

There it was, just at the edge of his vision. Shapes of varying sizes approached his destination on the horizon, slowly closing in, attempting to siege and steal his salvation. The light of midday shone brightly through the frail cloud-cover, reminding Carson of how much ground he'd already covered.

Before he even knew it, Carson was sprinting. His claws dug briefly into the earth then vaulted forward with every lunge of his legs, bringing him ever closer—ever closer to the green curtain blockade that represented home. He arrived before several of the people surrounding him, many giving him queer looks as he passed by. A few asked him reason for his hurry, but he ignored them.

The brown squirrel reached forward, opened his hand, and pressed it against the monitor of the device adjacent to the green curtain. The curtain—more like the portal that it is when inspected closer, he duly noted as he stood beside it, catching his breath—swirled gently into itself with mossy currents, inside which swam static particles emanating hums and crackles.

The SS—Synchronization Server in all its overlong glory if one were to ask, never again to be referred to as such after its initial conception—was the keystone to life as he knew it, flanked on either side by a wall of brick and steel, set upon which a shell of similar constitution protecting what lay inside. Through the impossibly tall portal lay the city he so desperately wished to re-enter; his home and his job, but he could not, for it would spit him right back out onto the grassy fields if he so much as stuck a finger through. That much he'd had the displeasure of experiencing once before, tempting though it was to try again right at that moment.

Carson's attention turned tentatively back to the monitor at the behest of the low beeping sounds it now began to make, data formulating within its systems. Those transitioned into a hum like the one created by the portal into the city, then from that into an energetic whirring that toned down over the course of a second or two. Soon, the whirring of the machine twisted into a gentle feminine voice to communicate with Carson.

Overflow: Active. Please wait for your number to be called. Red text across its screen mirrored the message as a slot below spewed forth an offering in the form of a black card.

Oh, how he hated the Overflow. And he could swear he'd made it just in time, too. That explained the curious looks, anyway.

“Damn it... fine,” Carson muttered to nobody. He caught his breath, stood straight, snatched the outstretched card and turned away, burying it in some pocket. Red light tracing the number twenty-seven along its face began to dim, briefly renewing its glow at the faintest touch. A small number, sure, but it wasn't as if the numbers went down on a person-by-person basis. No, nothing so straightforward.

Were it not for the Origin's Eve celebration occurring that very night, it would be little more than an inconvenience that he could not return home—albeit a grating, grinding one, but merely an inconvenience nonetheless. Tonight, however, marked the time many years ago when the SS was first crafted, and the day when society shifted in a permanent, united light. The three days of holiday represented the same three of tireless construction, and the festivities inside paralleled its grand opening.

And just when the squirrel thought he could not be more disgruntled, he found himself overpowered by a dose of ironic seasoning—the same thing that was being celebrated prevented him from celebrating it. So would go the fireworks blasting through the sky above and the whizz of children at play below,

while Carson would simply watch, relax, and appreciate the things that were. How he missed that already.

All around him stood others in a situation similar to his. Bears, wolves, foxes, rabbits, raccoons; the whole shebang, all sorts of people of notably varied shapes and sizes; a game of duck-duck-goose being played by a little group of mice and their mother; others busying themselves in wait for the garlic-seasoned bread on platters served by waiters and waitresses, those generally of the taller species. All nothing more than an assortment of candies in a box for the mechanized city-wards to choose from at their own leisure. Per the norm they took their careful time, picking one to sweeten up at random at most every hour.

It was then that Carson noticed a cat standing about fifteen feet away from him. He wouldn't care or notice her in particular, especially at such a distance, but her size is what unnerved him. No certainty regarding what kind, though; surely some less docile heritage, some kind of big cat, or so he had to guess given her height. He suspected his ears could brush just below her ankles, give or take some amount of measurement. Now if she were a calico or a tabby or some other cat, he was certain he could reach her knees at the very least—but that was not so, and she clearly had the blood of some larger species.

It wasn't terribly often he left home—likely for fear of being in the same position he now found himself in—so he was unaccustomed to such things as fifty-foot tall cats, true to reality as they were. Too true, in fact; he was a squirrel, and squirrels would always be so much smaller than a cat or a dog; *most species, really*, he thought with disdain.

Then again, perhaps it was he who had caught *her* attention, not the other way around.

