

Double Payload

PART TWO

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DAY 7

The fluorescent strip above the bed flickered to life to bathe the beaver's haggard fur in a stream of fake sunlight. A trickle of drool ran from his mouth down to the case of his dusty orange pillow. He groaned and shook himself awake.

The first thing Castor noticed was the replacement of his sheets. Gone was yesterday's thick off-white quilt; instead, upon him sat a thin metal space blanket.

A small yellow sticky note came attached. It was Polly's handwriting; he was sure of that, but alas, her time in the medical bay had clearly rubbed off on her. The only words he could make out were a, "Hi, Cas!" and a mention somewhere about a shower. God knows he needed one.

Polly herself was gone without a trace. "Shift must have started early," Castor muttered, as he delicately wrangled his body off the bed and into a standing position, paws dancing around the minefield of drink cans and popcorn bags.

As he manoeuvred through the cramped dormitory, he tried not to slam his rump into any walls. He grimaced at the sound of his

engineer's ring clattering onto the carpet, swept away by one of his tails. "Man..."

In the bathroom, piercing white shone down upon him, and he gazed into the mirror opposite. However well he had adapted to the new contours of his body, he still found it surreal to see four shoulders reflected back at him under that same old weary face. He held out his hand as if to check that this was all real, and, pressing both his thumbs against each other, he smiled, satisfied that it was. "Sorry, Beuce."

Castor walked into the shower, at least with as much of his body as could fit. "Let's get this over with..." he yawned, grabbing a sponge and a bottle of shampoo, and he punched in the button on the tile wall. *Click*. "Thirty seconds..." Cleansing hot water poured over his front; hairs shivered and tats unravelled. He exhaled a smoky sigh of relief. *Click*. "Twenty seconds..." He backed out, water dripping all over the floor, and turned around, now letting the rain flow across his back half. Instantly, his tails relaxed. *Click*. "Ten seconds... I dunno about this, but it's worth a shot." He flopped himself onto the ground, trying to roll over and expose his undercarriage, but ended up a damp, undignified, aching heap. "Okay... that's — *ow* — good to know for next time." *Click-click-click*.

On cue, the water stopped, leaving Castor to drag himself off the cold floor and lather himself up. Many hands made light work, but with twice the beaver to cover, he figured it was a draw in terms of time spent washing. (He still wasn't entirely sure how to reach his hindquarters — he settled on wedging a sponge in between him and the wall and awkwardly rubbing his rump against it.) Clicking in the button for a final blast, he thought: *Man, am I glad I stocked up on towels.*

* * *
** ** **

Castor, still a little damp, stared with apprehension at his distorted reflection in the visor, its shiny glass newly replaced. *Ugh*. He would

be quite happy to never see that thing again after last week. Work was work, though, and it was near impossible to do his job without the live feed of calculations and analyses ever ticking at the edge of his vision. He swallowed his pride, reached out, and placed the machine over his head.

A familiar blue glow enveloped the engineer's view. "YOUR DESTINATION IS APPROXIMATELY 3.64 QUADRILLION KILOMETRES TO YOUR RIGHT, SIR."

"...Yeah, I'm gonna need you to cancel that, Ardha."

"AS YOU WISH, MR BOBRSKI. ANYTHING ELSE?"

"Uhh... Do I have any messages?"

"INDEED, SIR — ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY-ONE OF THEM, TO BE EXACT. I IMAGINE YOU'LL JUST WANT THE MOST RECENT ONE?"

"Sure. Hit me."

"IT CAME IN AROUND THREE MINUTES, FIVE SECONDS AGO, FROM THE BOSSES AT ENGINEERING. HERE IT IS, SIR."

A plain orange piece of virtual cardstock materialised in front of the beaver's eyes. Swiping his hand to bring it up close, he took a closer look at the embossed text.

Hey! Sorry to hear about the accident. Glad to have you back. There's a fault in the oxygen garden in room A032. Your partner will be Bucephalus Strathclyde — meet him in the mess hall when you can.

"Well, that's... nice of them." It wasn't an apology, but at least they had acknowledged it happened. Before he could head down to meet his colleague, though, there was one last item to strike off the list. For when Castor raised the headset from his face, he was also taking off the only article of clothing on his entire body. He was *not* going to work like this.

Clothing his top half was the easy part. He had taken some time to bisect his mangled jumpsuit yesterday and, despite some obvious tears and scars, it still more or less fit. Getting his lower arms through took some fight, but, eventually, he wormed them through a pair

of holes on the sides. It was ugly, but it was better than nothing. Keeping the rest of him decent would take some ingenuity. Warily, Castor scanned the mess about himself for ideas — and got one.

* * *
** ** **

Passers-by stared at Castor as he stomped through the dark halls, a space blanket strapped uneasily around his back by a weary old belt he had discarded two trouser sizes ago. The arrangement left him looking something like a cross between a disco ball and a jacket potato. Head held high and sauntering straight ahead, the beaver tried his best to ignore the glances, or (at least) take a little pride in them.

Left, left a little, straight ahead, right... The route to the mess hall was still seared into his muscle memory, and as he carefully rounded the corners, swearing they must have gotten tighter, fragrant odours filled his nose. (He always wondered how his canine colleagues coped with the smell.)

At its end, the maze of corridors opened up to the most voluminous area in all the *Ardhanarishvara*. Two stories high, its ceiling hung with sleek golden-white lanterns, it was the central common area of Lobe 1, and one of the few places where one did not constantly feel like the walls were seconds away from crumpling in on them. The panels clad the boundaries of the hall in the same slate-grey tint as the rest of the ship, here engraved with intricate icons which allegorised scientific accomplishments past: the splitting of the atom; the sequencing of the first mammal genome; the fortuitous discovery of the ancient wormhole to Tau Ceti.

Castor joined the tail of the queue and grabbed a tray from a dispenser recessed into the wall. Snaking around the edges of the mess hall, he surveyed the room in search of his partner. Perhaps the Clydesdale sat behind the two hyænas lounging on the brightly-coloured bean bags in the centre, or busied himself chatting up the

raccoon with the bionic arm sitting under a plastic baobab tree. No dice.

Strolling through the long rows of automat machines, he keyed in the code for an algal “kiefbasa” sandwich and piled two onto his plate. His appetite had doubled with his form and, had he kept his usual smaller portion, he suspected he’d come to regret it before midday. He wasn’t sure how sustainable that would be once the mission ended and had to pay for his own food again, but he’d burn that bridge when he got to it.

