

Disease

By Friday

Dane T. Darmouth stands just under six feet tall. The hair around his muzzle is turning grey prematurely; stress, he tells me. The dorm lobby is strangely empty, but that's good for the recording, as there will be no background noise. "I wrote this up a while ago, as a way of processing things, and thinking one day people might need to be reminded how it went down. I hope you don't mind if I just read through it," he asks.

"Not at all, I say." His eyes lock onto me, and he starts reading from the sheets of paper he has in front of him.

Chapter 1:

In the early days of "The Cat Plague," as people called it, I was never quite sure how to broach the subject with Shawn. What started first as a cluster of cases on the west coast, in some small city in California, quickly began to spread through the rest of America. I didn't track the disease's approach through quarantine barriers; part of me hoped that if I ignored it, it would go away. Another part of me knew that the disease would spread, whether I tracked it or not. So I left it.

For weeks, every night, I would imagine how it would affect our little town. I listed the names and saw the faces of the people I might never see again. A little under half our school's football team would be dead, if the fatality rate held true.

I remember a lot of controversy about that. The CDC said that the chances of recovering from the disease were slim, for those who caught it. I don't remember the numbers, exactly, but I

think it was like a three percent chance. The controversy wasn't over the numbers, it was over the fact that many cats were accusing the staff of the CDC of being speciesist. It was true that the staff of the CDC were mostly dogs of various sorts. The CDC denied such accusations, but people couldn't help but notice that cats were stereotypically lazy, and their lack of representation in the CDC and the government was probably a result of that. In other words, their demise would be their own fault. If, of course, it were in fact true that the CDC was not trying to find a cure for their disease, they'd quickly add.

The claims were bolstered by the disease's unhalting advance through every quarantine the CDC set up. Some began to even claim that the disease was created by the CDC. A few more radical religious groups claimed it was a plague from God to wipe the unfit from the earth and leave it for the other species.

I don't think it was until the first cases of the disease were documented in the town next to us that I realized that our town was going to go to hell. I didn't listen to the news; I was a high school student for Christ's sake. Driving my car, I listened to rock music, not news stations. It didn't even occur to me to check the radio when I saw smoke rising in the west on my way home from school.

In the kitchen, my mom was making dinner, like she always was at that time. Before she could start talking to me about how my school day went, I cut in. "Mom, what's with the smoke in the air? Is there a forest fire?"

Her voice was almost nonchalant, but I could hear something behind it, like she didn't know how to talk about something so important. "It's riots, honey, in the next town over."

I understood the words, but not why they were being spoken. "Riots?"

“Yes. The first instances of CRID were just reported. Some cats are already trying to break the quarantine barriers.”

I didn't know what to say to that. “Why?” I asked, dumbly.

“It's probably on the news, why don't you go watch that? I'm busy, can't you see?” She was bustling around, getting the fish ready. I left to turn on the TV.

“-Already the first incidences of CRID, Cat Related Infectious Disease, have been reported in the town of Homville. The response has been explosive. Already families of concerned cats are attempting to breach the quarantine barriers, using fire, guns, chainsaws, cars, their paws, and anything else they can to break through the barriers and drive through. So far, the firefighters have been able to keep them at bay using only pepper spray and fire hoses.” The reporter's detached voice seemed to be speaking from the wrong channel; the scene she was narrating was chaos. On the ground, cameras were mounted on the top of the barriers, showing cats of various kinds attempting to breach the barrier in any way they could. More frequently, the camera would show what I think was the same helicopter fly-by, figures scurrying and like ants towards the barrier, and occasional white streaks of water from the barricade that would push them back. Neither side was letting up.

Suddenly the shot changed to a Dalmatian in a firemen's uniform, standing atop the orange and white quarantine barriers. “Me an' my men are doing a good job of keeping them at bay. They don't really stand a chance against the fire hoses. Even if they did manage to pull a path open so they could drive through, I got a lotta strong guys here who'll jump down and block it up again afore they can get through.”

“What's stopping them from just walking out of town? The CDC can't put a wall around it...” I asked.

My mom's voice came back as collected as before. "I'm sure some people are already doing that, but most can't take their possessions with them by foot."

"Why would they want to take their stuff with them? I mean, it's that or die, right?"

"Cats are weird like that."

A little bit of anger surged in me. "I think you mean *people* are weird like that."

"Yes dear, of course, but we're talking about cats right now."

I didn't press the issue; there wasn't much point. I couldn't tell if she was being speciesist or not, but she wouldn't admit to it if I confronted her about it anyways. And she knew about Shawn, so I doubted she would have insulted my boyfriend in front of me. But then again, I wouldn't put it past my mother.

A question lingered: were we safe here? It felt ridiculous to ask, in the warm bastion of the house I grew up in. I felt safe here. But then, the question in my mind wasn't if I felt safe. "Are we safe here, Mom?"

Her reply was immediate, like she had already been worrying about it too. "Yes, it doesn't really matter much. We're otters, so we can't catch the disease, and we're not dogs, so we don't have to worry about any cats hurting us out of hatred. We'll be fine."

I relaxed a little. "What about Shawn and his family?"

"Well, if they follow the quarantine procedures, they should have nothing to worry about. The disease hasn't even spread here, yet, honey."

In the weeks leading up to the disease's arrival in Homville, I systematically refused the idea what Shawn and his family would eventually catch the disease. Every night, my thoughts were of how I would comfort Shawn, because he was the only one of the sixty-seven cats in our school to have survived. I imagined that I would help him become acclimated more to the otter

community, who would welcome him. He already hung out with them a lot, when he was with me, and they got along great. Of course, everyone got along great with Shawn. The only futures I would let myself see included him. The futures in which he died, well, those came only when I fell asleep. I would wake several times in the middle of the night to turn my damp pillow over. I didn't get a full night's sleep for weeks, and the quality of my homework suffered because of it. The teachers, though, still kept putting the same B+'s at the top of my homework. I think the whole school was in as much turmoil as I was.

Still, even though I didn't believe that he could catch the disease, I knew that he believed he could. He always put on a brave face for me, acting like nothing was the matter. That was one of the reasons I could never broach the subject with him. We both ignored it for the other's sake. But with the disease visible in the form of smoke rising over the treetops, I couldn't leave the issue any longer. I thought Mom would be upset at me for not eating dinner, but I didn't want to wait. "Mom, I'm going to go to Shawn's. I'll be back after supper."

"Ok, dear." Then she surprised me by walking up and giving me a hug, and a kiss on both cheeks. She hadn't done that since I was a little pup. "There's no school tomorrow, you know. You can spend the night if you want to."

"No school?" I murmured, dumbfounded.

"Yes, it's closed for quarantine procedure."

"Oh," was all I could say. Stay the night? With my boyfriend? Before I told my parents that Shawn and I were dating, they didn't mind if he crashed here or I spent the night at his place. When I revealed that information, they didn't freak, but they did start monitoring us. Spending the night together became off-limits. "Stay the night? That's ok?"

"It's fine with us if it's fine with Shawn's parents, and I think it will be."

I took the boon without question. “Ok.”

“It’s a scary time for him and his family, I’m sure they’d appreciate your presence.”

I called Shawn, just to make sure he was okay with me coming over. I knew he would be; it was more a warning in case he wanted to clean his room or something like that. Not that he ever did. When he answered, I thought I could hear some worry behind his voice, but he told me to come over.

The drive was uneventful, but I kept feeling like someone was looking over my shoulder the entire time. It wasn’t until I got out of the car that I realized it was the way the smoke loomed in my rear-view mirror that gave me that impression. I bounded up the steps and knocked. His family must have been busy; usually one of them would have the door open before I even got up the steps. After a few seconds, though, the door opened, and Shawn pulled me in with a quick kiss. The handsome lion was dressed in his usual way, khaki cargo pants and a white t-shirt. His mane was somewhat unkempt, right side relatively tidy, the other more messy, like he had just woken up. “Nap?” I asked.

“No, just watching the news. You hear school was cancelled tomorrow?”

“Yeah, Mom told me.” I wanted to change the subject from the quarantine procedures. Jerking my head towards the stairs, I asked, “Want to play something?”

