

A wide, fanged yawn accompanied the twirling of a crisp bagel within the brown coyote's grasp—waiting, hoping. The whistle of the Sparklight workshop would not rescue her from the dark hours of dawn, and wouldn't for a time longer, despite the fact that its inhabitants were already setting up. The faintest layers of smoke and rust—which she did not doubt being due perhaps, in some corner of the warehouse, to burning rust—lingered in the air to be smelled and noticed only when was least pleasant.

"You know you have it pretty okay when the thing you like the least about your job is waiting for it to start," Battery said with a sigh. The white kangaroo sitting nearby, however, regarded her with a snoot and a snap of her fingers.

"Let's be honest, this place is pretty much awesome. Of course... for the work itself, you can't say it isn't a bit silly," the kangaroo asserted, chipper as ever. "Watching 'em tinker the way they do, all small and neat and... picky, huh. And, uh..." she tossed a glance, maybe a double take toward the window if the coyote wasn't delusional from the constant heat, then smiled. "To be honest they, like, kinda suck at it."

"They try," the dark coyote said amidst a mouthful of bread, eying the gathering employee crowd in the expansive room just beyond her office through the window. "Silly, though? Maybe, maybe a little." She swallowed. "But not all of them can be professionals, Sienna. That's just how the system works. Plus it's a lot more efficient to shrink down, regardless of how much experience you have. That's the edge we have over other repair shops. Also why we get so many people coming and going every month."

Sienna rolled her eyes. "Mhmm. But that's pretty much what you *hate* about it, isn't it?" She cocked her head toward the window again, the precise tip of her snout meeting a tiger that Battery recognized instantly. A loitering, useless figure that inspired some petty ferocity as her eyes flared with contempt for the indolent feline. "That just about anybody can come along and take a seat...."

"Uh, well!" Battery's teeth clenched ever so slightly; the phone of her office then cried out its presence, easing her lips. "Ya roll around on the beach like an ass all day and you're bound to get covered in sand, isn't that right? Getting certain people is just..." the words seemed rehearsed from a text and not at all her own, but she spat, "'Part of the job'." No longer able to stall, she then flew from her seat and grabbed the phone from the wall behind her with almost enough reckless bounding to drop it. "Hello, Sparklight Industries—this is Allison Arter speaking, how may I help you?"

Sienna leaned back and kicked her thick paws onto the desk. "Heh, yeah, that's right. Double A, A-Dubs, Battery... nope, just Allison Arter. Isn't it funny how I'm not used to that being your real name?" Bringing a coffee mug to her lips, she shut her eyes to alleviate the dim light of early morning that otherwise pierced her. "Also funny that even *you* prefer a nickname. I think it's just Sarah and Michael that call you A-Dubs though, huh? I think I'll hop on that bandwagon."

She went ignored. "...Yes, hold on one moment please." Battery tapped a button on the receiver, dimming its light as she shot back to her workspace and shoved the kangaroo's legs off, which dropped to the ground with an audible thump and recoiled her into a forward lurch.

"Um, ow?"

“Not now!” Battery whispered harshly without making eye contact, then sifted through the documents Sienna’s legs had laid atop. She couldn’t word precisely how much she hated being referred to as a select few specimens from her earned plethora of nicknames, but the only conduit for her accusations was Sienna’s layabout antics. “Puttin’ your feet up and blabbing while I’m on the phone. Geez. Where’s my client list... there.” She admonishingly swatted the manila folder at an invisible fly that happened to flit about just before the head of a certain white kangaroo, who did not flinch at the motion. “Gotta sit back and ask who the hell calls at eight in the morning though.”

“I could answer that, but I don’t think you’d like my hypothesis,” Sienna replied, stretching an arm like an inquiring student.

Battery stopped, shrugged, then made her way back to the phone. “Well...” she put a finger to her chin. “Nope.” The button beeped again, forcing a brief scoff from the room’s other inhabitant. “Yes, thank you for waiting...”

Sienna adjusted to the new silence and hunched forward in her chair, as the voice of her partner, her second half, faded from interest. Thoughts swirled around her head like dust devils. She would describe herself as anything but conventional when it came to her approach to work—some preferred the term “unprofessional” in fact—but on the field, her eyes were fast and studious, and she knew in her deepest recesses that none of her peers would have any other as a spotter and safety manager. Nobody was as skilled and as cognizant as she was, plain and simple. She could not be substituted.