As he shot a stream of black coffee into a bio-plastic cup, Castor finally saw Beuce out the corner of his eye, his muzzle too buried in a pulpy sci-fi paperback to notice the beaver back. Satisfied, he wandered over and braced himself for a reaction.

Castor kicked a chair out from under the seat and sat down opposite, buckling his four legs under himself, the only other crewmate at a quiet table in the far corner of the room. The buff stallion adjusted his glasses, sandy fur glowing in the light, and kept reading.

Only when the beaver cleared his throat did Beuce lay the dog-eared volume on the table and look up. His resting unimpressed face took on a more inquisitive character as he took off his spectacles, rubbed his eyes, and redonned them. Castor grinned sheepishly.

“Dude, what happened to your shirt?”

“What?” Castor tilted his head, flabbergasted.

The stallion continued in his droll baritone. “I mean, seriously, dude. You can’t just come to work like that.”

“I— *that’s* the first thing you noticed?”

Beuce shrugged. “Figured you’d just made a lifestyle choice.”

“A *lifestyle choice*?” Was he having him on or something?

“Yeah, a lifestyle choice. Thought maybe you snuck off to one of those clinics they got around Uranus. Didn’t seem like my place to judge.” He idly ran a hand through his chestnut mane, peppered with streaks of cerulean and violet.

“...Whatever.” Castor dug into his breakfast, trying not to look it too hard in the eyes. The slimy grey sight was an insult to every sense but taste — once inside his mouth, it was a dead ringer for the best sausage he’d ever had back on Earth. “I didn’t choose this, man.”

The taur shovelled more kielbasa into his gob as he waited for his coffee to cool to a drinkable temperature. Beuce looked intently back, hand on his chin. “So... what happened?”

“Oh, I got into an accident. Ended up in the core of the ship just before they jumped through the wormhole.”

For the first time, the stallion’s face shifted to an expression of genuine concern, shattering his stalwart façade. “Holy shit! And you *survived*?”

“Ehh... just about!” Castor laughed him off. “I think the guys at management sent me a job order an hour too early or something. I ended up in medbay for, like, a week. Doctor said my genes got all scrambled, so the nanobots they spike guys with didn’t know what to do.”

“You should sue.”

“Nah, it wasn’t her fault. She did the best she could. Anyway, she was really nice! We’re friends now. She came back to my bunk to visit after I got discharged and everything...”

Beuce stared bluntly at his friend. “Cas, I can see you’re blushing under there.”

“...Maybe.”

“You showed her your bad-movie collection, didn’t you?”

“...*Maybe*.”

* * *
** ** **

Beuce’s heavy hoofbeats clanged down the corridor as he and Castor rambled to their destination. “Run that past me again?”

“Four arms, four legs, four lungs, four balls, two hearts, two dicks, and I *think* two stomachs? Oh, and a couple bonus thumbs.” Castor swung his toolbox in his lower left hand, visor just sticking out

at the top. “Apparently the tests say I might not even be done. Upper deck just didn’t want to sit around waiting for the ’bots to die.”

“Fuckin’ management, man.”

“I asked her who it was and she *really* didn’t want to tell me. It was weird — she’s never usually like that...”

“You’ve known her for a week, dude. I don’t think you have the authority to say ‘never’.” The Clydesdale glanced at a plaque on a door as they passed it. “‘A042’. We’re nearly there.”

“Got it.” The beaver noticed something as he looked back at his friend. “...Hey, did you get shorter or something?”

“I’m a draught horse, Cas. If I ever lost a centimetre I’d throw myself out the airlock.”

“...Yeah, I figured. Just, you know, wondering out loud.”

The pair continued onwards through the hall until it came to a stop at a wide sliding door, no different on the outside to any other room on the ship. *A032 — Oxygen Garden.*

Castor grabbed his headset from his toolbox and strapped it tight around the eyes. “You ready to crush some bugs?”

“Let’s do it,” Beuce snorted, slamming a jet-black override card into the reader’s mouth.

Slipping through into the greenhouse, Castor wiped his visor’s cameras as they adjusted to the blinding light from every corner. The floors, the walls, the ceiling — all were draped in white, broken up only by great shelves of lively green, some screened behind plastic curtains steamed up in the rainforest air. To him they might as well have extended for miles.

The beaver drank in a deep breath and spread his four wings like a man freed. He thought back to the grassy dewdrop smell of his old college campus; the pouch of lavender he kept under his pillow; the coughing hemp smoke of his roommate stumbling in after a night out. In a cold sea of dry industrial air, this was home.

A light tap between his shoulders snapped him out of it. “Problem’s over there, dude,” said Beuce, pointing behind himself to a ruined rack of greenery to their right.

“...Oh. Right.” Castor made his way over to behold the issue at hand, grimacing at the contrast of the frigid nutrient sludge under his paws and the monsoon heat on his fur. A densely-planted stretch of hydroponic containers had collapsed in under its own weight, leaving a pile of dying leaves scattered on the floor and a maze of leaking pipes running over, under, and all round. “Yeesh.”

“Yeah.” The stallion rubbed his fogging glasses, dewy sweat condensing on his fine fur. “You figure out the deal with the plants, and I’ll tackle the pipes? I never had much of a green hoof as a kid.”

“Works for me.” Castor craned his front legs down, hind still firmly in the air, as Beuce examined a twisted tubule and muttered measurements into his glittering smart glasses. Picking up a frondy stalk off the floor, the beaver focussed in and directed his visor to analyse. “Ardha?”

“THAT APPEARS TO BE FROM A *NEPHROLEPIS EXALTATA* PLANT, SIR. THEY WERE ADDED TO THE GARDEN BACK IN 2332 TO CLEAN OUT FORMALDEHYDE FROM THE SHIP AIR.”

Beuce glanced back down at the beaver, his attention captured by the robotic whisper. “Wait, yours is British?”

Castor raised the device to his forehead. “Huh?”

“You know, your little, uh, AI *guy*. He sounds like a butler or something.”

“I thought they were all like that.”

“Mine just does it by text,” he elaborated, tapping his specs for effect. “Must be a different model.”

“Maybe.” Castor briefly put his head back down, only to bob it right back up as a thought came to him. “You good up there, Beuce?”

“Well, I’ll need a leg up to get to the ceiling, and it’s hot as Venus in here, but otherwise, yeah. Why?”

He rubbed his temples and strained his voice. "I think the heat is giving me a migraine or something. I dunno how much longer I can keep this pose up."

"Dude, if you're *that* hot, just take the damn blanket off."

"No," he sulked.