“Just got back from holiday?” The giantess was slate-furred and blue-eyed, donning a pair of shorts and a plain white top, attire suiting for the summer warmth. Leaning nonchalantly with her elbow against one of the tallest trees in the meadow, it frankly surprised Carson that she remained supported; though perhaps she wasn't pressing very hard against it at all. Perhaps it was for show.

“Yeah... I thought I could get here before the Overflow went up,” Carson replied, returning to bored loitering.

“Cant win 'em all. Not that many people really do—you couldn't have picked worse timing. The closest to the best is the worst in this case, since the SS filled up a bit ago. Around an hour if I remember correctly.”

“Well, thanks. I guess.” Carson held back a sigh.

“I'm Robin. You?”

Carson found himself a little jarred at Robin's friendliness—and more than a bit averse to it as well. But perhaps it was his aversion to *giant cats* that was speaking. However, he realized that a conversation was starting up, and that it would be impolite to remain so far from her. He walked forward to meet her; albeit at her paws, where in his cynicism he figured she would probably rather have him anyway. Yes, before her, showing oh-so-deserved respect to a larger and higher being.

“I'm Carson.” He was being looked at curiously, and possibly expectantly, by the towering feline. “It's

just... I have a couple days off and when I come back I'm just dumped out here for God-knows-how-long. It really sucks, you know? I hate this system—what's preventing me from just going in? A stupid machine, that's what.”

The squirrel's rant ended, Robin took a moment to absorb his words. It was clear she'd seen the same reaction time and time again, and didn't seem terribly sympathetic.

“Yeah... honestly, I know a lot of people don't like waiting out here, but I don't mind it at all. I've been thinking I'm the only one that's really taken a step back and realized how nice it is.”

Carson raised an eyebrow briefly, but then chuckled as if realizing he'd been nearly fooled. “Ha, had me for a second. You gotta work on your sarcasm a little.”

Robin stood straighter, as if she somehow took that as a challenge. “Hey, I'm not kidding, I honestly think it goes way under-appreciated—”

“Well in that case, I think you just *over*-appreciate it,” Carson interrupted without a beat. “There's nothing fun about standing in a queue just to go home.”

It was then that a voice echoed behind him to interrupt them both, from a monitor similar to the one he had used, albeit much bigger. *Seventy-six may enter. Seventy-six may enter.* It was not long before a tiger, who Carson noted was even bigger than Robin, skipped merrily to the monitor, redeemed his card by inserting it back into the slot from whence it came—acknowledged by a jolly hum of the machine, which Carson saw as a roundabout way of telling everybody else in the immediate vicinity to screw off—and entered the city.

The interruption did not last long, however. “There is when you look at it the right way,” Robin returned smartly. “I'll call that my secret since nobody else seems to get it. Not you, either.” It was strange to Carson that, instead of simply dropping the subject and ignoring him, she opted to return his attitude in kind.

The squirrel replied with an anxious flick of his bushy tail, “Oh really?”

“Hmm...” Robin took to thought, leaning slightly more on the tree. Carson could swear he heard a pained creak of its bark. Suddenly, as if remembering something, she continued: “Okay, why do you think you hate the Overflow?”

Carson stared on, befuddled, and slightly put off by the placement of the word 'think'. “What kind of question is that?”

“My dad used to tell me, 'Forcing someone to justify their ignorance is the best way to get rid of it,’” she replied with a purr.

“Oh, I see how it is. You call it ignorance.” The squirrel fixed his collar in irritation, though couldn't prevent a smirk. “Well, fine. I just call it being normal.”

“I'd agree with you that waiting in line for a bit is horrible, but then we'd both be wrong.” She laughed at herself before Carson could—though going by her current judgment, she knew he probably would not to begin with.

“May I ask why you see this as any of your concern, anyway? Who are you?”

That seemed to cheer her up somewhat, evidenced by a new gleeful light in her eyes. Carson was confused, but he wasn't about to walk away, either. The serpentine blue-grey tail skulked and slithered in the squirrel's peripheral vision as if waiting for a proper time to strike.

“I'm just a simple girl with a simple thought. One as simple as thinking you might be as open-minded as I am.” She paused to smile warmly. “I don't bring up the subject to *everybody*; it's not like I'm some kind of preacher or whatever, but I get a feeling... one like, I guess, you aren't *too* ignorant of a person. I'm not wrong, am I?”