She had been replaced before, in another time, another place. The kangaroo wouldn’t let it happen again. No; she would skirt around the edges of admissibility while having the time of her life, never once relenting her position. Even if the workers didn’t look up to her as much as they literally looked up to her, she was happy where she was—and that wasn’t going to change.

The clack of a phone being shoved into its receiver then resounded. “Done?” Sienna chirped, innocently peering up.

“Yep. God.” The coyote ripped off her bandanna, allowing her rough and equally dark mane to drape, and wiped her brow, pushing up her styled bangs. She swung herself into the leather chair by her desk, allowing the wheels to roll her a few feet away before tiptoeing back.

The soft chipping of a worn, low-powered fan taunted from its perch in the high corner of her sizeable office as dim and dusty beams poured in shafts that vanished and reappeared in accordance with its rotating blades. “Some of the people you get, honestly. ‘Is my monitor’s crack gone?’ Uh, no. If it was you would be the first to know. Give us two days, lady! We said it would be two days and we just got her shipment yesterday morning. Look, I’m patient, but if she takes this up with the rest of customer service or even Mr. Redowli... I swear I’m gonna lose it. And maybe my job.”

Sienna let her eyelids fall in a lull, steepling her fingers sleepily. “Yep. I getcha.”

The steam breath of a cruiser-grade whistle suddenly sounded somewhere just outside Battery's office. "Damn, already? Sparklight's docking already?" The coyote could have sworn the Sparklight workshop was *behind* its cross-continental travel schedule. "Who's gonna be up that early?" she continued with a shake of her head. "No new employees, no new shipments, not much to work on. That's just bad business."

"Yeah... captain said he'd overestimated the distance toward the next set of coordinates," Sienna replied slowly and with a prominent laze. One arm pointed to a luminous board of blue-grey color on the far end of the room which happened to serve as a holographic schedule. At her fingertip, the words upon it seemed to project further from the screen and into the fabrics of reality with letters fizzing and crackling at their third dimension. "We're up bright and early. In addition... I've taken it upon myself to go over the employment projections this year," she paused to yawn briefly, batting an open palm against the heavy breath. "Today. I'm not sure how many we'll get, but it'll be interesting to see who's devoted enough. The rest of the month, however, should be relatively slow. We'll lose just as many as we get, give or take some applied mathematics or whatever."

Battery eyed her with some amount of tired disbelief, but then shrugged. "Guess you'd be right about that. We'll see what happens then...." The coyote put her feet up to the quiet point of hypocrisy by the kangaroo, and took to a bout of relaxation; *at least until Mr. Redowli signals for us to start doing something important*, she quipped internally. "Already can't wait till lunch," Battery muttered with a posture as low as her tone. "And Evan Helry's probably gonna meet me halfway, that'll be cool. Can't wait."

The white kangaroo snapped open a single eye, then stood to her full, somewhat daunting height of well over six feet. Revealed to be a huge woman in stature and bound by prominent physical bulk, Sienna embraced her ability to intimidate—if only to tease. "Just be sure to save some of that PMSing for the tampon, Double A."

A candid growl told of the canine's enthusiasm. Though more evened out, the coyote was no slouch in size either.

"Heh, only kidding..." The marsupial brought a hand to her head and wiped, only to be displeased with the somewhat damp results. "Also holy *shit* is it hot in here. Or am I just crazy?"

Battery opened her mouth to point out her hypocrisy of complaint, but decided against it. She'd get chewed out for killing a joke if anything. "Let's compromise—it's hot *and* you're crazy. The crazy just has nothing to do with the heat." Sienna's pout and admittance to defeat prompted the wag of Battery's tail, the motion being stifled by her chair. "We can't have temperatures below ninety eight degrees except for outside the work zones. If the fan in here was any higher, it'd get through any time someone opens the door. If you need an icepack I have a couple under my desk. Help yourself."