"Well... you wanna swap, then? There's fans up here if you can get them to work. I'll go see if I can find us a stepladder."

"*Thank* you." As the stallion plodded off to get an adult, Castor pried himself from the ground and scanned the mess above him. A self-sure smile slowly crept onto his muzzle. "I think I can do this..."

He gurned as he clumsily hoiked his forepaws onto a sloped shelf amidst the rubble, grasping the braces of the next rows over for support. "Come on..." His eyes darted around the array of pipes and wires running just under the ceiling, a fleet of statistics digitally projected before him.

His raised feet nestled themselves into a sharp but stable crevasse as he steadied himself on his hindpaws. Satisfied in his security, Castor let his sweating palms go of the polyethylene braces and put them to work.

"Okay, fan... not working. Thanks for nothing, Beuce, but whatever. Pipes..." Water continued gushing out of the broken tubes beneath him, but his eyes were firmly set on a twin set of clear plastic conduits strung across the ceiling, both of which had split down the middle and drooped down in front of him. *Easiest fix first*, he figured.

With his upper hands, he grabbed the two dripping cables, holding each one in one of his doubled thumbs, and gently guided them towards one another (as best he could, what with the blinding lamps blaring into his eyes). His lower set reached down, grabbed a roll of duct tape from his toolbox, and wrapped it tight around the faulty plumbing. "Gotcha!"

Castor's hearts pulsed. He was in his element. Any feeling of heat dissipated around him as he entered a divine flow state. His

migraine hadn't cleared up, but it was sure to be next. "All right, time for the big money." Ready to tackle the spaghetti of crushed piping below, he—

"Found a stepladder." Beuce beamed at him from his left, attended by a clipboard-toting sable whose labcoat bore an olive-green patch. "Moot point, though. Rowan here from Experimental Biology says they'll fix it themselves."

"I was in the *zone*, man!" The crushed beaver slowly stepped down from his precarious stance, neatly tucking the roll of tape back into its box.

"Yeah, I know. You were doing that tail-batting thing."

"I was?" Castor blushed and looked behind him to check — only to find his impromptu jacket and belt had slid into a soggy pile on the floor. "Oh, god damn it..."

The stallion couldn't help but laugh. Rowan put their hands over their mouth to stifle a chuckle. In sheer embarrassment, the bottomless beaver quadruply palmed his face.

"You know what this is, Cas?"

"Whaaaaat?" Castor croaked as he hid his pounding head in the ferns, nuts hanging out for anyone to see.

"Payback for all the times you made fun of my jumpsuit's bulge."

NIGHT 7

Castor was always a cacophonous snorer. His family could attest to it, his roommates could attest to it, and Polly could attest to it. Yet here he was, dreaming away, silent as a mouse. Naught but the buzzing of his fridge and the drip-drip-dripping of his bathroom tap illuminated the vacant soundscape of his bunk. He jittered a little, grimaced, and chattered. A faint gasp would travel perhaps as far as the plaque on his wall. From above, he looked as peaceful as a man on his deathbed.

His apartment's ceiling was leaking again. Castor regarded the expanding mass of mould on the beige plaster above him with

weariness. One day, he was going to get out of here and do something with his life. Something new. Anything but Earth. For now, his diploma taunted him from its cheap filament frame.

Out the corner of his ear, a deep hum rattled the beaver. Sprawled sedentary on the sofa, he sat up and turned his head to look. There was nothing. No change in which ear the sound entered, no identifiable source. Nothing.

Now that he thought of it... it was the *only* noise. He hadn't heard his neighbours arguing. Teens yelling outside. When drops of water fell into the bucket he had placed on the floor, they did so without a sound.

He heaved himself up on his own two feet and he was in the bathroom, staring at the face in the mirror. The hum increased in pitch, loudening itself semitone by semitone. He could hardly hear himself think. His languid eyes couldn't look away from his filthy black band t-shirt, his two flabby arms limply poking out of the holes. Something about it was... *wrong*. He felt naked. Cold. Like something was missing.

There was a ring at the door. He walked out to look and his stomach sank. He didn't know what was behind it. He had no reason to worry. Yet — the mere thought of answering triggered a primal reflex. He froze, unbudging legs locked in place on the hardwood floor.

The humming heightened again to a shrill buzz. Static snow filled his essence. The doorbell rang again. He limped ahead with satyr-like gait, one leg arrhythmically spasming forward after the other.

The door opened for him and he was there. A dark, smoking corridor deep in the bowels of a Martian starliner, only lit by the crimson fire of his flickering headtorch. In the distance, muffled patrons were partying their night away. Machinery pulsed and whirred away. Then the noise cut out.

Deafened, he looked down at his ragged boiler suit to find it totally severed from the torso down. Blood trickled from the gash on his leg. His left leg. No... his right. No... that was...

Is anyone here? He yawned his maw to speak, but nothing came out. The noise answered, a two-hundred-decibel squeal into his right ear and a pulsing infernal moan in his left. Clutching his head in pain, Castor fell to the floor and through the searing metal.

The beaver roamed alone through the deserted white halls of the spaceport, each gate further away than the last. He didn't remember packing that much luggage — it being so... *empty* last time he it was like an extra hundred came. The infosite said it was the pounds had been tied to his back. busiest port in the solar system. Distorted glyphs scrolled across the departure boards overhead.

Suddenly, he spotted her. A russet-furred wolf in the distance, sat quietly in the chairs of the next gate ahead, beckoned the engineer towards her with a wave.

Castor galloped as fast as he could against the torpid travelator, its sharp grooves digging uncomfortably into his bare feet. *She has to know*, he thought. *She has to tell me what's going on.* Reaching its end, he skidded to a clumsy halt, end, he carefully dismounted, paws dancing skittishly on the trying his best not to fall flat metal below. The wolf didn't on his face. The wolf didn't react — she just leered at him with bloodshot eyes as he made his way to her seat.

Slowly, he divested himself of his luggage before he could sit down. His carry-on bag hanging loosely from his left elbow, he lowered it onto the floor. He discarded the empty bottle of water that he had clenched firmly onto with his right. And the book he was holding in his... lower...

The illusion snapped as the pressure in his head returned. There he was, one of two souls in this nexus of interplanetary life — four-armed, four-legged, totally without modesty. The she-wolf's unbroken stare dug into his shivering visage.

What are you? were the words on his lips, betrayed by the empty rasp of his throat. She did not answer. Not in words. She just smiled at him as her head began to tear itself apart, flesh unfolding, bone cracking, a kaleidoscope of viscera from which he couldn't avert his gaze. Tears welled up in his unmoving eyes.