He ran his fingers nervously through the right side of his mane, brushing at it and pulling out loose hairs. I realized this was the reason for the tidy appearance of the right side of his mane. He always fiddled with it when he was nervous. “Uhm... I guess. Sure.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Idk.” I always found it amusing how he would spell out text speak in conversation. ‘Idk,’ ‘lol,’ ‘omg,’ and such. “It’s just... there’s so much going on. It feels kind of weird to play video games when there’s important stuff going on like right next door.”

I knew what he meant by “Important Stuff.” But I didn’t want to talk about it, so all I said was, “Well, what else can you do?”

He just looked at me for a moment. Then he flashed me a faint smile and said, “I guess so.”

Passing through his kitchen on the way up to his room, his mother stopped us. She was a very caring lioness; her eyes were constantly appraising you, predatory by nature, looking for weakness, but so she could shore it up, not use it against you. “Hi Dane, how are you doing?”

I bowed a little, respectfully. “I’m doing well Mrs. Wilmond. How are you?”

“Oh, we’re doing fine. We’re all a little concerned about what’s going on over in Homville, but there’s not much we can do about it, I suppose.”

“Ah, yeah.” I was painfully aware I didn’t know how to respond to that. I felt terrible. She would know how to reassure me if I were in her situation. I wanted desperately to get away from the kitchen, Mrs. Wilmond, and my own sense of worthlessness.

Luckily, after a short pause, Shawn rescued me from the situation. “Dane and I were going to play some video games, let us know when supper is ready, ok?”

“Alright, dear. Your father should be home soon, it’ll be ready shortly after that.” She glanced anxiously at the little oven clock. It was ten minutes early, like always. Shawn had credited it as the entire reason his family was ever on time.

I knew we wouldn’t actually play all that much video games. It was a small deception from us; Shawn had only moved his Xbox up to his room after we started dating. His parents

didn't care what we were up to, being lions, and it was certainly no secret. It was almost entirely to make me feel comfortable. My parents had always been conservative when it came to sex. Shawn's dad had taught him how to masturbate. When he told me that, it at first freaked me out, but he explained that adolescent and adult male lions have extremely high sex drives, even needing to get off several times a day during the summer. If they don't, they can start acting crazy. Apparently it's a pretty common rite of passage for young male lions, a part of the 'Birds and the Bees' talk. That helped explain how open his family was about sex. It just wasn't a big deal to them.

Shawn's room was a somewhat messy den. His bed wasn't made up, like usual, some of his many movie posters were askew, and dirty clothes were piled against the foot of his desk. His fan spun slowly, the broken blade hanging down, and catching the corner of my eye occasionally. He'd broken it when he'd beaten me in a racing game. I still remember distinctly his body stretched out, hands up, jumping, and then the cracking sound, followed by the "Oh, shit," silence. The fan made me feel like a giant spider was hanging over the room.

Sure enough, Shawn and I spent part of the evening before supper messing around. Shawn stopped me early, after only the second blow job, saying, "You should leave room for supper." Usually, he'd deliver such a line with a wink as well as a smile, but this time he only smiled.

"Ok then, guess we can actually play video games," I said.

For the next half hour, we raced sports cars through nameless downtown cities, speaking only to trash talk. We were both in the zone. Both of us were far too competitive. The winner only got bragging rights, but that was where all the fun was. Finally, we heard the front door slam, and Mrs. Wilmond meet Mr. Wilmond at the door, presumably with a hug. I got up to go

downstairs, but Shawn stopped me. “We can go a few more rounds, it’ll be a little while before they’re done.”

Ears burning, I sat back down. He always found it amusing, catching me off guard with his frank attitude towards sex. The sounds of cars revving didn’t entirely cover the sound of Mr. and Mrs. Wilmond. Only when a heavy drizzle began to patter on the sunroof did the world begin to sound muted. Shawn turned to me, smiling. “Even the sky is crying at how badly you lost that race.”

Before he could trash talk further, though, his mother called up the stairs: “Shawn, Dane, dinner is almost ready! Come on down now.” After we finished up our race, we went down. “Shawn, will you be a dear and set the table?”

I quickly volunteered my help. “I can give him a hand with it unless you have something else I can help with.”

She gave me one of her warm smiles that she was always so quick with. “If you could get a chair and a spot on the table set up for you that would be very helpful.” I went to grab my favorite chair, a comfortable wooden one with a cushion. Their table was the perfect size for a family of four; my presence was difficult to find room for, but I usually sat between Shawn and his mother.

Mr. Wilmond lumbered into the room, re-adjusting his pants. He was dressed in his usual olive-brown cargo pants and Comora-County fire department T-Shirt. It was the way all the firemen were supposed to dress. His large frame dwarfed any of the rest of us by far. His mane was tidy, and a much darker brownish-black than his son’s. He was somewhat hard to read; he never really smiled, but he felt friendly and I was almost always at ease around him. I asked Shawn once, shortly after I met his father, if he could read his father’s moods. “Horny. If not that,

friendly. He's a simple guy," he said. I couldn't tell if it was a joke. Almost a year later, I still can't.

"Son, can I get you something to drink?" he asked, in his usual gruff manner. "There's beer, milk, and water."

"You know what, water's good," I said.

"Dane, I cooked your steak a little longer, because I know you prefer it that way. And I got some of that spicy sauce, Worcester is what Shawn said, because he told me you preferred it to A1," Shawn's mom said.

I smiled. "Oh, thank you Mrs. Wilmond! Yeah, I prefer Worcester on my steak. My parents usually have it for fish, so I sorta grew up on it," I explained. Usually, I wouldn't have been comfortable with other people's parents spending money on me. When I was a little cub, I was visiting a friend and his mom took us to the grocery store with her. I asked her to buy me some candy that my mother was always so stringent about keeping from me; when I was unsuccessful at hiding the wrapper in the trash, my mom had figured out what happened and scolded me. But Mrs. Wilmond's actions didn't make me feel uncomfortable. Mrs. Wilmond felt like another parent to me. She felt like family.

After saying a brief prayer, with hands interlocked even at the awkwardly close quarters of the small table, we dug in. "Dane, could you pass the Worcester sauce? I'm going to give it a try," said Shawn.

The rest of his family followed suit. They each put it on a single piece of their steak, and with a sniff, tentatively tasted it. Shawn and his father didn't use any more, but his mother used even more than I did.

“So, Dane, how are your mother and grandmother doing? The last time I talked to her she was having a rough time dealing with your grandmother’s illness.” I remembered she and my mother talking for quite some time about it, a few weeks ago. My grandmother was hospitalized with a stroke, and my mom had been taking it hard. Mrs. Wilmond sent my grandmother a get well soon card and some flowers, and my mother a bowl of tuna salad so she didn’t have to prepare dinner, and could instead take some time to visit my grandmother.

“Mammy is stable.” That was the word my mother and the doctors had used. It was code for ‘Not getting worse, but not getting better.’ “Mom’s doing better now, too. Thank you for the positive wishes and for the food. It was delicious.”

“Oh, it was no trouble at all. Anything I can I do to help.”

We continued to eat in silence for a few minutes. It was a comfortable silence and a comfortable scene. Somehow, the table had seemed to grow. It no longer felt quite as cramped as it had when we first started eating. I felt like speaking up. “The steak is really good, Mrs. Wilmond. My parents can never cook it this well.”

“Why, thank you Dane! Maybe your mother and I will have to cook together sometime, I may be able to help out with her steak and I know she could help me out with my fish. Every time I cook fish it always comes out too dry.”

“It always tastes good to me, Mom,” said Shawn.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t make it taste *better*,” said Mrs. Wilmond, with a gentle smile.

“I don’t mind if you stick to steak,” said Mr. Wilmond. “Nothing against your fish, honey, I just prefer a nice slab of meat. Right Dane?” He winked at me. I smiled, even though the remark made me somewhat uncomfortable. I couldn’t tell; was it innuendo? Then I remembered it was Shawn’s dad. It almost definitely was. I gave a delayed snort of laughter. I realized that if I

acted awkwardly, the situation would become awkward, but if I didn't no one would think twice. It was just the way Shawn's family worked.

Shawn lifted his beer bottle to his muzzle and took a drink. "Hey, Dane, you heard from George? It's his birthday in two days, but I don't think anyone's put anything together." George was a mutual friend of ours, a cougar. The three of us ate together regularly in the cafeteria.