It struck Carson that he was quite cornered. With a sigh that he did not bother restraining this time, he nodded and spoke uncertainly, “Maybe not.”

Robin reached and hovered a hand over the squirrel, leaving him to cringe briefly, pinching him between thumb and finger. She took care with her claws, noting Carson's rampant insecurity, though did not bother to retract them. He refused to show it, but the erratic shifting of his head told her everything. Not that she could blame him, of course. Being so much smaller was one thing, but when it came to the phrase “mouse before a cat” the situation hit the notes quite close to literally. After a midair examination, she crossed her legs and gently planted him on her knee, musing at how it was probably more like a plateau to the squirrel.

“God, d-don't pick me up like that, I hate it.” Carson shuddered tersely, then stood straight after getting proper footing on the new ground—ground of the rarely-walked furry, living sort. “And there's another reason I'd rather be inside right now, it's that out here, sizes aren't synced properly.”

“No such thing as 'proper' syncing when this is how big I really am, and how small you really are. It's what's *inside* the city that's artificial. Besides, I'm careful, aren't I?”

“I'm careful' is what every drunk driver ever says. And just like how there are regulations with how far you can drive per milliliter of alcohol, there are so many reasons for the size-syncing. Accidents happen.”

“Huh,” Robin exhaled. Not a lot of people would readily demonstrate their knowledge of the city and how its laws worked. Not the specifics, anyway. “Sounds like you're smarter than I gave you credit for. Though I can't help but think you're missing a big piece of the puzzle.”

“And what would that be, dare I ask?” Carson asked while tapping a paw, an action that went unnoticed by the behemoth.

Robin hummed calmly. “Think of why it is that the SS was built to begin with. That's one impressive piece of technology—the entrance to the city puts you inside a 'server' where everybody is on the same page, size and all. There are multiple servers for the same place, each one identical to the others in about every way. When they take in too many people at once, or when there are just too many people in them, or if the servers are, say, unstable; stuff like that is when the Overflow kicks in and regulates it all. All the Overflow is is simply the lack of servers like that. The real world. What I'm saying is that for all the work and time it must've taken to make it, I dunno how important it was.”

“Well... yeah, but it'd be hard for the whole system to work without those servers, wouldn't it?”

Robin looked quite prepared to answer such an assertion. “Everyone says that the size-sync is just part of living perfectly, that it's the only way the servers and the Overflow will work—but really, with people like me running around in the same places as people like you, there's no way that's just it.” Robin brushed back a lock of hair with a snoot. “People were scared. They didn't want any fifty-foot cats hanging out with two-inch squirrels, especially inside city borders. I bet they thought stuff like that could only lead to disaster. Maybe it did before, I don't know.”

To Carson's surprise there was a halt, wherein Robin let her eyes grow just a little wider as she thought. Shortly contradicting her normal demeanor with a hushed voice, she spoke again: “You aren't *that* worried about me accidentally killing you, are you?”

“Well, you can start convincing me by putting away your claws. And something tells me you wouldn't mind horribly if it actually did happen.” Robin sheathed her natural death-weapons at his whim, though tried to be inconspicuous about it. Carson still caught the motion. “By the way, that's coming from me. I'm not the voice of the people really, so I dunno what the real reason was either. I just don't like being skewered is all.”

A bit of glee returned to Robin's soft gaze. “Well, that's just silly! Of course I'd mind. And don't tell me you aren't the 'voice of the people', because damn if you don't charge the issue of first-world problems. Personally, I think it was just a matter of 'equality' or what they thought would achieve it.”

“Ah, you've simply smashed my uncertainty,” the squirrel said rolling his eyes, “Now can you put me down?”

“Ah... let me think about it...” she trailed off playfully, “Sure. I've had my fun.” She then complied without ceremony. “What are you gonna do down there anyway, keep waiting for your turn?”

“No more enthusiastically than I was five minutes ago...” The squirrel brushed himself off when the grip around him released and he set to the ground, almost immediately restoring composure whilst standing on familiar turf. “Man, screw this.”

Robin cocked her head at him, gaze flat. “Well if it's all that bad, consensual euthanasia is perfectly legal now.”

“I don't think that's the sort of thing you should be joking about,” Carson sighed. “Besides, I'm not saying my life sucks, cut me some slack.”

The cat took to laying back down upon the meadow. “Hey, just lighten up is all I'm telling you. Stiff as a pile of bricks.”