Castor blinked. The bland white sea around him now glowed deep red. A beast stared back at him, still seated, still smiling, a three-headed monster whose wolfish faces betrayed the soul of a primordial wight. Its right countenance unhinged its jaw and spoke without tongue.

"This is what you wanted."

No... he mouthed to a pathetic squeak. The Cerberus disregarded him, its six eyes pulsing with alien hues, and continued, monotone, now from its centre.

"Something new. A change in life. What was it again?"

Castor violently shook his head, one side twitching at a time in a sick Newton's-cradle game. The beast took on a twisted mirror of his voice.

"Anything but Earth.' Well, I'd say..."

It floated from its seat, towering over the engineer's form. What little light still shone around them went black, leaving only the glow of its eyes as its threefold visage closed in around him, wrapping its arms tight around his face. In disharmonic unity, it spoke as three:

"... You're not much of an Earthling now."

The beaver's screams echoed through the unwatched halls as it ripped his flesh in two.

DAY 8

The room was dark as pitch when Castor woke up, uncomfortably sprawled across his bed. He tried to rub the sand from his eyes — and missed. Sore echoes of the pain he had experienced in medbay

bounced around his body. *Oh, god, he thought. Am I going to have to go back there again?* Polly was nice and all, but it was still medbay, and he didn't particularly want to return to a diet of algæ on toast. *And... wait, no, that's not...* His eyes surged open — all four of them. **“What the fuck?”** the beaver yelled, voice booming in stereo.

Desperate, he flailed and fumbled around the walls looking for a light switch, and when, by chance, one of his twenty-four fingers ran into it, the influx of light nearly burned his retinas out.

“Jesus!”

“Fuck!”

Duplicate senses pierced the beaver's mind. An old collegiate flame — a goth otter majoring in mortuary science — had once told him that, in the days before death, the ill would speak of the world with a heightened intensity, as though they were opening their eyes for the very first time. The skies were bluer; the music more harmonious; the blossoms blossomier. If she was right, he thought, then God must have fast-tracked him to the pearly gates.

As he rolled off his futon and stumbled his way to the bathroom, Castor felt the fifty-hertz flicker of the light around him, the subtle shimmer of oranges and golds — things he had only seen through the lens of his camera. Disorientated by double vision, he felt around for a dial to turn the room's diodes down as dim as candlelight.

That's better, he thought, though it carried a twinge of *I'm gonna throw up*. As his vision adjusted and pupils grew, the harried rodent straightened himself up and looked in the mirror — to find two identical faces looking back. He harmonised: **“Fuckin' knew it.”**

Castor grabbed onto the porcelain of the sink and leaned in close to better examine himself, in the spirit of scientific inquiry and morbid curiosity. *There's gotta be a tell*, he told himself; some flaw somewhere revealing which head was the original. The grain of his fur, the ruffles in his hair, the whiskers on his snout: it was all identical. He thought the hue of the green in his eyes could be warmer on one side, but he couldn't be sure under the dim light — and he was even less sure which shade he had started out with.

“Man, even by the standards of **last week...**”

“**...last week**, this is freaky.”

With intrigued force, he grabbed his necks, slapped his cheeks, and tugged his ears. Each touch rushed through his nerves as sharp, three-dimensional sense; then, milliseconds later, a dull echo would ring out from his other brain. He looked down on his left to an imaginary notepad.

“Well, I can feel stuff on both sides, so... good to know it's still just me in here.”

God, do I really sound like that?

There was one last thing to try. Castor looked at himself in the mirror and took a deep breath. “**Let's do it.**” His heads craned inwards, fields of vision crossing each other like a funhouse mirror, until he met the gaze of his very own olivine eyes. He gasped, feeling the echoing tickle of his own breath upon his whiskers just millimetres away. He was awed in the biblical sense, like he had seen some unfathomable beauty sapient life was not meant to know. A primordial soup of nameless emotion embroiled him, and terrified, beautiful tears rolled down his cheek as he heard

until he met the gaze of his own jade eyes. He stared, entranced, as his left head recoiled and gasped. The sight was surreal. Was this what he looked like to everyone else? Everyone he'd ever loved, everyone he'd ever hated, everyone he'd ever fucked, every selfie he'd ever taken — and here was that same old beaver face, taking up his whole field of vision. It was... “That's kinda hot,” he

the rest of him say, “*That’s kinda hot.*” All he could give back was an aimless stammer. The same primal feelings swept through his loins, and as his right half leaned in to kiss himself, he suddenly yelped, let go, and skittered away from the countertop.

“Jesus, no! I can’t do this! It’s like—”

“—I’m kissing my own mother!”

“What was I even—”

“—*thinking*? I— I mean, fuck, I guess I just—”

“—wanted to calm myself down, but—”

“—what the hell *was* that, man?”

The panicked beaver put his hands on his heads and tried to compose himself. “**There’s gotta be a better way.**”

* * *
* * * * *

“AS YOU WISH, SIR. I’VE WRITTEN UP A LETTER SAYING YOU’VE COME DOWN WITH NOROVIRUS AND WILL BE UNABLE TO PERFORM YOUR DUTIES TODAY. WOULD YOU LIKE TO READ IT BEFORE I SEND IT OFF?”

Castor held his left eyes shut in deep meditation while he argued with his digital assistant through the goggles on his right. “No thanks, Ardha. Just... send the damn thing. I’m a half-hour late as is.”

“DONE.”

“All right, now time to break the bad news...” he mumbled, his left head’s concentration now drifting in and out. “Ardha, call Polly.”

No response. He cleared his throats. “...Ardha. Call. Polly.”

“...APOLOGIES, MR BOBRSKI, BUT OF THE TWO-THOUSAND-AND-FORTY-SEVEN PERSONNEL IN MY DATABANKS, I WAS UNABLE TO FIND ANY BY THE NAME ‘POLLY’. DID YOU PERHAPS MEAN MARGARET FUCHS, DOWN IN WORMHOLE MAINTENANCE?”

This fuckin' guy... His tenor sharpened as his other half began to softly overlap and harmonise. “Ardha, could you just **shut the fuck up** and let me **browse** the personnel file myself?”

On cue, the AI fell silent, leaving the beaver to stare at a glowing rolodex projected in front of him. He turned the crown on his headset to begin, reading off the list as he went.

“Aagard, Abdulaziz...”

“...Algæ Processing.”

“Oh, come on!”

He cranked the dial as far as it could go, watching the waterfall of names rush by. “Bobrski, Castor, Engineering... Dunno who that is, but he seems cool.” The flood continued on, intermixed with occasional mutters from each head, until the beaver found who he was looking for.