"Oh, I uhm, I don't think he's doing anything. He said his parents didn't want to deal with the fuss. I was just going to send him a copy of *All Our Fears* on Steam. He's been saying how much he wants to play it," I said.

"Oh... Okay. That's kind of sad, I was hoping we could celebrate," Shawn said.

Shawn's father broke in, forcefully swallowing his mouthful of steak. "His parents probably don't want guests over. They're probably scared that they'll get someone sick."

"David!" exclaimed Shawn's mother. She looked upset.

"Honey," he said, "there's not much point getting upset over it. It's next door, and it'll be here soon. The quarantine barriers won't stop it. All we can do is follow quarantine instructions, purify our water, and pray."

The conversation dampened pretty quickly after that. We went on, eating in silence. We finished up what was left of the meal, some mashed potatoes and some vegetables, and had dessert. Shawn's father grabbed another beer from the fridge, rather than the apple pie. Shawn's mother rested her paw on Mr. Wilmond's paw gently, preventing him from opening the bottle.

"Are you sure you should be drinking that much, David, if you're going to work after this?"

Thumpthumthumthumthumthump. A growing thumping sound from beneath the table caused us to all turn and look at Shawn. His mother frowned a little at him. "Shawn, stop jiggling your leg, the table can't handle it."

“Why is dad going to work again tonight?” Shawn asked.

His father spoke, deftly popping open the beer bottle and sitting down solidly in his chair again. “A good number of the men are over in Homville manning the quarantine barricades. They’re operating the station on a skeleton crew so I’m needed over there tonight in case there’s a fire here in town.”

“Oh,” Shawn said. His leg had stopped bumping up and down, at his mother’s request. “Are you going to spend the whole night there, then?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Oh... okay.”

His father set the half-empty beer bottle down on the table. Only the neck of the bottle could be seen peeping out of his hand. He gazed at me shortly, then at Shawn. “You two boys keep good care of Martha, ok?” He cracked a teasing smile at Mrs. Wilmond.

“Yes sir,” Shawn said, and I followed suit.

“Alright, I should get going soon. The sooner I get there, the better. Fred already assumes I’m lazy, and I don’t want to give him anything to reinforce that notion with.”

Shawn’s mother let out a little sigh. “Alright dear, be careful. Love you.” She gave him a quick kiss. “Boys, I’ll clean all this up,” she said, motioning towards the table. She wasn’t looking at us, she was staring at Mr. Wilmond, who was now hovering near the door. “You two can go play games.”

Shawn grabbed my wrist and pulled me towards the stairs, ears twitching. “Alright, come on Dane.”

The rain was still pounding on the skylight in his roof. Outside, it was dark.

After a few more round of racing, we switched to other activities. Shawn's sex drive never ceased to amaze me. I, generally, couldn't keep up. He was always somewhat disappointed about it, but he understood. In my own way of trying to make it up to him, I told him I didn't mind if he hooked up with other people. I knew he took me up on it, but I didn't know exactly how often. I never asked. I really didn't mind; I knew he wouldn't leave me for someone else. I was the only person who could reliably make him laugh. That, and I didn't think anyone else at our school would have liked the idea of him sleeping around at all. Comora's values were very conservative. It was something of an odd arrangement for us, at first. I suggested it, he thought it was a trap. When I assured him it wasn't, we danced around the idea, awkwardly at first, but Shawn's straightforward attitude eventually won out, and it fell into comfortable normality.

After about an hour of playing around, Shawn said, "Do you want to go downstairs and see if there's anything my mom needs help with? I know she said she would clean it up, but dad said to help her out."

"Ok, sure," I said.

We wandered downstairs. Mrs. Wilmond was washing dishes, and glancing up frequently into the living room. "What can I do for you boys?" She asked, turning to us with a worn smile.

"Oh, we just were checking to see if you wanted any help," I said.

"Well, Dane, if you could dry the dishes that would be wonderful," she said. "And Shawn, could you be a dear and wipe down the table?"

"Sure," we both responded.

From my position in front of the sink, beside Mrs. Wilmond, I noticed something that I hadn't seen all evening. The TV was still on. It was muted, but it was showing the news. The

same helicopter fly-by from a few hours ago was still being shown, but the ground shots were now dark and rainy. The reporter's monologue was appearing in text at the bottom of the TV.

I wasn't sure what to say, or if I should say anything at all. The only concern I could know for certain she had was death, and there was no way I could reassure her about that. The numbers of the fatality rate couldn't be fudged, and death was death. But I felt I had to say something. I loved Shawn's family, and I wanted them to know they weren't alone in this suddenly very scary world. I spoke softly. I didn't want Shawn to hear, but I doubt my voice was low enough. "I'm sure it'll pass through ok, Mrs. Wilmond. Don't worry."

She turned to me. In her brown eyes, the same warm, comforting brown as Shawn's still-growing mane, I thought I could see tears. It strikes me as odd, looking back, that I remember her eyes as the same precise grain-brown as Shawn's mane. I'm not sure if they really were, or if my mind is just associating the two by proximity. But they were such a warm, caring set of eyes, and the way the light glittered in them took me by surprise. I wasn't expecting so much emotion. She gave me a big hug, and in her voice I thought I could hear a slight crack. "Oh, you're such a dear. Thank you." She sniffed. "I'm sure it *will* be fine."

Shawn gave me a look I couldn't read well. I thought it was a mixture of surprise and happiness. I'm not the most outgoing person. I have difficulty figuring out what other people are struggling with, and even if I could figure out, I don't have faith in myself to say the right thing. Shawn spoke to me, interrupting his mother's long hug. "Dane, want to come with me and get some sweets from the gas station?"

I was slightly confused, but I responded, "Sure. Ah, let me just finish up helping dry the dishes."

"Ok, sure."

The three of us talked a little more, finishing up the chores. It was mostly warm small talk, all of us trying to ignore the elephant in the room. We were all concerned about the disease, but like I had said earlier, we couldn't do anything about it. When we finished, Shawn's mom said to us, "Alright boys, well, I'm going to go ahead and sleep probably. Be careful out there, okay? It's late, and there could be some crazy people out there, okay? And don't pick up any hitch-hikers."

Shawn gave his mother a weird look at the last remark. She ignored it, and asked again, "Okay?"

"Okay," he said.

The rain was still pouring. We rushed to Shawn's truck. I hadn't brought a rain jacket, but being an otter, didn't mind getting a little wet. Shawn had brought his jacket, and got inside considerably dryer. After we settled in, he turned on the engine, but paused with his paw on the gear stick, eyes straight ahead. The light from the porch coming through the rain-splattered windshield poured a spotted pattern on his fur. A crack in it slashed a thin streak of light diagonally across his chest. The luminescence stood out on his white T-shirt, starkly apart from the dark of the car's interior. His slight, lean frame was poised like a statue. Only his whiskers moved as his mouth struggled to find the words he wanted to say. I waited. Finally, he said, "Dane, I know you don't think you're the most eloquent guy, but what you said was what my mother really needed to hear. She's been so tense for the past few days, so worried. I've never seen her like this before. She's still gonna be worried, but that helped a lot. And Dane." He turned to me. I couldn't see half of his face in the shadows, but my mind filled in the deep jawline, the slightly untidy, light-brown mane, the other half of the pink heart shaped nose, the gold eye. "I'm scared too." He let out a large breathe after saying that. "I'm really scared."

I unbuckled my seatbelt and slipped closer to him. I hugged him. "I'm really scared," he repeated.

"I know," I said. "Everything will be alright, I promise."

He sobbed out his words. "Almost everyone is getting sick and almost everyone who gets sick is dying. I don't want to die, Dane. I need more time here. I want more time with you and my family and everyone at school."

"Hey, it'll be alright. I won't let anything happen to you, ok?"

We sat in the car, parked in the driveway, for I don't know how long. After a long while, his sobbing into my shoulder seemed to calm down. "Sorry," he said, with a weak laugh, "I think I got snot all over your shirt."

"It's ok," I laughed it off, "it was already wet from the rain anyways, it doesn't make a difference." The change in Shawn's attitude was concerning to me. I was kind of glad he had clarified what was going on with him and what he was concerned about. Sure, I could have guessed, but hearing it in his words made a difference. I loved Shawn for the way I could trust him to be honest with me. I still didn't know what to say to reassure him. I had no power. I couldn't promise he wouldn't get sick. I couldn't promise he wouldn't die. I could only promise him that I'd be there if he did. But if I promised that, it might make him feel certain that I thought he was going to die. And I didn't want to process that possibility. Looking back, I hate myself for that. I didn't promise him the one thing I could comfort him with, because I was too selfish to put myself in the emotional anguish of considering his death. I just said, "Hey, you going to be ok?"

