded at the fine white sands beneath him, cold ocean lapping at his toes. “They can fit a brain smarter than the

planet inside a peanut, but they still can't get the rockets to launch on time."

"Yep," she yawned, stretching out on his back and nestling her head between his. "So... are you excited to see the sights of Gliese six-hundred-whatever?"

"Strictly between you and me, I think I liked 'Dave' better."

"Maybe we'll call this one 'Bill'," she laughed, before turning her attention to the stars above. The night was clear as glass, without so much as a blotting cloud or shooting satellite to interrupt their view of the constellations. "You know, on nights like this... sometimes I just lay there, and I wonder how many of those little pin-pricks of light I've travelled to."

"You know which one's Dave?"

"Honestly," the possum shrugged, "I always lose track once it gets past Orion and the Plough."

"Eh, don't worry. They make you take navigation classes in Astroengineering in case something ever goes *really* wrong."

"Go on..."

He pointed to a spot in the sky just above the horizon. "You see Betelgeuse, up there, on Orion's shoulder?"

Polly nodded. "Mm-hm."

"Well, if you follow his club *all* the way up — see those two yellowish stars? That bottom one's Eta Geminorum."

"And what about those two bright ones up there?"

"That's, uh..." As he squinted up, for a brief moment, a communications satellite flashed across the stars with a crimson streak. "...Castor and Pollux."

Silence fell. They looked at each other. "Well, how about that."

She yawned deeper. Her eyelids were fighting valiantly to keep unshut, but it was a losing battle. "I think I had a dream like this once... back when I first met you. Just... you and me, together on the beach, staring at the sky."

“Was it as good as this?” Castor asked, sealing the question with a double kiss on the cheeks.

Polly thought about it. “Nah.”

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THE END

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