“Polydefkis, Aletheia!”

“...Astrobiology?”

He raised a puzzled eyebrow.

“Eh, whatever.”

“Ardha, *call Aletheia Polydefkis.*”

The torturous buzzing that followed wore a hole in his stomach. “C’mon, pick up...” Thirty agonising seconds later, silence fell, until Castor heard the sound of her voice.

“Hey, this is Polly! If you’re hearing this, I’m probably busy right now, so leave a—”

The beleaguered beaver groaned doubly in frustration, shaking his head to hang up. *All right*, he told himself, *she’s probably just busy doing... Polly stuff. Just keep trying to reach her.* “Ardha, call Aletheia Polydefkis.” That same sawtooth buzzing followed. As did that same canned recording of Polly’s voice.

He huffed: this wasn’t working. She was probably — hopefully? — just down in the lab in medbay. Castor hated to inter-

He sweat: she wasn’t picking up. Was she even still on board? Shit, what if something had happened to her? He hated

rupt her work, but... she had to know.

to barge into medbay again, but... he had to know.

Hand hovering over the bunk door's card reader, Castor glanced back at yesterday's sogged metal blanket and mauled ultramarine shirt, both clumsily splayed out to dry over a black radiator in the corner. "...Fuck it." With a beep of his lanyard, he left his vestments behind and wandered into the halls.

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* * * * *

Bumbling through the bustling arteries of the ship, Castor held his heads low, away from the migrainous lights. He had to be halfway there by now, right? The corrugated metal under his paws clanged and bounced with the steps of a dozen crewmates. Ice-cold ridges dug into his soles with every step of his accelerating jog. He heard a voice at eight o'clock to him say something about, "Isn't that the repair guy who got stuck in..." Still, he—

there by now, right? He glanced up at a sign which rushed past above to confirm, hand held in shield-salute just above his brows, and noticed a labcoat-clad kangaroo was peeping at his sheath as he walked by. Castor was too focussed on finding his girlfriend to take any offence; rushing forwards in determination, he—

Fwump. The beaver's tunnel vision piloted him straight into the paunch of a charcoal-furred binturong, who was lazily scrolling through hir unread messages as shi headed the other way.

Castor sprang back, hindpaws skidding to a stop, and apologised. **"Oh my god, I'm so sorry! I was—"**

"—I'm sorry, I'm still getting used to this, and..."

"—You know, just looking for a friend, and..."

The bearcat, still in something of a cyber-daze, dismissed him. "Nah, dude, it's fine! It's on me. I gotta look where I'm going bet... ter..." As the blurry digital cataracts lidding hir eyes faded, revealing the piercing gold underneath, shi got a better look at the figure in

front of hir. "...*Ooohhhh*, you must be Castor! Polly's told me so much about you!"

"Oh, geez, you know her?"

Castor blinked his left eyes in surprise.

"I was actually trying to fi—"

"*Know* her? Wah lao! Buddy, if I had a fiver for every time I had to fix some weird technical bullshit down in the lab because she was too buzzed up on her seventh frapp of the night, I'd be the richest guy on Mars."

"So, do—"

Polly's colleague interrupted, unfazed. "...And we've only been here two months!"

"...*Riiiiight*." Castor continued his attempted interrogation on his right.

"So, uh, like I was saying, do you know where I could find her? I really need to talk to her about something."

Hir tail traced jagged lines back and forth in the air. "Oh, she's down surface. The guys in Astrobiology *finally* called her in and said they might have seen some space moss or something down there. I've never seen her run out the room that fast in my life!"

The beaver shrank, dejected.

"...Oh."

"...Is there anyone in medbay I could talk to instead?"

The bearcat bowed theatrically, a twinkle in hir eyes, and introduced himself. "Timo Alhena Tjokrosutenturuno, at your service!" Shi looked left and right, pretending to scan the bustling hall for eavesdroppers, and followed up in a whisper, "Technically, I'm just the IT guy, but I've stared at enough printouts to get it."

Castor glowered flatly. "Okay, but like, an actual doctor? With a degree in *medicine*? Anyone?"

"Hmmm..." Timo stroked the underside of hir muzzle in contemplation. "Well, there's Dr Kuposov, but he's probably busy."

He's kind of an asshole, anyway — you know what humans can be like.”

“Prude?”

“Prude. You shoulda heard him chewing out Polly just for showing you back to your bunk.”

“Okay, so *definitely* not him.”

“Yeah, lor. Figured, given how all our *distinguished colleagues* — shi gestured around at the maddening crowd — “are checking you out in your... problem area.”

“...I think we have different definitions of ‘problem area’.”

“Sure, buddy.” Timo buried hir hands in hir jumpsuit’s pockets. “So... you wanna talk about this somewhere else? ’Cause I was just walking down to get some snacks before you bumped in.”

“God, yes.”

Castor’s tired eyes squinted through the halogen.

“These fuckin’ lights...”

The binturong smirked and reached out for a handshake. “I know a place.” He smiled back, grasping hir tight with his lower right hand’s double-thumbed grip. “Whoa.”

NIGHT 8

Gentle waves skimmed the surface of the *Ardhanarishvara*’s spa pool, bending wee pin-pricks of light from the dark, glittery ceiling. Castor stood there on its rim, the claws on his paws just peeking over the edge, and gazed down at both visages of his rippling reflection.

Eight days in, a sense still lingered at the back of his mind that this was surely just a dream, and at any moment he might wake up, feel around his bipedal buttcheeks, and breathe a sigh of relief. He knew it wasn’t, but a beaver could dream, no?

Eight days in, he was getting used to that lumbering centaurine gait, but this was something else entirely. Without Polly, he didn’t know how he would ever have adjusted. He just hoped her standard of friends was as good as her standard of care.

He lapped up the humid air. A luxurious Earthling clientèle might expect a cocktail of aromas rare and sweet to be piped in, but in space, all that was needed to seduce a spagoer in need of relaxation was the scent of home. It smelled of dewy grass, of rain on road, of Martian rust, and of... popcorn?

His ears poked up at the sound of snapping fingers. “Hey, Narcissus, you ready?” There, on the opposite side of the pool, stood Timo, hir hot-pink bra and bulging trunks leaving little of hir curvaceous body to the imagination. “I dunno how long this is gonna take, but I booked us in for an hour just in case.”

Castor looked up and smiled nonchalantly.

“Yeah, I’m good, I was just, uh...”

“Thinking about stuff.”