Really? Because she was turning him to *jelly*.

The soft crinkle of grass alerted Carson to a new assailant. Just a few steps more and a biting itch at the back of his head foresaw a rather unfortunate end. Thankfully, making the rounds, this waiter wasn't new enough to make such an easy mistake as stepping on innocents, eyes scanning the ground thoroughly before speaking. The dingo was turned out, easily identified among the rest of the rabble, and all the more noticeable due to his considerable size.

“Afternoon, sir. Out here we offer water, either flavored or—” the monolithic dingo started before being interrupted by an anxious Carson.

“No thank you,” he said quickly and dryly.

“I’d love some,” Robin interjected, waving a hand, the fingers of which lazily curled. “Strawberry if you’ve got it.”

“Certainly, ma’am.” The dingo nodded at her, turned away, and marched mechanically to the outer wall—ironically enough, Carson noted, the waiters were one of the few *living* things attending the Overflow, though perhaps their dull demeanor was questioning of that—phasing through the green barrier without issue. Carson felt just a twinge of jealousy, and the imaginary scent of unlit fireworks.

“See? It’s not all bad. Free drinks, babe,” Robin quipped.

Carson didn’t so much as tear his eyes from the portal. “You know, I might consider it if they had something ten times harder.”

“I think I’ve been desensitized. How long have we been out here again?”

“Uh... hm.” Robin nonchalantly sipped from her glass of strawberry-tinged water, legs stretched forth as she sat with her back against the tree. Then she simply shrugged.

Carson glanced at her as she took another sip of the drink, remembering the dingo when he returned to deliver it. That time, it was hard to tell if he had even noticed who was sitting beside her, or if he cared at all. It was like he had it ingrained in his mind where the squirrel was and so wouldn’t need to check again. Strange, and such a strangeness that overpowered any will he could have had to accept any of what they served.

“Hah! How rude of me.” Robin’s sudden outburst tore apart Carson’s thoughts without mercy. “Here we’ve been, sitting and chatting and arguing, and I haven’t even asked about you yet. If that’s okay, I mean.”

“What’s there to know?” Carson’s pointed ears fell flatter than his tone. “I’m a squirrel, I live on 2nd Street, I’m just a normal guy talking to a fifty-foot cat who probably has a lot more to say about her life than I do about mine—anything else?”

Robin scoffed audibly and let her shoulders slump, as if to her the answer was obvious. “Job maybe? What do you do?”

“Job? I’m an editor—*damn it!*” Carson’s eyes went wide in the brief moment they remained open before he shut them in a fit of anger. He suddenly pulled out his card, looking as though he’d like nothing more than to snap it in two. In fact, he tried, but the number twenty-seven flashed twice mockingly in his face when his meager might proved unworthy. “I’m gonna get fired!”

While it was true that the system allowed for potential employees to apply and volunteer service—

much like an internship of days past—tardiness was met with exact punishment. Carson had already discovered the hard way (the same way he had discovered many things, he had to grudgingly admit) that even a day gone by without preemptive notice meant the loss of work.

Robin twinged her lower lip a little, though whether in dramatic concern or mockery Carson could not decipher. “Ooh... actually, I totally forgot about how that worked.” Though Robin's words would be concerned in the mouth of any other, that of Robin uttered them quite nonchalantly. “I'm sorry.”

“Yeah.” he sighed. “But now at least you get what I mean about the Overflow being so crappy.”

“Hah! Nice try, but getting re-employed is the second-easiest thing in the world next to getting employed for the first time. You just don't get paid for that first week, then everything's back to normal.”

“But I *like* getting paid for doing my job!”

For the umpteenth time, Robin's shoulders rose up in a shrug. “Oh well.”

“You'd think that for something called the 'Synchronization Server' there'd be a bit more communication in that regard... you know, say 'Oh hey, you were stuck in the Overflow with a giant cat for a day or two, let's just clean the files and you're good to go' maybe. Something like that.”

“And you act like hanging with me is such a bad thing.” Robin finished off the contents of her drink, held the glass receptacle out above the squirrel, and shook it patronizingly. “You really should try this, you know.”

“Oh, please... one thing after another.” Carson swept a paw over the entirety of his face, noting the distinct lack of anything conjured on his fingers. “Give this argument a ball of yarn and I'd like to see where it ends up. All over the floor, maybe? Guess it wouldn't be too different from where it is now.”