"Yeah, well, cool I guess, but I'm good," Sienna replied with a shake of her head. "Huh, now that I think about it I'd better get out there before someone... dies or something, I dunno. Never know with first-timers—and hell, ya get new ones every day, so no point mopin' about it!" The kangaroo quickly

excused herself but moved only with a saunter, planting herself just before door leading to the employee gathering. "Come join me, like, whenever."

Battery let her eyes fall to the client sheet on her desk, which she discovered she had been absently doodling featureless circles over where they didn't belong. Leaning forward and twirling her pencil on its end, she began to coarsely rub away at it, eyes narrowed and focused. "Shit. Uh, yeah, be there in a sec."

Hands gripping the doorframe as she swung herself forward and back, Sienna called out one last before leaving. "At least we'll get our landlines hooked in. Then you can get your complaints with much better reception!"

The coyote, now nearly reclining in her flexible chair, responded only with a lethargic flick of her pointed ears.

This was the day, he told himself. The day Sparklight landed right beside his home and, if he played his cards right, the day he'd reclaim a steady paycheck.

Varian's fingers trembled despite knowing what lay beyond the swirling pool of emerald turned on its base like a door's arch, and the ocelot's peculiarly-splotched arm of gilded charcoal fur reached forth. Contact with the bastardized River Styx was the goal of his fingers; they dipped inside and then, dumping dubiety, the rest of him and his soul followed close behind.

On contact, everything flashed. His very vision became watery and pale and colorless, as all feeling disappeared from his body simultaneously—a conscious, willing relent of his senses. All went relaxed for the brief two seconds of spacial displacement.

And just as quickly as the sensation of teleportation began, it ended, dumping him back into reality. Varian stepped out from the frothing emerald green wall, behind which lied home. One outsider might never think it a home based on the simple dome-like appearance of the server hub from which he had come, but that's just what it was.

The servers were powerful, that much was true. Varian readily admitted he may never fully understand what forces allowed for the existence of something that could house thousands of people in the same space, and synchronize their size to an average of somewhere between five and six feet on top of that. It truly was, as he liked to call it, the wibbly-wobbly peak of science.

Grassy plains and a nearby flank of forestry presented their natural glow of green to all who would attend. Such forestry measured only just above him, however, on part of being a species that would be officially classified by SS databanks as "medium-large", ranking proud among other large cats and some canines. A terse moment was spent smiling at the discrepancy between the urban virtuality behind him and the meadows of the Overflow that, decades ago, had probably been inhabited.

A raw, synthesized voice spiced with femininity warbled into being from the face of the dome. *Attention inhabitants of the Overflow: the annual Origin's Eve celebration is to occur in two weeks from today. Make sure you are prepared to honor the birth that allowed for lovely and scenic Western Alpine Estate in time for the commemoration inside the city! Enjoy the sunrise.* With a buzz of static, the voice cut off again.

"Origin's Eve, huh...?" Varian scuffed against the dirt. "What a joke."

Previously a city named Harven many years before the advent of Synchronization Servers, Western Alpine Estate—now one such server hub—had its walls set up at the foot of a beautiful mountain range. It was otherwise untouched by any form of urbanization save vestigial biking tracks and markers, long since abandoned by most. A fate of absence and hollowness that had been painted across most of the country, save those grey domes with the green portals...

"Just gotta make sure I get here before everybody else," he muttered again, the evocation of the blue hour tempting him to speak his thoughts aloud. "Doubt anybody's really as interested as I am, but... can never be too sure." Or at least as interested in *applying*, he concluded.

A yawn echoed from his left, in the dim shadows cast from above. "My my, off on your soliloquys again already?" Varian nearly jumped at the sound; this time, the voice belonged to something pure and living. "You do quite enjoy those. Or did you just think nobody was around? I thought you'd be giving me your weekly visit more than a few hours from now."

"Oh!" The ocelot twisted to face the sound. His quick eyes found a blue-grey rabbit reclined upon the grass, absently pawing at the leaves on the trees just above her nose. Weighing in at an unremarkable half the height of the tree and subsequently of Varian, her gaze was on such a toy, and not him. "Oh, it's just you. God, can't scare me like that so early in the morning."

"I'm nobody's God," the rabbit mewled innocently. Her gaze flashed on him with amusement at her own game of semantics. "I do have a name though, as I'm sure you remember. It's...?"