“By the way... why the spa?”

Timo splashed hir tail around in the water to check the temperature. “I *was* just gonna take you back to my bunk, but you said the lights were messing with ya, so I figured I’d pick somewhere I knew there wasn’t gonna be LEDs and neon everywhere, lah.”

“**Thanks.**”

“*Thank* you.”

Shi crouched down by the pool, waving hir hand through. “You wanna get in? Water’s dece.”

“Sure.”

Castor inched down the stairs with trepidation, his body soaked deeper and deeper with each step, and, as his paws reached the smooth mosaic at the bottom, the warm spring water just barely lapped over his hind body.

“Geez, this brings back memories.”

Timo dropped himself into the deep end without a second thought, splashing bromine in the beaver’s eyes. “Like what?”

Castor spoke with his right head as he tried to rub the water from his left. “This one time... I dunno how old I was, but I got my

family banned from the water park because I wouldn't stop damming up the lazy river."

"That's *evil*, dude!"

"It's in my DNA. I dunno what to tell you!" He leaned against the walls as his thick tails paddled up and down.

"Speaking of DNA..." The bearcat pointed his palm towards him. "What appears to be the issue, *monsieur Castor*?"

He crossed his lower arms, gesturing towards his two heads with those remaining. "I was hoping it would be obvious."

Timo shrugged. "Hey, it's Polly's casefile, not mine. I just skimmed it while she was asleep. Although..." Water dripped from the tufts of his ears as he tilted his head askance. "I think she kept the... head thing in the future tense, leh."

"You see why I wanted to talk to her?"

"Hmmm..." The binturong mimed putting on a pair of glasses. "Can you describe the symptoms?"

Castor sat deep in thought. | Castor rolled his eyes at the
"It's... hard to describe." | bearcat. "Two-headedness."

Timo put his palms up. "I'm gonna need you to back up there, because I didn't catch what *either* of you said." Before he could respond, she added, "Actually, first question: *how the hell are you doing that?*"

"...I have no idea. I... you know, sometimes—"

"—I dunno, I'm thinking about something, and then another thought pops into my head."

"And normally, that happens, your train of thought gets knocked off course, right?"

Timo nodded, listening. "Sure."

"But instead, it's like somebody built another track."

"It's still just *me* in here, but... fuck, I dunno how to describe it. It's like I spent my whole life blind in one eye and finally got Lasik."

"Everything's brighter."

“Louder.”

“*Bigger.*”

“And it’s beautiful, but I don’t— I don’t know how to...”

He closed his eyes and inhaled a shallow, soppy breath.

“I don’t know how to live like this.”

“Fuck, man.”

“...You good?” Timo reached out to offer hir embrace.

Castor wiped his reddening eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Fine. Just... it’s like she said. Two of *everything*.”

For some time, the two sat there, not exchanging a word. Just the quiet splashing of recycled water and the occasional spritz of artificial Earthling odour. *This is probably the biggest volume of liquid water on the ship*, he thought — *and we’re using it for this*.

Timo looked up at him. “You wanna try the sauna?”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know about you, but my paws are starting to wrinkle up. And we might as well get our money’s worth.”

“...Timo, I haven’t even thought about money since I got on board. It’s been six months since anybody here paid for *anything*.”

“It’s an expression, dude.” With a guttural grunt, shi hoisted himself over the wall and dragged hir lumbering black-furred limbs from the brominated pond. “*Chi bai*, that was easier back on Mars...”

Castor sighed, but complied, trotting his way back up the steps, chittering as he shook the water from his body. Turning around — he was grateful there was enough room that he could, which, as he had found out over the past week, was not always a given — his eyes landed on the bearcat, who was in the middle of stripping off hir swimsuit and neatly laying it on a bench by the sauna door. *Oh, for god’s sake... “I’m taken.”*

“Didn’t say you weren’t. It’s sauna etiquette, mah. Have you no *respect for tradition*?” shi melodramatically swooned. “Besides, *you* can’t be complaining about nudity in the workplace.”

“Touché.”

The binturong’s physique was Polly’s opposite in every way. Where Polly’s thin fur was all cloudy greys and whites, hers grew in bushes of matte black, peppered with speckles of greyish brown at the tips of hir whiskers. Polly was slender, slight. Timo... wasn’t. The runt of hir family on Mars, a body adapted to its lower gravity still towered over most of the Earthling crew, leaving Castor at eye-level even after his accident gained him six centimetres. But the crown jewels of hir plush body were surely the titanic accoutrements on hir chest, covered in a coat of black fur that tapered off around thick, peach-pink teats. If hir tits were big, hir bollocks weren’t too far behind, hung tantalisingly underneath a truly Priapic pendulum. (God damnit, did Polly’s girlfriend have a bigger dick than *him*?) As shi bent down to straighten out hir trunks, he caught a glimpse of the puffy, pierced yoni shi kept tucked behind hir scrotum. The sight of it was...

The flushed beaver stamped his hind legs to reprimand the growing heat in his hindquarters. *Now is not the time for this shit.* Head held high, hoping to just act natural, he proceeded through the sliding door into the belly of the bath.

A scalding red heat washed over every part of him from the moment he entered. Birch benches crowded up around the walls of the sauna chamber, leaving little room in the central pit for those not bipedally inclined. To his right, Timo stood atop the wooden seating, alternating between pouring water on the coals and fidgeting with a thermostat whose screen stayed stubbornly clogged with condensation.

“Jesus, it’s boiling in here!”

“Can’t you turn it down?”

“I’m trying!” complained the binturong as shi furiously tapped at the miniature screen. “Whoever was in here last kept that shit on human/lizard mode or something. I *think* I can get it to a temperature where we don’t sweat ourselves to death, but who kno— Never

mind. Got it.” Shi swiped away the green glow of a box of approval, sat back down, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“...Do you know where I could sit? I’m not sure these benches are really designed for, uh, people who’ve been in horrible wormhole accidents.”

“Nah. You’ll be fine — just stay on the floor. Works better for me, anyway.”

“Okay, but if I get burns on my paws, I’m calling HR.¹”

Timo dismounted from hir bench and began circling the beaver-*taur*, taking mental notes of each of his features. “Hmm...” Shi tapped the knee of his left hindleg, quickly dodging his instinctive kick back.

“Don’t— don’t do that.”

“I won’t. Probably. But I do have a question...” Shi circled back round to meet him in the eye. “How d’you get back there?”

“...I don’t.”

“Oh, come on, you have to have *something*. Otherwise you’d smell like you hadn’t taken a shower for days, instead of... *sniff* I dunno, wet beaver.”