And he said, "Yeah," staring ahead. "I think I'm fine now."

"You sure? Want me to drive instead?"

He laughed again, this time more hearty. “You’re a noob, you can’t drive stick, remember?” He’d put on that brave face again, for me. Even as he faced death, he gave and he gave. Thinking about it now, I’m glad I had given back, even it was only in the form of a shoulder to cry on.

“Oh... right,” I replied.

The drive to the gas station was eerie. It was dark and the rain was pouring down. Even with the windshield wipers going full force, it was hard to see more than a few yards ahead of the truck. The only thing visible was a half-dome of golden light created by the headlights, ten feet in diameter, in front of the car. Even that was obscured by the deluge of rain on the windshield. But even in that weather, there were a surprising number of cars on the road. More unsettling was the bedraggled hitchhiker we met halfway to the station, who lunged towards our car from the side of the road, paw outstretched and thumb up. We didn’t see him until we were nearly on top of him; Shawn braked, and swerved to avoid him. He was a cheetah, I think, but it was hard to tell with the poor visibility. “Who the fuck would be hitchhiking in this weather?”

I remembered the odd comment his mother had made about not picking up hitchhikers. It took me a moment, and I think it hit us at the same time, because he said, “Oh fuck...”

“Was he... was he from Homville?” I asked dazedly, as if Shawn would know.

Shawn just floored the gas. The guy was already far behind us, but I think we both hoped that putting geographical distance from him would help us forget about him more quickly.

At the gas station nearby, we hurriedly picked out several kinds of candy, as well as what was left of some more substantial food. The cashier, a fox, grinned craftily when he saw Shawn. “Sure you don’t want to get some more food, sonny? When the disease hits here they may close down the grocery stores to yer kind.”

Shawn was alarmed, and I wasn't quite sure what to do. I pushed the cash I had towards the cashier and said, "No thanks." I then turned to Shawn and said in a low voice, "If that happens I'll bring food over, don't worry." That didn't quite settle him down fully, but he seemed a bit more sure.

Shawn didn't take the same road home, but took a longer route instead. I'm sure it was because of the hitchhiker, but it didn't help. We saw two more hitchhikers, and by the time we got back home, I was relieved. Shawn was clearly even more unnerved by the experience; he was shifting between gears in seconds, accelerating quickly, barely slowing down, and taking curves at unsafe speeds in normal weather. It was alarming. Shawn was usually an extremely safe driver, much safer than I was. He would go the speed limit, use turn signals, and stop all the way at stop signs and even wait for a second. I usually fudged the first and the last, and only used turn signals when I felt it was necessary. He was funny. He never got onto me about that though, whenever we drove somewhere together. He would always be encouraging. If I did something well driving, it got a positive comment from him. I still remember when a car swerved to avoid something in the road and came into my lane. I went off the road to avoid it, at forty-five, and still managed to get smoothly back on. His first words after that happened (while it happened he was yelling profanities) were, "Phew, that was really well-done. On your part, that is. That other guy was crazy."

When we got back to his house, several of the lights downstairs were off. We smuggled the candy up to his room quietly. The night ended with me playing games shirtless while Shawn jacked off. I could tell from his body language that it was more of a stress relief mechanism than a pleasant experience.

Falling asleep beside him, I thought carefully to make sure I was doing all I could to help him and his family. I tried to come up with a list. But after twenty minutes of worrying, it was as empty as when I began.

Chapter 2:

When Shawn and I woke up the next morning, I distinctly remember it being to the smell of bacon, sausage, and eggs. The aroma cut through the brick-like smell of Shawn's home and over the faint scent of damp earth coming in from outside. The rain had stopped. "C'mon," Shawn said, kissing me on the nose to avoid my terribly sour morning mouth, "let's get some food." It took Shawn longer to get ready, because he had to comb out his mane and fur and brush his teeth and jack off. I lay on the bed with my hands behind my head, staring up into the skylight, and seeing if my brain had come up with any ideas for helping Shawn's family while I had slept. Before heading downstairs, we played around a bit, but mostly for Shawn's benefit. He didn't seem as into it as usual.

Mr. Wilmond was sitting in his chair, reading the local paper. He seemed tired. The headline was angled away from me, but I'm pretty sure it had something to do with the spread of the disease in Homville. "Hey dad," Shawn said. "Everything quiet over at the fire station?"

"Too quiet," he growled.

"What do you mean?"

"Dear, don't bug your father, ok?" Shawn's mother requested, her voice mildly polite but clearly stern. Shawn gave a disgruntled look at no one in particular.

His father sighed. “Don’t worry about it, son. Just the usual shit I have to deal with getting more intense with what’s going on over in Homville. It doesn’t help that most of the guys manning the station are all part of Fred’s gang, and that all of the decent men are over at Homville. The guys helping out over at Homville just got back this morning.”

Shawn’s ears were pitched straight forward, at his father, and his tail was undulating rapidly behind his chair. “Did they say anything?”

“Shawn.” Mrs. Wilmond said sternly.

Mr. Wilmond ignored her. “Nothing. Just the usual shit. Some jibes about me being lazy and not helping out over at Homville, even though,” his voice was rising, to nearly a shout, “they should *know*, I can’t help because of the quarantine rules!” He slammed his fist on the table; not hard, but enough to make clear his frustration. He took a moment before proceeding. I felt like I was intruding, but I also felt as angry as Shawn did. I could tell from the look on his muzzle.

Shawn’s mother was acting like she hadn’t heard the outburst. When Mr. Wilmond spoke again, his voice was level, and he was attempting to sound calm and reasonable. “I would be over there helping in a moment if I was allowed. I’ve helped with more out-of-town emergency aid events than any of them, but they don’t care. And Fred’s my boss, so I can’t tell him he’s wrong.”

That last statement confused me. “Why not?”

“Because I do my best to respect authority. And I keep hoping that it will eventually respect me. So far I’ve been disappointed,” he growled.

I didn’t know how to respond to that. In the ensuing angry silence, the three of us stewed. Before I started dating Shawn, I never realized how frustrating and damaging the ‘lazy cat’ stereotype was. I’d always just assumed it was a fact, personally. Shawn got extremely angry at

me once, when I had said something ‘speciesist,’ as he had called it. I had defended myself with, ‘it’s not speciesist if it’s true.’ He almost broke up with me for that, but thankfully instead had explained that the stereotype was bullshit. He’d shown me his schoolwork, where math tests with the same answers as mine had points deducted for not showing his work (he had shown more work than I had). His grades were lower than mine, even though I know he’s smarter than me, and actually does the work. He told me about his father’s lack of promotion or raise, due to his boss’s misguided belief that Mr. Wilmond was lazy. I learned about how difficult the stereotype made things for Shawn’s family pretty quickly, and soon became just as angry and indignant as Shawn did whenever I was confronted with it.

After a few minutes of ill-tempered silence, Shawn’s mothlightened the mood. “Food is ready, boys.”

She brought over the breakfast. In front of me, she placed a plate with four strips of bacon arranged in a square around a pyramid of scrambled eggs. On another plate she brought over was a pancake in the rough shape of a sphinx, two chocolate chips for eyes, and a hole in the shape of a nose cut out. I looked over at Shawn’s plate, surprised. His eggs were arrayed similarly, but his pancake was in the shape of a mummy, with chocolate chips for eyes and two links of sausages crossed on the chest for the symbols of rule. The sausage on my plate, I realized, was arrayed to look like the sphinx’s legs. “Shawn told me you boys were studying ancient Egypt,” she explained. I smiled. Mr. Wilmond’s pancake was in the shape of a heart. Looking at Mrs. Wilmond’s plate, I felt kind of bad that no one made a special arrangement for her.

“Mine’s cooler than yours,” Shawn bragged.

“Well, I got more sausage than you did,” I shot back.

There was silence for a moment, then Shawn and his father starting laughing uproariously. Even Shawn's mother giggled a bit. I just smiled and went along, knowing I was the butt of a good-humored joke and not wanting to ruin their humor. They needed it.