"Morning, Rena," Varian said with a roll of his eyes.

"Better. Top of it to you!" The rabbit of slate fur made one last swipe at the tree's limb, branches creaking obediently before snapping erect and their green tips rustling softly against her clawless fingers. She stood to her full height, a soft rumble accompanying the quick, spring-like motion. Rena emitted wave after wave of childish and playful demeanor with every word she uttered, but her features were mature and sleek, with prominent cheeks and sharp, angular eyes. Being a rabbit, she hardly compared to Varian's height in any regard, but she was still a giant in the midst of the natural world. "Again, you're up awfully early. I mean, it's... what, six AM? It's not at all like you. Making the move-in with me already?"

“Not today, as... fun as that sounds. I *was* wondering why your snoring didn’t wake me up from across the street, though.” The ocelot of somewhat mixed blood simply hung his head and laughed. His features, softer and gentler than most others of his kind, blossomed with his smirk. “Charming as always, sis.”

“But of course. I could say the same for you, what with your tendency to leave the seat up. And turn off the news while I’m in the bathroom, dick around until the last second before work to fold your clothes...” Rena counted off each statement on fuzzy fingers. Her ears seemed to tick-tock to their sides in perfect rhythm, her tongue clicking against the roof of her mouth with every finger tapped. “Oh, the list goes on. It’s nice to have your own place, isn’t it?”

“Say, how’s the BF? Haven’t heard any talk of that in *such* a long time.” Varian’s voice suddenly oozed with the same mocking tone hers carried, and his adversary rolled her eyes with a restrained flop of her ears. Funny; those ears seemed stringent like dense wood most of the time, but she expressed herself so well with them—often going so far as to use them in place of hands for gesticulation. It was like they were simply coiled up like springs for a professional air and then let loose as the conversation allowed.

“Remmy doesn’t like to leave the SS all that much,” Rena said airily. “I think he’s a bit afraid of how big I am to him. Maybe a little, anyway. Can’t say I blame him—mice in the Overflow are so small compared to... well, just about everything, even rabbits! But still, it’s not like it would kill him to come every so often.”

“Don’t be too hard on him. Everybody holes up in the Synchronization Server, it’s nothing new.” Varian gave the server hub, the white dome-shaped monolith with its green portal at the front, a cursory glance. “In the Overflow, everybody’s different; it’s a lot of stress to be around people so much bigger than you.” He swallowed. The opposite was also true. “Or smaller. I can’t stand almost stepping on mice. Either way, most people are only out here when they have to be, like when the SS is down for maintenance or they’re moving to another city for the sake of location.”

The rabbit tilted her head in sparse consideration. “True enough. I appreciate the Overflow for what it is, but that’s not why I’m out here—Remmy and I don’t share the same server, so I’m waiting for him. Something about this time of the morning is just so romantic, don’t you think?” She paused. Her pink nose twitched with the scent of a new thought hanging about in the air. “You know what, I should be the one asking a question like that, shouldn’t I? You still haven’t gone for anybody in... what, three years?”

Shoot. Cornered. “Oh don’t bring that up.” Varian’s cheeks warmed beneath the cover of shadow and fur, but it did not go unnoticed by Rena. Her black eyes lit up, shifting from “abyss” to “charcoal” on the color wheel at his reaction.

“Why not?” Rena’s tone was now perfectly innocent, which given her words was the least expected time for it to do so in Varian’s head. “You’re just as deserving as anybody, don’t you think?”

The ocelot turned his head, ears flat against his skull. His tone rose at first with salinity, then fell; she meant no harm. "You said it, not me."

"Yes, I did. Because I'm your sister and that's what good sisters do," she cooed. Varian released a sigh and huddled his arms close as he sat down upon the meadow, tail flicking with defeat.

"Well... it'd have to be somebody smart. Maybe a bit of a techy, or something like that? I didn't take three years of engineering classes at Univera for nothing; I wanna at least see if that's able to impress anybody. Oh! Now if she knew more about server tech and how that all works, that'd be killer..."