“I get a loofah, I stick it between my ass and the wall, and I pray.”

Castor clutched his temples. He was straining to hear himself think in this heat — if the temperature was going down, he sure couldn’t feel it. And that discomforting presence under his tails was rearing its head again. *This was a terrible idea.*

“But what if you need to... you know...”

“There’s a squat toilet and a bidet. It’s *fine*.”

Timo toyingly rested hir hand on hir cheek. “Castor, that’s not what I meant.”

He was sweating buckets of castoreum by the second. **“Oh my god, *fine*! I can’t jack off! Is that what you wanted to hear?”**

¹Nobody is quite sure what the “H” in “HR” stands for, and the matter has been a subject of heated debate amongst linguists since the late twentieth century, when the term was coined.

Timo thought about it for a moment, idly tickling his whiskers. “Mmmmh... I dunno if I *wanted* to hear it, but you were reminding me a lot of me when I was younger, you know? Second puberty and all. I had so much libido I could barely even function.”

“...Second... puberty?”

As she reminisced, she swept away a field of sweat-drops from his face. “Yeah. Hermaphrodite stuff. Runs in the family! First you get your periods and your back problems, and *then*, a couple years later, your body remembers it has another set of hormones to turn on and all hell breaks loose.”

“And that’s relevant because...”

“Think it through, lah! It’s like... uh... like you said she said. Two of everything, right? Which means you’re going through the exact same thing I did. You” — she jabbed him in the abdomen — “just happened to get the *oops-all-testosterone* special.”

The flagging beaver dragged a paw across his left face. “All right... well, what did *you* do about it?”

“Same thing you can’t.” Steam blasted into the air as she tossed another ladleful of water onto the heater. “They should have given me a fuckin’ degree in Applied Post-nut Clarity.”

“...I see where this is going.”

“See? We’re on the same page.” Timo winked at him and grabbed him by the lower shoulders, to which he emitted a shocked squeak. “As they say in the biz... let’s get troubleshooting. You bring any sex toys with you?”

“What? No.”

Castor flashed two sceptical looks.

“Why would I even do that? It’s a research ship.”

“Looks like *someone* was raised by humans,” she harrumphed. “Worst comes to worst, you could probably convince HR to count a dildo as an accessibility requirement. I bet they’re bored as shit up there.”

“They have—?”

“Shush! Shush. I’m thinking.” The binturong paced another few circles around him, muttering to himself in Martian Creole, before another idea hit hir. “You tried kissing yourself?”

Castor sighed, and spoke only in embarrassed mutters.

“Yeah. Doesn’t work.”

“Just feels like I’m kissing my mom.”

“Seemed like a good idea at first, though.”

“Good idea how? Work with me here.” Instinctually, shi reached down to a phantom keyboard on hir thigh to take notes, only to claw hirself in the leg with a pained grimace.

“Well, I dunno, it seemed kinda... hot... in the moment, but then when I actually went in for it it was like, *yech*, you know?”

Castor was so hot, so dizzy, so thoroughly drenched in sweat, that he didn’t even register his double-barrelled shotgun beginning to unsheath itself from its holster.

“Okay... You mind if I poke around? I wanna see if the nanobots gave you any sensitive areas.”

“As long as you stay away from my dick.”

“Which o—”

“Either!”

“All right! All right.” Timo crouched down and began investigating, starting at his pelvis, the joint between the old body and the new — where his cock (singular) *had* been, once upon a time. If medical technology had missed a spot, this would be it. Shi placed a palm upon his smooth brown fur and rustled around, hoping for a response. “You feel anything?”

“...Yeah. Your hand.”

Shi sighed. “Dude, if you’re not gonna work with me, sial, I’m just gonna start asking you to turn yourself off and on again.”

“I think that’s called sleep.”

Timo heaved hirself back off the ground with a grunt and a deep breath. Between hir popcorn sweat and his vanilla musk, the

olfactory impression shi got of the clogged sauna was of some kind of demented adult sweet shop. “Nice cocks, by the way.”

“Oh, god, are they really...?”

“Yeah.” For the sake of their mutual friendship with Polly, shi tried hir best not to think about hir own rising semi. “Okay, next up...” Shi grabbed onto the beaver’s bushy armpits, one hand tackling the upper pair, the other the lower; as shi felt them up, shi could feel his legs rustle and hear him take in shallow breaths. “Is it working?”

“No... **buff-buff-buff**... I’m just... **bab**... ticklish, you asshole!”

As Castor laughed, Timo had to stifle hir own. “Sorry!” Shi let go, leaving the beaver to compose himself.

“Look... **buff** I’m glad we did this, but at this point, I don’t think you’re gonna find any—”

“Wait.” Timo wasn’t looking him in the eyes. Either set. Instead, shi had noticed something in the space between: a small, unfurred patch in the nape where his two necks met.

Castor gulped, his smoky breaths clouding the air with every heartbeat. “...What are you looking *aaaabbbghbabbholy shit...*” The feeling was electric: a static shock of undifferentiated *sense* surging through his nervous system that was to his stream of consciousness what the Three Gorges Dam was to the Yangtze. For 1.87 glorious seconds, nothing else mattered but that pulse, the here and now, the primæval needs of his bicameral mind.

Castor shivered with purrs of delight as the binturong softly ran a finger along the bottom of the crevasse. “*H-bbbholy*

Timo divested hir hands from the rattled beaver’s fur and smirked. “Think we found your G-spot.” As his psyche crashed back to earth, he stood there, staring out into space.

“I... I think so.”

Shi looked down at the clear droplets of pre splattered on the floor beneath him. *She’s gonna kill me.* “I’m, uh... I’m gonna go get back in the pool. Just ’cause I wanna still be able to look your

girlfriend in the eye when we get out the spa. You do your thing and come out when you're done, yeah?"

"Yeah, 's... 's probably for the best,"

Castor huffed, and with that, the bearcat backed sheepishly out through the door, leaving him all alone. *Well*, he thought. *Not that alone...*

It's worth one more try. Just one. The idea got him giddier than he'd like to admit. *After all — nobody's gonna see me but me.* With the atmosphere choked and the coals still roaring, he turned in to face himself again. The fur on the face before him glistened like a disco ball in the dim light, a tired, cryptic smile playing on its lips. "*Hey, gorgeous,*" he heard himself say. Maybe Timo had a point with the "Narcissus" thing.