After we finished eating dinner, Shawn suggested we go check out the little nature trail not far from his house. We took our bathing suits. Shawn knew I loved to swim, being an otter, and since he enjoyed it as well, he was constantly looking for opportunities for us to swim together. The public swimming pool was on the other side of town, but we still went frequently. He was thoughtful like that. He would remember things that I liked, and did what he could to make sure I got them. It made me feel special. What was also amazing about it was how effortlessly he did it. His family wasn't particularly well-off. And yet, he'd find ways to do fun things together that didn't cost much to anything. Movie dates on half-price nights, frisbee golf, and a (delicious) homemade cake on my birthday. I always felt clunky in comparison, giving gifts that I knew he wanted, but that felt so uncreative. I always felt like it looked like I didn't put nearly as much thought into what I offered, but I did. Possibly even more, in fact. I just couldn't figure out anything better. And it wasn't like he wasn't happy with the things I suggested we do and the gifts I gave him for his birthday. But still, I just never realized how much better a gift is when it's exactly what you didn't know you wanted. I don't think I ever gave him a gift like that.

We swam for a few hours in the warm, late spring air. The river's clear, brown water continued slowly on its course, unflinchingly. The bleached green leaves of the oaks and beech trees were reflected in the mid-afternoon sun, disturbed by the ripples we made, appearing as if dabbled on the water's surface by broad brush strokes. "This place reminds me of an impressionist painting," I said aloud, floating on my back in the shallows.

Shawn waded towards me, picking his way carefully around the rocky bottom of the river.

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

He spoke up. “I love the impressionists. They just... their philosophy made sense. They acknowledged they couldn’t capture the world perfectly in a painting, and so instead showed the world as they saw it. It’s such an individualistic and fundamentally sharing-based world view. They were like, ‘Here, look, this is how I see things, isn’t it cool?’”

I laughed. “Yeah. My favorite style of art so far is the minimalist stuff. Simplicity at its finest. I wish people were more like that. It’s so damn complicated figuring out what everyone wants, you know? It’s not that I don’t want to help them if they need it, but I’m not psychic. I don’t know how you and your mom do it.”

“Whoah, where did that come from? You alright?”

I could feel my ears flushing and turning red. “Yeah... I’m sorry. I feel like there’s nothing I can do for you and your family right now when they really need it, and it sucks. I mean, I don’t know what to do for anyone at all, usually, and it makes me feel... I don’t know... useless I guess.” I righted myself and sat neck-deep in the cool water.

“Hey,” he waded towards me and sat down, eye-to-eye with me. “There’s nothing you can do. Just being around has helped. Having a guest in our home makes things less tense and quiet.”

“Oh... ok.” I noticed he didn’t say that having me specifically around was helping. Anyone would do, apparently. But I wasn’t kidding myself. It’s not like I was anything special. Sure, I could make people smile, but I wasn’t the life of the party or anything. Not like the way everyone loved Shawn.

My thoughts must have been apparent on my face. He reached out with a laugh and pushed the corners of my mouth up into a forced, toothy smile. “Oh, c’mon, don’t pout like that. Mom and dad love you. I think they’ve been really glad you’re here.”

I gave him a playful growl and pulled him under as best I could in the shallow water.

We had the place all to ourselves. It was a wonderful feeling, being alone with my lion in such a beautiful place. The tall trees standing on the side of the river felt like verdant walls of the cathedrals we studied in art history. The place felt like the inside of a giant Gothic cathedral, it gave off the same vibe of awe-inspiring solitude and quiet, but more comforting, more organic. The rapids not far upstream provided a blanket of soothing white noise, and for a few peaceful hours, I played and laughed with my boyfriend in the cold stream.

When it was a little after noon, we dried up and sat on the bank, talking about little things. It was distracted conversation; both of us worried too much about the inevitable calamity to hold a decent conversation, but we tried, for each other.

Eventually, we left that serene, biological place of worship. But that day, those last few peaceful moments with my high-school sweetheart before the onslaught, will hold a treasured place in my memory for the rest of my life. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to walk into a church or along a forested riverside without remembering his laugh, his reassuring eyes, his bedraggled mane.

When we got back to the house, I knew something was wrong. Shawn knew it even before I did. He tensed up as we walked towards the house, his tail arching. His mother was pacing, her ears and tail twitching, but her eyes steadily watching the TV. She kept crossing her arms, then putting her paw to her mouth, then crossing her arms to hug herself again. “Mom?” was all he could say.

“It’s- they- they’re reporting that some cats from Homville made it out and they’re probably here.”

“Sick ones?”

“Ones who don’t realize it yet, maybe. Oh, Shawn. It’s a good thing your father’s home today.”

Shawn’s father strode out of the bedroom, and headed quickly for the back door and locked it. He turned to me. “Dane, I’m sorry, but you need to go. We need to lock the doors. And you can’t come back here until we can be sure you won’t bring the disease with you. I’m sorry, son. I’ll give you boys a few minutes to say goodbye, but then you need to leave.” He paced to the window and bobbed his head under the curtains, scanning the front yard.

Shawn and I went upstairs. We had a few last intimate minutes. Weirdly enough, it wasn’t spent doing anything sexual. I’m sure that was what Shawn’s parents had intended for us, but instead we just spent the few minutes holding each other and nuzzling. We were both worried, I think, that we might not see each other again. But after a few minutes, we both knew I had to leave. I gave Mrs. Wilmond a hug, and said my goodbyes to all of them.

“Goodbye dear, and thank you for coming over, it meant a lot. We’ll see you soon, I promise,” Mrs. Wilmond said.

“Yeah, Dane. I’ll see you soon. I love you,” said Shawn.

“Yeah, stay safe, ok? And call me. Love you,” I said.

“Goodbye, son. And sorry to have to say this, but don’t come back. Not for a while.”

It was an alien sensation as I walked down the porch steps, hearing the door’s lock clunk solidly behind me. Since they lived in such a remote area, the door was never locked while they were home. I waved towards the window with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. I saw Mr.

Wilmond's bulk framed in the left window, and his mother with her arms wrapped tight around herself in the right one. Behind her, Shawn held his paw out, touching the glass. It felt like such a surreal motif at the time. Looking back, the memory is made even more surreal knowing it was the last time I'd see them all together as a family. It was the last time that house would feel like a home.

Chapter 3:

Shawn and I talked a lot on the phone over the next few days. School was still cancelled, so neither of us was particularly busy. On top of that, Comora was quickly becoming sketchy to downright dangerous, so neither of us had anything to do. There were aggressive vagabonds in public areas, police stops all over town, and drunk drivers at all times of day. The number of accidents involving alcohol was so high, there was an emergency movement to stop the sale of it. It failed to pass, as it was a, "violation of small-business liberties," according to the news. Meanwhile, automobile repair shops and any store that sold alcohol were profiting.

Cat residences tended to fall into one of two categories, at that point in time, and the two categories were polar opposites of each other. Shawn's house fell into the first category: complete lockdown. No one entered or left, except in dire need. Curtains were closed, doors were locked, lights were almost always off. It was defensive. The residents tried to shut out any possible threat. The other category: total party. Loud music, drinking, drugs, everything. The cats played the role of Trimalchio, partying lavishly at all times of the day and night. I didn't understand why, at first. It seemed like a sure way to catch the disease, bringing so many potentially infected people into one place. When I broached the subject with mom, she just said

quietly, “They think they’re going to die soon. So they’re spending what they think are their last few days having fun.” Then it made sense to me.

I kept Shawn updated about what was going on in town. His voice over the course of our conversations slowly became more grim. The change was so subtle at first I almost didn’t notice it, but after a few of our conversations, I felt more worried than I usually would, talking to my reassuring boyfriend. When I realized that, it wasn’t hard to place why.

He kept me updated about how his family was holding up. I assumed he was in his room, probably lying on his bed, watching his ceiling fan spin, because I don’t think he would have been talking about them where they could hear him. “Mom’s restless. She doesn’t really have anything to do. She’s been mostly cooking really elaborate stuff that takes several hours to do. She’s also just been baking bread almost non-stop. I mean, it’s nice because there’s a lot of stuff to eat, but I think she’s really only doing it because she’s trying to keep herself busy.”