Robin set her glass down and crossed her arms. “Excuse me! See, I could make a comeback involving the fact that most of the trees out here are oaks,” she smartly jabbed an elbow against the tree she was leaning against, “And you're a whiny little squirrel who's too picky to eat anything they're serving here, but I don't think I will.”

“You're kidding. That's just too convenient, isn't it?”

“Hey man, you wanted to bring stereotypes into this.” That she began purring told Carson she wasn't in the least bit offended. “See, we're just made for each other, aren't we?”

“If we are, then God is one cruel artisan.”

“Still need some convincing?”

“If you think so.”

“I mean about the Overflow.”

“Have at.”

“Will you listen this time?”

Then, a pause. “I guess.”

Robin nodded. “Walk with me then. I've got a couple things to show you” The cat reached a hand out, prompting Carson to reluctantly climb on it. Cupping him gently, she placed him atop her shoulder and began walking in the direction of the forest around the edge of the field. It was the same forest he traveled through in arriving at city borders.

Robin ducked and fit inside the thicket, proving to the brown squirrel that he had somehow overestimated her height. She looked around—fondly, as it became clear—with slow swivels of the neck, where Carson found himself contending for territory with a soft curtain of hair, at all the sights; the leaves, the grass, but the apparent lack of people most essentially. After sweeping every clearing she passed through, she eventually settled upon one she must have found suitable, or at least such was Carson's guess based on the content hum she emitted. Suddenly, he was taken back into her grasp, eliciting a quick squeak, before being put back onto ground level.

The cat sat cross-legged and inhaled deeply. “This is the awesome part. You said you wanted a change of scenery, so here it is. Nobody goes that far from the SS—when their number goes up, most people wanna get back in as soon as the card goes off. So I get most of here alone. It's pretty, isn't it?”

Carson was indeed taking in the sights; shafts of light poured down through the leafy ceiling of the forest, creating a juxtaposition of light and shadow, intertwining yet separate. There was a very gentle gale, just enough to cause a rustling in the leaves, and with its passing left a ripple in the fur of his cheeks. With the addition of the warmth cast by the light and the solace one can find in silence, Carson would have admitted she was right—leastwise if it were not for his distraction, for not all the sights that intrigued him were quite related to the scenery. The sunbeams trickling through the leaves above spilled over Robin's body, bringing some kind of... peace to his mind, at least for a moment. There was a natural, ethereal beauty of sorts in the slate cat he could truly appreciate now. Too absorbed by what he saw rather than what he heard, he merely nodded.

“You get what I mean about the Overflow not being so bad?” she asked again, unwary of Carson's gawking.

That snapped Carson out but good. “W-wait, I never said that!”

The cat sighed but then smirked, leaving Carson to wonder only briefly why. “Think about this, then.” Robin reached forth and patted his head as a sister would to a little brother, forcing a growl that she only chuckled at. “What are you *really* missing? You've got your books and your computer. How badly do you want to use them right now?”

“That's not fair! It's a matter of principle—I'm not at home, and I want to be at home.” Carson motioned all around with his arms. “This isn't home.”

“I thought I was being pretty fair though. What makes it not like home? Seriously.” She paused, waited for an answer that did not come, then continued: “Times like these, you have to ask yourself what the cost of a perfect society really is.”

“Oh, sure, must be easy for you to say. And how long have you been out here?”

“Two days, kiddo,” Robin mewled knowingly, pulling off a couple leaves from above as trophies. “It’s not that hard to deal with. Wanna know my secret?”

“Well, let’s start with the question of which one,” Carson snarked, nostrils flaring.

Robin raised an eyebrow. “I can’t help but feel like you’re insulting me. Ah well. Listen, I just kick back here and wait for my time to come up. They serve food. I talk to people. The grass makes a good bed, believe it or not.” The cat let her body fall upon the face of the meadow, resting on her back. “Loosen up your hard ass and you might actually enjoy something, God forbid.”

“H-hey, that’s not necessary!” Carson said defensively. The feline shut her eyes and giggled, spreading her arms outward along the ground. “I mean I don’t know about you, although I guess I do now, but I don’t really want to sleep on grass. At all.”

“Well, don’t you live a sad sham of a life? Think for a few minutes about how bad you really have it, then come back. I’ll be here a while.” She brought her left knee closer to her body and crossed with her other leg, dangling a paw carelessly.