He laid his top left hand on his opposite cheek, and as the shared crackles of warmth echoed across his nerves, a slight smile crept upon his nervous face. "Hell, this ain't so bad," he muttered, to the feeling of his penes coming to rest against the bottom of his trunk.

"You're not so bad, myself." As his right side leaned in for the kill, he guided his only free extremity up to the pointed bed in the valley of his heads, and pressed down.

himself again. He could see his other half's apprehension in the way the dew-drops on his whiskers wibbled as he shook. "*Hey, gorgeous,*" he swooned, thinking more with his right dick than his right brain.

He moved in to put his lower arms to use, navigating his body's erotic lay of the land as only he could. A flick of the nipple. A rub in just the right spot on his back. Fingers dancing down his spine.

"Hell, this ain't so bad." "You're not so bad, myself." He gazed, awed, into his own eyes: tired, bloodshot, eyelids at half mast. His fur was too tangled and moist for either of him to blush. Quaking, quivering, he dared a small kiss.

For perhaps a millisecond, those pangs of disgust returned — only for time to stop. In that moment, his lips locked in unity with

himself, all that existed in the world was that cramped, suffocated, sweat-drenched sauna. The stifling mores of Earthling society, his days of struggle in his new body, the viverrid swimming laps in the pool outside: all of them merited about as much consideration as an ant on the pavement.

Castor kept at it, caressing himself all over, smooching himself silly, moaning into his own ears, until he could barely breathe, and, at last, two days of pent-up heat spilled out onto the sauna floor in an explosion of uninhibited self-love. Keeled over in an inelegant heap, heads rested awkwardly on the side of the bench, he struggled to recuperate his higher functions.

“Fuck me, that was good...”

“...Just imagine what Polly could do with it.”

The engineer took two deep, contented breaths. At least he knew how to keep himself busy until then.

NIGHT 10

The nitrous skies above were scattered with ruddy sunlight, and a maroon haze blocked all but the brightest stars from view. The white rocks stretched far into the distance, punctuated by icy spears jutting out from smoky sinkholes like knives in the chest. Kaleidoscope crystals sublimated onto the thick plastic visor of Polly’s spacesuit as she cradled a small Petri dish in her hands.

The possum whistled to herself a jaunty Mediterranean melody. The shuttle back to the ship was in sight. Flanked by seven of the *Ardhanarishvara*’s finest researchers and explorers, it had been a gruelling two days down on Eta Geminorum Ac — “Priapus” to the authorities, “Dave” to the crew — but now, she held the fruits of the *Ardha*’s months-long voyage in her grasp. At the centre of the dish grew a small, yellowish moss: Eta Geminorum’s very own indigenous form of life.

An old voice crackled over the radio. “Yi kna, I’ve never seen someone so excited about *lichen*.”

“Aw, come on, Brian! How could I not be?” she merrily retorted as they strolled on across the frozen shield. “The number of planets with native life just went from 21 to 22, and you don’t think that’s special?”

“Well, aye, I’m not saying it’s not *special*, but... it’s lichen, innit? Every time we gan out on one of these we’re always hoping for aliens, and every time it’s either nowt or a bloody low-rent chicken-of-the-woods.”

“And if we *did* find a little green man up there?”

“Then maybe I could finally fucking quit,” the otter laughed.

* * * * *

“Polydefkis, do you even know what’s *on* there?”

“Uh...” Polly paused from rubbing the ice from her detached helmet as she sat shoulder-to-shoulder with her crewmates in the cramped shuttle interior. “Water ice?”

The vixen smacked herself in the face with her palm. “Yeah, *water*, on a planet we’ve just established *has life*. This is why they’re quarantining us for a week,” she said, with a tone so pointed that she may as well have finished with “...You dumbass”.

“Point taken.”

“Whatever.” The pilot tapped a clear plastic dot on her neck. “*Janus to Ardbhanarishvara*, this is Ngairé Rayner. We are clear for takeoff. Do you copy?” The response echoed silently through her bones, inaudible to the rest of the crew. “Copy. Glad to hear it.” She turned to face the other explorers. “Hold on to your asses, kids. And whatever you do, don’t throw up.”

Brian pointed a short claw at the possum sat opposite. “Well, we kna at least *one* of us who’s not got a gag reflex...”

Polly banged the back of her head against the walls of the craft. “...Ngairé, remind me when we’re getting back?” she groaned.

“0230 hours, ship time.”

She looked at her wrist display: 19:51. *This is going to be a while.*

* * * * *

“Ya cannit just point to, what, the twentieth piece of boring space moss we’ve found in so many years and go, ah, aye, now this is *revolutionary* stuff we’ve got here!”

Spittle flew from the opossum’s mouth as she hissed in rebuttal. “I don’t care if it *looks like* moss! It’s a brand new domain of life by any definition! We don’t even know if it’s DNA or RNA or silicon or *whatever* under there yet!”

Brian gestured around the ship theatrically. “Oh! Oh! You see that, lads? Big lass ower here who’s on her first mission says she knas more about it than the fella who’s been on the *Ardha* since the day they smashed the champagne glass. My arse.”

“Sorry, who’s the biologist and who’s the geologist here?”

“Well, frankly, I’m not bloody sure, given you’ve spent your entire career on the ship bumming around medbay and handing out plasters and lollipops! And... fucking *whatever* fer that gadgie in Engineering!”

“*Don’t you bring my boyfriend into this!*”

From the back of the shuttle, a brown-furred cacomistle piped up who had up till then remained utterly silent the whole way back. She took out her earbuds, rubbed her eyes, and yawned. “Look, I like you guys, but I woke up at... like... two *a.m.* to get a head start on analysing some samples, and I would really appreciate it if we didn’t run out of air just because spraint-for-brains woke up on the wrong side of the oxygen tent this morning.”

“Fine,” the geologist pouted. “But you’ll be the auld bastard complaining in this seat some day!”

* * * * *

Polly was dimly aware of a tugging on her shoulder. “Polydefkis?”

“...Huh?” the opossum slurred, sandy eyelids at half-mast.

An unimpressed Ngaire bent down to look her tired passenger in the face. “Repressurisation’s done. Get up.”

Polly rubbed her eyes and unbuckled her belt. “Ugh... What time is it?”

“Ship time’s 04:30. Trust me, I’m as happy about this as you are. But the sooner we get this done, the longer we *might* get to sleep in quarantine.”

She nodded in resignation. “Mmh.” As she and the fox ambled through the arrival bay’s spartan halls, she took a moment to link her headset back into the mothership’s intranet.

Castor Bobrski — 27 missed calls, 92 unread messages.

“Oh, god.”

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To be concluded

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