“Probably. I mean you guys are stuck in the house, it makes sense.”

“Yeah, I just wish I could find something else for her to do. But even I’m running thin on things. Browsing the internet and playing Madden doesn’t really fill 18 hours.”

I joked a little. “Maybe you could teach your mom to play some video games, then.”

He laughed, but then grew serious. “Huh... you know, maybe I should try. Who knows, maybe she’ll enjoy it? Lol.”

I teased him for saying, ‘lol,’ putting on a fake teenage girl voice. “Omg that’s a *great* idea.”

He growled back, playing along. “Stfu fool.”

We both laughed. I pressed on. “Really though, you should do it. Say, also, didn’t you want to play *All Our Fears*?” I ask.

“What? Oh, uh, yeah, I was thinking about it.” He knew what was coming next. *All Our Fears* was a game that came out recently that was supposed to be fantastic. It was a survival-horror game that supposedly did an amazing job getting the player to identify with the main characters and their fears. The four main characters had to attempt to escape an old, haunted castle. Only one of them survived. The one that did was dependent on data the game analyzed. It would decide which of the three character’s fears you were most scared of and killed them as the game progressed, reinforcing your phobias. I wanted to do something for Shawn, since he was bored. I knew he would try to stop me from getting it for him, but I didn’t care. So I didn’t even give him a chance to object.

“Check your Steam library,” I told him.

He got through the whole game that day, and he told me he really enjoyed it. When I asked him which characters died for him, he got quiet. It was only then that I realized I probably shouldn’t have made him feel he had to play a horror game when he was already terrified of real life. I struggled with whether I should apologize or not. I may have just been reading into his reaction, and I didn’t want to assume something that he might be offended by, like that he was ultra-sensitive to being scared by a video game. After a second, though, he rattled off the character’s names and I knew that even if I should have apologized, the moment was past. I struggled with the thought though. I didn’t want him to think I was insensitive. But I also didn’t want him to think I was ridiculous and over-analyzing everything he said or didn’t say. When I thought about it like that, I realized I would rather him think I was ridiculous than insensitive. “Uhm...” I started, because I couldn’t figure out exactly how to bring it up. “I’m sorry, I just realized you probably are dealing with enough scary stuff without playing horror games... I should have gotten you something else, I just knew you wanted it...”

“It’s ok,” he sighed resignedly. “I did want it. And if I hadn’t wanted to play it, I wouldn’t have. It’s not that big a deal. Thanks for being concerned about me though. It’s sweet.” I smiled, even though I know he couldn’t see it.

It was three days after I left his house that he called me in a mess. All I could hear at first was weird static. “Hello?” I said. The static faded, I heard a deep gasp, then it resumed. Then I realized it wasn’t static: it was Shawn sobbing into the speaker. “Shawn? Are you alright? What’s wrong dude?”

He stuttered out the words between sobs. “It’s... it’s... it’s mother...”

I instantly knew what was wrong, but I tried not to think the words, I had to hope it wasn’t true. My insides felt like they were being pulled gently through a hole in my torso, and my chest felt like it was being slowly filled with heavy sand. Everything went numb. My eyes paused, staring straight ahead of me. The only clue I had that time wasn’t frozen were Shawn’s sobs still echoing in my ears. She was sick. I had to ask though, irrationally. I didn’t want to say anything lest by assuming she was sick I somehow made it true. “Is she... is she sick?”

He just kept sobbing, but then he managed to force out the words in a guttural stop. “She- she had it.”

The sand in my chest slowly burned against my ribs. I tried to breathe, but my voice came out tiny. “Had?”

At that word Shawn broke down again, crying even harder than before. I heard long moans, and I wanted with every part of me to be there, so I could hold him. And so he could hold me, too. My eyes were filling with tears, and I could feel that I wasn’t far from breaking down as well. After several long minutes of sitting on my living room couch, listening to my boyfriend crying in my ear over his dead mother, and feeling emotionally desolated because Mrs. Wilmond,

one of the sweetest people I'd ever known, even to this day, was dead, and feeling even worse because I was useless and couldn't be there to comfort one of the few people who was devastated even worse by her death, my boyfriend and the person I was supposed to be looking out for most in this world, Shawn finally spoke up again. He took a deep breath, and managed to get all of the words out at once before breaking down again. "She killed herself."

I didn't understand. I thought I misheard the words, at first. I thought he had misspoken. What he said made no sense. "What?"

He repeated it. He explained it to me, over the course of the next ten minutes. He got out words one at a time, between gasps and sobs, and sometimes pausing to just cry for minutes. I could see his beautiful amber face with tears running down it, his body shaking with sobs, rocking back on forth on his bed. He explained what happened. They were running low on food. They needed to go to the grocery store. Shawn's mother was always the one who got food, and she insisted she should go, because she could get everything fastest. Shawn's father was unhappy, but had finally given in. Half an hour later, Shawn and his father got a very long call from her. She said she had found several lumps on her arms, and her throat was becoming swollen and it was hard to breathe. She knew that was the first symptom of the disease. She also knew that the presentation was unique. It couldn't be anything else. She had CRID. She had looked it up on her phone to make sure, and she had called the hospital. Shawn said he remembered her stern, loving voice being the same as ever. She told them she couldn't return to them, because she didn't want to infect them, and she didn't get anyone else sick. He told me she broke down crying at that point, and started apologizing. His father kept yelling no, pleading with her not to. But she said she had no choice. She said she didn't want to die that way, with the disease choking her like

some invisible monster, and that there was no point going anywhere for treatment, since there was none. And she said she didn't want to infect anyone else, especially not Shawn or his father.

So she drove into a river.

Shawn said that she told them she loved them a hundred times, and that she was telling them she loved them right up until the phone went to static in the water.

I didn't know what to say. I've never been able to know the right thing to say, but there was no moment in my life that I was ever more aware of, and more crippled by, that fact. I couldn't say anything to comfort Shawn, and he needed me to comfort him. So when he begged me to come over and hold him, I did the only thing I could do: I drove to his house so I could comfort him in my arms. It was the only thing I could do for him, and I was going to do it.

I picked up some food on the way over, I don't remember what. I just remembered they needed it, because that was why Mrs. Wilmond left the house in the first place. It was a long drive, and I almost got in an accident more than once. I was a wreck, and to make it worse, a lot of other drivers on the road were impaired. I spent most of the drive trying to figure out what I should say to Shawn. I tried to think about what he would say, and what I should say in response. Iterations of what I could say were created and scrapped hundreds of times. I almost stopped and turned the car around, because I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to say what Shawn needed to hear. But I made it to their house.

I don't claim to remember well what happened after I got out of the car, because of what happened. I lost consciousness twice during the whole ordeal, and that hobbles my memory. I think I remember walking up the porch's stairs and knocking on the door. I think I remember Shawn opening the door when I knocked, and I do remember pretty distinctly a feeling of horror when I saw the look on Mr. Wilmond's muzzle when he saw me. He walked in from the

bedroom, tears, matting the fur beneath his eyes. When he saw me, the look on face turned to terror, then rage. I remember the crunching sound the plastic boxes in the groceries made when I dropped them on the steps; Mr. Wilmond had charged me and I dropped them, turned around, and ran. I didn't know why, but I knew I was in danger. In the few seconds I had before I was tackled to the ground, I couldn't figure out why he was chasing me. I heard Shawn yell, "Dad! No!"

And then I don't remember much. I think I remember him yelling, "I told you not to come back!" I think I remember his brown-black face against the lightly-cloudy blue sky; the gold eyes, with the whites of them wet and torn red by veins. The dark mane, disheveled. The mouth, open in a heart-broken roar. The fist, raised above his head, coming down. Pain. I have those images, and they feel detailed, but I'm not sure how many are imagined. It all feels too clear to be real. I feel like I would have closed my eyes when he raised his fist. But I can't remember doing so. All I remember for certain is the pain.

I'm not sure how many times Shawn's father hit me. I remember having two black eyes, a tooth lost, my muzzle feeling broken, and my cheeks feeling fractured. Moving my face was painful. I didn't get why my face was wet, at first, and then I realized it was blood. Shawn told me it was only after a few seconds that he grabbed his father's fist and tried to restrain him. He pulled him off of me, and they collapsed together, Shawn sobbing.