There passed a few moments of rested silence, wherein Carson vainly waited for Robin to continue her piece. For an odd reason he could not bring himself to answer, he found a sort of apprehension growing in response to her silence.

“What do you mean?” he at last inquired.

“I mean I’ve said my share. You don’t have to stick around and I’m not gonna make you. You’re a stubborn little guy, but you’re not an idiot—in fact, you’re pretty smart. I can dig that, I can. But stubborn doesn’t mean stupid; stubborn just means stubborn.” Evidently finished, she shut her eyes in a lull, conjuring the image of a napping nymph of the forest.

From the way she spoke, it seemed like she *wanted* to stay out here. It even seemed possible she might delay her turn to leave the Overflow, or had done it before; actually, where was her card? It seemed there was more to this girl than simply accepting the ways of things; she might embrace them with open arms.

Robin was a curious individual indeed—but no less than the very incarnation of an unbound spirit, the most unchained and carefree person Carson had met in his entire life.

After a bit of hesitation, Carson shrugged and turned away. The last thing he knew right now was just what he wanted to do... so, what better thing than to take Robin’s advice? Perhaps he’d rid himself of her presence for a bit.

The squirrel shuddered, despite her apparent harmlessness. There would never be a way around the anxiousness rodents felt near cats, it seemed.

Carson found himself treading paths from clearing to clearing, sometimes lingering in the void between each. Trees imposed, mighty and towering, no matter where he looked; and indeed, much to his chagrin, he couldn’t readily point out one that wasn’t an oak.

Somehow, he found he could not get lost no matter how hard he tried—he could easily trace the way back to where Robin was resting at a whim for some reason—but perhaps that wasn't a good thing.

“Pheh.” Why was he confused? He'd made it firmly clear that he was right. The Overflow had no redeeming qualities, and no wide-eyed idealist would convince him otherwise. And yet now here he was, trying harder than he should to reassure himself, and attempting to overpower a looming weight.

It was a weight he'd felt far too often, and one he only now realized he bore: the weight of loneliness.

Carson swept his new surroundings. A scent filled his nose; it was sweet and pure, utterly inviolable. He felt a content warmth from all around, though the sun had by now begun to drop from the sky. It brought him to thinking again. It struck him right then just how torn he was. He wanted to go home, but the very thought of going back evoked a bitterness of some kind. His tail involuntarily twitched and flung itself back and forth. Since when did he care so much?

“Damn it...I'm an asshole,” he muttered exasperatedly, as he knew the answer to his thought already.

Since he'd met Robin.

The rodent felt more like such than ever before, only dispelling his self-loathing with a new thought that, after churning and developing of its own accord, became a decision: Robin was no wide-eyed idealist. No ignorant idealist might convince him otherwise, but *she* could—no, she had already, and it was a wonder that he had refused to accept it—and perhaps she was right.

She said I'm not too ignorant... does she still believe that? He couldn't help thinking.

Carson reached into a pocket and produced his numbered card, glaring at it with contempt. It merely flashed in retaliation as it did to everything. The squirrel took a few insecure looks at the card, eyes darting from it back to the path leading back to his feline friend, knowing now something he certainly did not before.

The final blow to his dubiety came: he'd much rather remain outside in the Overflow with Robin, who had already managed to wriggle her way into companionship and more, than return to his familiar and restful hovel alone. Carson held the card high, noting it blink its lights one last time, then threw the thing onto the ground, causing it to unceremoniously break. No crackles or sparks, no electrical sounds of despair—just a crack.

At this point, he wasn't sure what he had expected from it; perhaps some city-wards to run in and arrest him, or maybe ban him from the city forever? The more he thought about the anticlimactic destruction of his card, the more imbecilic he felt. This was no life-changing decision; this was a choice he could have made at any time in his life, and it would not have affected him any differently. This was something he was doing for himself.

He cut a memorized path through the forest to meet again with Robin. He found himself hoping she kept her word about remaining in one place. Thankfully, she had. The cat opened one eye and cocked a head toward him, half-smirking as he approached, but did not speak yet.

“Well, Robin. I'm not sure how to say it after all this time, but uh... I guess you got me. Hope you don't

mind my company a little longer—” he was promptly cut off as he took a cautious seat beside the giantess, sunlight being blotted out every half-second by the repeated wave of a mammoth paw in the sky, a dance of shadows appearing and fading.

