

Atlas:

Beside the road was an abandoned CONEX container. I took shelter in its shade, resting my sweaty head against the cool metal. Everything else, the yellow grass in the fields, the sandy dirt and gravel on the shoulder of the road, was baked by the sun.

Cerb the hellhound took a seat next to me, his dense black fur cutting a hole in the dusty world.

"Tired?" He asked.

I nodded.

"We should wait until evening, when it'll be cooler," he said, "then we could keep walking."

"Why don't you go walk ahead," I said, "and call a truck from the gas station, tell them to pick me up along the way."

"I wouldn't want to leave you alone. I am, after, the one responsible for us being out here."

"It wasn't like you did anything to make the truck break down."

Cerb didn't respond for a while. He stared off across the field of yellow grass, all four of his emerald, glowing eyes, fixed on something I couldn't see. I wondered if there was something there, something that only a hellhound would be sensitive to, or if he was just staring off into space.

"Still, I wouldn't want to leave you alone. And it's not like I have anything better to do."

"So we're waiting..."

I sighed deeply. My feet felt warm from sticking out of the shadows into the sunlight. Fortunately, the sun would be swinging behind the container as it set. The shadows would eventually tuck themselves over my feet, like a cooling blanket.

"What was it called?" I asked Cerb suddenly.

"What?"

"The story you were looking for."

Cerb hummed for a moment, a sound that I felt as a vibration in the metal container.

"Well, it was going to be about a wolf, and, some other shit, too. I couldn't think of a title before, well, I sort of exploded and burnt most of the house down."

"I remember that. I could see the smoke from my house."

Turning into a hellhound wasn't exactly a peaceful process.

"It was about a wolf," I said, "a story about a wolf."

"Yes?" Cerb must have thought I was trying to say something.

"Nothing, just getting bored."

I drew up my feet to get them out of the sun.

"Have you ever tried writing after you became a hellhound?"

"Yeah. But none of it ever really worked out. I forgot how normal people worked. How they talked, loved, walked down the streets. The type of things they felt and smelled. I forgot about it all. Everything I wrote was either an attempt at remembering, or just a bunch of incomprehensible hellhound bullshit."

"You know, I've never seen a book written by a hellhound before..."

"Oh, it's only natural. We're all authors, but it never helps."

I decided against asking him what he meant by that.

"So no one ever tried to get something published?"

"Not here at least."

"What?"

He drew himself up straight and looked at me. I sensed the weight of what he was going to say.

“Any story ever written, ever conceived, may have been published somewhere. I mean words here could be the same as words elsewhere, and there could be infinite elsewheres....”

He swished his tail across the ground.

“Well, there we go. A prime example of incomprehensible hellhound bullshit.”

He lifted a rear paw and scratched his ear with it. All the vigorous activity seemed to be just a mask for some embarrassment.

I stood up and brushed the dirt from my ass. Cerb got up also, looking up at me with questioning green eyes. Sitting in the shade had done a lot to make me feel better.

“I think I ready to start walking again.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. The road goes through some trees. It’ll be cooler there.”

Back on the road, a small breeze greeted us. I smiled as it swept across the column of sweat on the back of my shirt.

“Hey Cerb.”

He looked over his shoulder at me.

“Yeah?”

“You remember the stories you wrote, after becoming a hellhound?”

“Yeah. I could tell you some of them if you want.”

I nodded. The wind kicked up again, blowing dust across the road. The mane of fur down Cerb’s back shook slightly.

Cerb hummed, a thinking noise that I felt as a thick vibration through the soles of my shoes.

“Okay. So this is a story about a hyena. A hyena and his journey....”