His father spoke, crying incoherently, "I told you not to come back, Dane, I told you not to come back. Why did you come back? Shawn, get away from him, I can't lose you too."

Shawn started crying again, too. "Dad, I need him, it doesn't matter."

Shawn's father stood up and pushed him aside. He got up, and dragged me by my shirt and arm to my car. I tried to walk with him, but I was too disoriented. My feet just stumbled

against the gravel of the driveway. “You have to leave, go away Dane, I’m sorry.” After placing me in the driver’s seat, he grabbed me and forced me to look him in the eye. I looked at him through swollen lids. “And Dane,” he said, his voice despair tinged with rage, “if you got my son sick, I will kill you.”

I saw Shawn’s paw appear on his father’s shoulder. “Dad...” he said.

“I’m sorry son, I can’t lose you too, I’m sorry.”

He spoke again, his body obscured behind his father’s. “Dad...”

Then he turned his father towards him. And we could both clearly see, on his outstretched arm, several lumps. “It doesn’t matter dad... I’m already sick. And I want him here.” His voice broke on the last words, and he started crying again. Then his father, with a look of horror and shock all over his muzzle, hugged him and started crying too. I passed out.

The next thing I remember was waking up on the couch to Shawn’s face peering into mine. He had a chair pulled up next to me. He was dabbing a wet paper towel over my face, cleaning up the blood. Each touch stung. “Shawn...” I started.

“Shh... it’s going to be ok. It’s not bad.”

I struggled upright. “That’s what I should be telling you.”

He paused and looked away. “Except you’d be lying.”

“Shawn, that’s not true. It’s going to be alright.”

“No, it won’t be. And it’s not. Dad just went into the bedroom after we got you in here and he hasn’t come out. It’s been three hours Shawn. I haven’t even heard him crying.”

I didn’t know what to say. He continued. “I’m sorry he... I didn’t think...”

I tried to assuage him. “You couldn’t have known. I didn’t expect it either.”

“No,” he stated bitterly, “I should have known. He... he just lost mom, and I should have realized he would do anything to protect me. Especially since he thinks he failed to protect mother. But he couldn’t have done anything. I should have realized he might have done anything to stop you getting near me... I just didn’t realize he’d see you as a threat to me. I should have. And I think he hates me now too.”

“What? No, he just hates me, you’ve got nothing to do with it. He loves you.”

“Then why isn’t he out here with me when I’m gonna... when I’m.... when I’m going to die soon?”

“You’re not going to die, Shawn. And he’s probably just upset and needs space, and doesn’t want you to see him like that.”

“No... he hates me. You know why? Because what mother did? She did it to protect me. And it didn’t matter. I was already sick.”

“But you didn’t know, you couldn’t have done anything!”

“I did know. I could feel the lumps, Dane. They weren’t visible but I could feel them, and I was too scared to say anything. And then I tried stopping her when she called but she wouldn’t listen, she just kept saying she loved us... Oh, Dane.” He broke down crying again. I pulled him towards me, and cradled his beautiful head in my lap. I couldn’t find the words to say to relieve the guilt he was feeling. It wasn’t his fault, but he was blaming himself. And to make it worse, he was convincing himself that his father saw that guilt in him too, even though I was sure he didn’t. I thought for a long time about what his mother had done. She was so noble and loving. She was so unselfish, even with her life. And it was all for nothing. It was too painful to think any more about that, that she had died, alone, for no reason. It was, and still is, impossible for me to decide

if it would have changed anything if she had known. She had been sick anyway, and had died on her own terms.

After a few minutes of almost total silence, the only sound that of Shawn's quiet sobbing, I heard the door to the bedroom open. I didn't turn around. A flush of guilt rose to my muzzle over what I had done, breaking Mr. Wilmond's rule, and the pain the repercussion had caused. The flush caused my face to hurt. A tiny, defeated voice spoke out. "I love you son. I love you."

Shawn went still. After a few seconds, he buried his face deeper into my stomach and started crying again.

I'm not sure how long we sat like that; Shawn's father standing motionlessly behind us, Shawn crying into my chest, me trying to figure out some way to reconcile them. I never found the solution. Eventually, Shawn's father walked around and sat down on the couch. He pulled Shawn away from me, and comforted him in the same fashion I had. Shawn let him. I noticed small clumps of fur already falling off of Shawn's arm. Full hair loss was one of the mid-range symptoms. From what I had read, I knew that meant Shawn had a day or two left, at best.

Chapter 4:

I called my mother and told her I wouldn't be home for several days. She asked what was wrong. I remember not being able to say anything more explanatory than, "Everything." She didn't press me for more.

My injuries, though severe, were thankfully not limiting. I was able to take care of Shawn. I looked up what I could about treatment on the internet. The same phrase seemed copy-pasted

from one website to another: ‘There is no treatment for CRID, only for the symptoms. One can only make the patient comfortable.’

I called 911, local hospitals, and the CDC. They all said they were unable to assist with individual cases and that they were at maximum capacity. They said they could only intubate patients until the second stage of the disease. So I did what I could.

Shawn said he wasn’t in denial. He said he’d already gone through the stages of grief with his mother’s death; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. His own death felt like an addendum to that loss, and he had faith he’d see his mother again soon. I wasn’t so tranquil. Ever since I had heard about the disease, I’d been working through those stages. I’d only just gotten over denial when Shawn’s father entered anger, and it almost killed me. My bargains were just for other options for a happy life, for that to be possible without Shawn. All the while depression was working its numbing lethargy through the house, and eventually, all we could do was settle down, cry, and let our world end.

The first symptom was raised lesions on the arm and legs, as well as swelling of the throat. Apparently this was where the first round of fatalities usually occurred; the patient would become unable to breathe after a few hours. Intubation was the only solution. Shawn never got to that point; somehow, he kept breathing, hard, ragged breaths, but collected ones. I hoped against hope, and took it as a good sign.

It was during this time that I became concerned for his father, too. His father said nearly nothing, to me or him. He stayed by his son’s bedside, but when he left at one point to go to the bathroom, I confronted him on the way back. I was intimidated by him, even more so than usual, given that he had beaten me. But I had to ask him. In the narrow hallway, I stopped him and asked, “Are you sick too? Do you have any of the symptoms?”

He just turned his head away. “No. I wish I did.”

I didn’t understand why, but he didn’t explain. He just pushed past me and walked into his son’s room.

We sat together at Shawn’s bedside for hours. None of us slept. Shawn’s breathing was too unsteady, and Mr. Wilmond and I were too tense. My attention was only diverted from Shawn by the websites I read and the information I looked up. I tried to find anything I could, but there was frustratingly little information about the disease. Most of the search results were journals of patients and their last few days alive, abandoned by their healthy loved ones in the hospitals. Those were far too depressing to read, and were the vast majority of the links.

The next symptom was the most alarming. It still haunts my nightmares, to this day. All of Shawn’s fur fell out, including the mane he had been so proud of growing; it was more full than all the other lions in our school, even the ones older than him. He was a revolting sight. He was completely unrecognizable. My vibrant, handsome boyfriend was now a coughing lump of wrinkled, sore-covered, pink flesh, struggling with every breath. His whiskers were the only thing that didn’t fall out.

Shawn’s father didn’t even flinch at the sight. But it was I who cleaned up the fur as it fell. I couldn’t vacuum it up; I tried. Even though that would have been the easiest way to handle it, I couldn’t bear to lose any part of him to that incessant, loud, hungry mouth. So instead, I carefully picked it up and bagged it in a giant trash bag. It didn’t feel fitting. The golden hair was a treasure, the creation of an ephemeral being of great beauty that would soon be gone. It was not trash. But I had nothing else to put it in, and I wasn’t going to spend long away from his bedside looking for an alternative. When I had cleaned it all up, I lay the bag down beside his bed, not far from the pile of dirty clothes.

During the course of the disease, I did my best to make sure Shawn stayed hydrated. He would barely drink. I knew better than to try and feed him, but I insisted he drink water frequently. Sometime several hours into the first night, I realized Shawn wasn't the only one I needed to take care of.

I started making sure Mr. Wilmond was alright, too. I realized he hadn't drunk anything in hours, and I made him drink and eat. He resisted at first, but I forced him. I'm still not sure how I got up the courage to tell him what to do, after what had happened. But he knew he needed to take care of himself. I think he was attempting to punish himself. Or perhaps he thought he might fast, for forgiveness. He did spend a lot of time holding his well-worn, brown leather Bible and praying. When he did eat, he did so briefly, and outside of the room. He would be back maintaining his vigil in a minute.