“Don't even worry about it. You can chill out here for as long as you like.”

“I think I'm willing to give it a go.” He tilted his head up and smiled, hoping she could catch it—which, as she was now looking back down at him, she could. “I'll think of a way for you to repay me.”

“Cute.”

“Problem still here, though. I'm missing out on Origin's Eve.” Carson sighed deeply. “This'll be a first.”

A series of thoughts and connections surged through Robin's quick mind, immediately informing her of a more suiting response before she could spit a less informed one. Oh, she knew something he did not—and perhaps this would be the nail in the coffin, least if she gathered her information right.

“It's funny—every year the same thing happens, and until they decide to update the server capacity, it will keep happening too. So many people leave for vacation, like you did, that when they all come back, the SS can't handle them all right away, so... you get stuff like this. Huge groups of people all waiting for their time to come up. Sometimes, even people inside get booted depending on just how many decided to go visit the beach on Origin's Eve.”

“Uh huh, yeah, that's a problem, don't you think?” He near-instantly regretted the words as he realized the fault could easily belong to the people themselves, but said nothing of it. Thankfully, Robin didn't press that point.

“Easy now, I'm not done.” This forced a cough and uncertain shake of the head from Carson, which Robin reciprocated. “Every year, the same stuff happens; can you guess what I'm going to tell you?”

Carson looked around with obvious uncertainty, to the point where Robin had trouble discerning whether he was uninterested or scared. She had to guess it was neither as he then spoke, forcing a twitch of her ears. “That it gets boycotted every year and I didn't know because I usually stay home during Origin's Eve?”

Before she answered, the cat took him at face value; but as an exaggerated smirk crept across his face she realized he'd managed, somehow, to learn how to poke fun at himself. “No! Gotta say you're nothing if not predictable,” she paused only to wink, “But seriously. So many people in the same place, used to missing out on a celebration dedicated to new tradition. Now they *plan* for being in the Overflow at this time every year.”

The squirrel's expressive eyes went narrow, then wide in realization. “They... there's stuff out here? There are people who actually do that?”

“Mhmm, yup. Every Origin's Eve, some people set aside their time and money to have a mini-celebration out here. I'm one of them.” She quickly grabbed Carson without permission, letting him slump then stand in her open palm while she stood just above the forest-cover. “In fact, the fireworks should be starting up in just a sec.”

Carson was, reasonably enough, speechless. Suddenly, soft cheering from the other edge of the forest could be heard, followed by crackles of light and thunderous sound in the sky that turned into a rain of colored sparks, dissipating mid-fall before they could pelt down upon the earth.

“Ah. And there they go. I set 'em up about twenty minutes before you arrived, actually.”

“You're really something, I gotta say.” Carson swallowed before continuing, offering a palm. “Sorry for being an ass earlier. But hey, I guess this tacks off one thing I hate about the Overflow.”

Cementing his positive judgment of the slate cat, she replied with no hostility. “No problem. This'll still be a first, just not in the way you were expecting. Like I said, you're stubborn... but hold on, let me be the first to say that arguing with you is some of the most fun I've had in a while.”

The squirrel turned to meet his captor in the eyes. “Are you insinuating something?”

Robin chuckled. “Nope, nothing.”

“Well, good.” Carson leaned coolly against the thumb of the giantess. “Okay, okay. I've tried it your way... now maybe in return you could show me your 'secret' after all.”

“Are you curious or just making fun of me, little dude?” She bared her canines in a smile.

“Heh, little of both. Think I can get it this time?”

There was a pause, then a genuine smile from the cat. “Of course I do. But hush. Let's wait for the excitement to die down.” She paused yet again, and as if to mimic it the snaps and explosions of the fireworks took a brief hiatus, but it was clear her question was important. “How long do you plan on staying?”

It was a cautious question—and a hopeful one, Carson discerned. He gave himself a mental pat on the back for his sleuthing. “Let's just say I... accidentally locked myself out for the time being.”

Robin gave a close-lipped chuckle and poked the squirrel in the stomach with her free hand, forcing a wheeze and some comment she hadn't registered. Attention between each other faded into the backs of their minds as they turned to the spectacle of the sky.

So went the fireworks blasting through the sky and the whizz of children at play below at the edge of the woods, while Carson simply watched, relaxed, and appreciated the things that were—now in the company of a friend, and with many more things to appreciate.