"Heh, okay. Go off and chase that dream of yours. But believe me, I'm all for it." Half of Rena's face was a bemused smirk; the other half was stuck in a premature pout to emphasize her next words. One of her ears hung low while the other remained erect. "And by the way, you still haven't answered my question. Why are you out here?" She crossed her arms and puffed out one cheek in an unamused angle of her lips.

Rena's little brother was simply too easy to perturb, and the ocelot was well aware of how often she liked to prod him. It was much to the titillation of her amusement how his tail would go limp and hide behind his leg, his ears would splay, and he would try to look at anything but her as the conversation went on.

His visits were restricted to weekly for one reason or another, after all.

"I hate going out the portal just as much as in. SS has a few issues," Varian admitted, growing the courage to look at her again. "Well, it did, anyway. The wardens recently updated server capacity and a whole slew of bugs followed in due course. Other people got off with a few dollars missing from their bank accounts," Varian chided, more to himself than to Rena. "But no, not me. I leave with a slap on the wrist."

For the ocelot in particular, the way the city detected his personal data records in its libraries had malfunctioned. What his job was, his current weekly income, his tax dues—practically his whole identity on any business-related note had bore a temporary glitch caused by his return during server stress testing. As a result, the SS couldn't recognize him at first entry; instead it labelled him as unemployed, and restricted him from re-employment for a week's time—just as if he had been fired.

The ocelot had taken up his frustrated complaints with the wardens who monitored the databanks. However, the answer they returned with was simply that his status would take longer to fix than the one short week required for an automatic soft reset. It made sense, sure, but it didn't make him any less upset.

"Oh... well that's just a shame. Be a dear and tack that on as me playing the smart route and not leaving for winter break, hm?" The rabbit shook her head. His silence after the fact was audible in the breeze. "You know you're awfully quiet, even when talking to your dear sister. What's with that? Tell me, what're you doing up so early?"

Varian shrugged, looking into the distance. “Sorry that I’m just a little soft-spoken, I guess? Didn’t think that was something you were supposed to apologize for.”

“Well, no. Not like that. It’s...” Rena was promptly shushed.

A twitch of Varian’s ears forced his eyes, and Rena followed his gaze. From beyond the farthest white-capped peak encroached a hovering obsidian vessel—a sizable octahedron he could only describe as positively gigantic. Calm, thunderous hums emitted from the titan as it slowly drifted, unassumingly rotating like a mystical top, while at set intervals a large pulse of sound would accompany the hum—a powerful enough shockwave even to brush against the ocelot’s face and part fur from its distance, with time.

Hardly the strangest thing the world had to offer, but it still succeeded in eliciting awe, bound toward his location just outside the city with invisible propulsion.

Varian tore himself from the sight, puffed proudly and tugged at his collar as if some kind of royalty. “I’m deciding to take you up on that recommendation of yours. That’s what it is,” he said firmly. “You’re the one who told me about Sparklight, the nomadic workshop. It’s landing this morning and I’m gonna give it a shot.”

Rena, standing well below half his height, stared curious daggers into him from his peripheral vision near the ground. “Ooh-hoo, are you? Really and truly?” The blue-grey lagomorph sauntered close with ears reaching for the heavens. Her fur was like ashen snow—just as brisk and soft as it too, he noted as a harmless, congratulatory pap of her hand swiped at his calf. “Look at you, all going out into the world and trying something new! My little bro’s growing right up. Slow down or I’ll never be able to send pictures to gramma!”

“Uh-huh. I’ll do what I can.” Varian’s attention returned from his diminutive sibling and to Sparklight as its landing procedure ensued.

As it drew close, the gigantic vessel took to the ground in a glamorous display of huffing steam and rushed air as it jerked, halted, then continued a slow and inconspicuously shaky descent. Thick, spidery leg-like columns ejected from its four corners and held it upright like an infant on its first steps as it at last reached the earth. Thunderous booms echoed through the earth and made touchdown upon a suspiciously large clearing for its size.

A rupture of light broke the morning stasis; crows flocked from their perches high above, forming ebony clouds that blotted the sky. Varian shielded his eyes. The light was not as the sun’s, but green and sweet in its soft, brief cacophony. A swirling emerald vortex of light and humming sound coalesced into uproarious being, the signature portal of an SS—a Synchronization Server. The source was nowhere to be seen, perhaps coming from behind the metallic behemoth—or perhaps inside. Its green glow burst forth and overtook all surrounding it only to slowly fade into a transparent sphere surrounding the Sparklight Nomad.