I felt useless. I was doing so little. My insistence on getting Shawn to drink regularly sprung from that. It felt terrible, not only being unable to do anything to help, but also not being able to enjoy what I knew would be my last few days with Shawn. We didn't talk. He couldn't; he was fighting to stop the disease from closing his throat. We didn't cuddle, or play video games either. I was angry. I felt robbed, lied to. He was already dead. As I sat there, I thought about how, though I couldn't have known at the time, my swim with Shawn was the last time I would enjoy being with him. This being with him, watching over him, it was just a formality. I was there for him, so he wouldn't be alone while he died. But I, sitting there, was already alone.

The third symptom would have been the most scary had I not been expecting it. Sometime around seven the next morning, he began coughing up blood. This symptom was why intubation was only a stop-gap measure. When the patient hit this stage, the tube would have to be removed, and they would usually choke on their own blood as their lungs filled with fluid.

Patients who could survive without a breathing tube usually died from blood loss a few hours into these symptoms. Patients couldn't get a blood transfusion, you see, because the sores that covered their body by this point made it almost impossible to safely locate a vein. Puncturing these sores, according to the CDC's website, was 'almost guaranteed to cause septic shock; bacteria festering in these lesions are released into the blood stream and overwhelm the major organs of the body, causing multiple system failure.' Or something along those lines.

Shawn coughed up a startling amount of blood over the next seven hours. A few hours in, I noticed that his skin had started changing color. It ceased to be reddish-pink, and became pale, almost sand-colored instead. There was no way he could keep bleeding at the rate he was. I felt helpless, watching my boyfriend fall apart. First, from the outside, with his fur falling out, then from the inside, with his life bleeding out through his mouth.

But then it stopped. It was astonishing. He went from coughing blood every other breath to only once in four, then infrequently, then not all. He kept coughing, but it was no longer crimson-colored sputum. I forced him to drink. He still wouldn't eat. By that point, it had been a little over 24 hours since he became symptomatic. He hadn't eaten since then, and given the state he was in, I felt he needed to. I looked up all sorts of nutrition information about what to feed patients with heavy blood loss. The internet was unhelpful, so I crushed some vitamins and pecans into applesauce and spoon fed it to him slowly. I figured that would have a lot of protein and vitamins and iron. I thanked the mandatory health class our school had for that knowledge. He threw the mix up twice. "Am I that bad a cook?" I teased, but my only response was silence. After a few hours of slow progress, he managed to keep some down.

By that point, there was nothing else to do but wait for the next symptom. Patients rarely got this far. The sites I looked at had mixed reports of what would happen next; that's how rare it was. So we sat. Shawn's father held his left paw, while I held his right.

The final symptom's arrival was heralded by Shawn screaming. I remember seeing the alarm clock on Shawn's bedside table showing 11:59 and then changing to 12:00, and almost immediately after that happened his scream jolting us awake. Looking back, it couldn't have been exactly midnight when it happened; I was probably just tired.

His father was alarmed. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He curled up into a ball. Every part of him was clenched up, and tears were seeping out of his eyes. "Everything hurts," he whimpered through clenched teeth. "Everything just slowly started to ache then burn and then hurt so bad. Oh, god, it hurts."

Mr. Wilmond's eyes were filled with concern and rage. I could see him wishing for anything to be able to help his son. But he couldn't. The site I had read that reported this as the final symptom before death or recovery stated this was 'likely due to pressure on the spinal cord from lesions growing on the neck and back.' There had even been a photo of some cat, the species impossible to identify because of the hair loss, the form bleached from flash just like a picture in a science textbook, curled in the same position Shawn was in.

Mr. Wilmond and I sat helpless like that for eight hours. The only sound was Shawn's whimpering, punctuated occasionally by coughs or sharp whines. It was an impossibly long time. We both expected at any moment for Shawn to stop breathing and his body to yield. And at 7:39 that morning, he went limp.

Chapter 5:

Shawn's father never came down with the disease. Later, researchers in Europe learned a lot about the disease, and that explained what had happened. The disease was spread through person-to-person contact. By the time cats were becoming sick in Homville, the whole town had been infected and were carriers. Shawn's father had likely picked up the disease from his co-workers who manned the quarantine barriers. It was possible to become a carrier without getting sick. A 'typhoid Mary,' it was called. He had spread it to his wife and son.

Researchers in Europe managed to contain the spread of the disease and even come up with a vaccination that drastically reduced the lethality. France was the leading country, in that regard. The scientists there were responsible for saving about half of Europe's feline population. The fatality rate was still alarmingly high, however, something like forty-six percent.

The CDC was subject to a large congressional inquiry and overhaul, after pressure from the World Health Organization and the global community. There were some documents leaked that showed CRID relatively low on their priority list, and the primary research on mostly trying to figure out if it could mutate to cause symptoms in other species. The final verdict on that was no. The research is still ongoing as to why it only caused symptoms in felines.

The feline population in the United States was decimated. It became rare to see a cat of any kind on the streets. In school, survivors were shunned at first, then ridiculed and bullied. I almost got expelled from school after beating up one too many fuckheads who did so.

Shawn's hair regrew, much to my relief. As much as I hate to say it, I don't think I could have stayed with him on a physical level if it hadn't. I probably would have stayed with him even if it hadn't regrown, though, because the one thing I learned was that Shawn is worth so

much to me. Not just him physically, but the person he is. I don't deserve him. But I need him. And I'm so thankful I have him.

I'm glad his father has him, too. I'm pretty sure that if Shawn hadn't survived, his father wouldn't have either. I think his father would have just given up on life. And his mother survived through Shawn, too. Ever since that experience, he's been so giving. He always was, but now even more so. He doesn't care about physical possessions anymore, I think because of how thankful he is for just being alive. He now has this ferocious hold on life and he can just... tell, with some sort of sixth sense, what people want. And he gives it to them. It really reminds me of her. He's got that same appraising smile, the same way of figuring out what your weakness is so he can shore it up.

I don't know why he stays with me. He's so amazing, in so many ways, and I'm just so average. I can never give the same way he does. Even though my family is well-off, I just don't have as much as he does. I won't lie: it makes me jealous sometimes.

I spent a lot of time, after that, at Shawn's house. I was rarely explicitly invited over, but the house felt empty even when I was there. I knew it must have been soul-crushingly vacant when it just the two of them. I tried to fill the gap. Mr. Wilmond became much more friendly with me, after that. I drew them into my family, as well. The two years between Shawn's recovery and our going to college were filled with evenings at my house, Shawn and his father eating with us.

Shawn decided to go to college nearby, because he felt he would need to be near his father. I asked him if he felt restrained by his father's need. He shrugged, and said, "I need him too." I felt like an ass.

I wanted to go the same college Shawn did. My parents weren't happy about that. They felt I had better educational opportunities elsewhere. But I didn't care. Becoming a successful businessman like my father didn't matter to me. Shawn was all that mattered to me. And everything I read said that just about any degree is as good as another.

So far, we've made it two years into college. Shawn says he feels lonely here in the States. I don't think there's another lion in our college. There may not even be any more left in our state. He's talked about moving somewhere in Europe after graduating, possibly with his father, too. He's conflicted though. He's majoring in epidemiology. It makes sense. It's a math-related field, and he's good with numbers. What he's conflicted about is the fact he wants to work at the CDC, to make sure what happened to him, his family, and the other cats here in America doesn't happen to anyone else.

I'm not sure what the future holds for us. I think Shawn and I have made it through the worst of it, but I guess only time will tell. The infection still lingers in all of us; the actual virus itself as well as the memory. The doctors still don't have an explanation as to how Shawn survived, beyond him being a fit young adult. Nightmares still haunt me like a disease. I keep waking up with throat-closing fear and tears in my eyes, from dreams where my reality is that Shawn actually died. Every time, I roll over, feel him next to me, and sit there for several minutes trying to shake the thought from my mind and go back to sleep. I've never told him about the dreams. In these days after 'The Cat Plague,' as it is still called, I'm not quite sure how to broach the subject with Shawn. Luckily, I don't have to. His presence beside me is all the reassurance I need.