Varian let his hands fall from his face and to his sides as the glow began to settle. To his silent surprise, the ocelot measured up the nearest tree to find that his stature had changed. Where before he could easily match the height of one of the smaller pines nearby, now he was a measly rodent-like five feet and some inches, perhaps nearing six feet if he was lucky.

“Ooh, check out that sync field,” the rabbit chirped, demanding Varian’s attention once more. Having now made a close stump at the edge of the forest her new seat, she kicked her legs at the grass; each individual strand was now perfectly visible compared to the blurred mass of green she saw before. “Now that’s high-tech. It’s like a reverse-engineering of what the SS does!”

“You’re serious?” Varian’s gaze shot from his hands to Rena then back again, and so the cycle went. The sync field intrigued him, but what disturbed him more was Rena’s sudden superior height, weighing in at half a head taller than him. “What the—how the hell are you taller than me? You’re a rabbit!”

“You always were a bit on the short side,” the rabbit chimed playfully, springing from her seat to give him a reassuring pat on the back. “Even for an ocelot.”

“Well I’ll be. Good of mom to pick up the smallest kit in the box.” Varian dusted himself off, noting with explicit detail every speck of dust and his own fur that fell from his grey cardigan. “I shouldn’t be shocked. Guess it’s been too long, huh? Haven’t seen you inside the SS in... damn, guess it’s been a couple years already.”

Beams of new-morning light, fresh and punctual as dew on grass, began to gently trickle from the heavens. Rena had been chosen to be their first victim of exposure as they fell aloft her shoulders in welcome of their softness. They reflected off her dark eyes, which bore straight into him from a distance. In response, Varian only shifted weight from one leg to the other. An accusation was coming, he just knew it.

“You did hole up on your own the second you graduated from Univera, didn’t you?” the rabbit stated smartly with a curt snap of her tiny fingers. “No time for the family, really. So ambitious of you to lodge up at a convenience store and trade chips for a social life—”

“I’m just not that much of a people person, that really shouldn’t be all that hard to understand—”

“Just visit me more, is all I’m asking.”

Varian puffed an astute cloud of vapor from his lips, still somewhat visible in the fading chill of morning. “That... your timing, see, it could’ve been a lot better.” He let loose a second sigh, earning an inquisitive glance from Rena. “I’m about to join Sparklight, aren’t I? I’ll only have a bit of time before they leave. Visiting’s gonna be a lot harder after that. This is my only chance.”

The metallic pyramid before them both let out one last sigh of air from between its layers of steel skin as a rectangular chunk of its face fell forward, revealing an empty black beneath. With loud clangs of metal

it thumped at the ground as if to politely knock at the earth and request to see the roots beneath. The ocelot's gaze measured up, higher and higher, taking in the sheer scale of it all.

"I mean, it... that's what I think. I am about to, well, you know..."

Apprehension suddenly loomed heavy in his airless chest as he looked on with a jaw that had nearly doubled its distance from his face; the very size of the vessel was enough to dissuade him. He had never actually seen it before, only having known of it from hearsay—primary source being Rena—and now that it was all here before him, its sheer intimidation factor was only matched by its size.

On top of that, he had no idea just what it was that he was getting into. How could he figure if his own experience would be enough? What lay within?

"You know what? I... think it would be better if I give it a go some other time." The ocelot's speckled tail flicked hither and thither, full of tired and anxious vigor. "It's really early—a-and I think I can manage a week without something to do. Look forward to seeing me tomorrow, Rena—" Varian sought agreement in Rena's visage as he started to walk off, but there was only a flat line where her mouth would be. "Urk!"

A tight rabbit-grip clenched around the back of his shirt. "I don't think so. You got yourself out of bed for a reason, and you're gonna finish it. Have some faith in yourself, Varian!" Rena shook her head, long ears wobbling with the soft motion. "I'll be right here if you need me. Really, I will."

The ocelot shook himself free of her grasp and gave her a curious look, finding one of complete honesty returned in kind. The rabbit draped his shoulder with an arm.

"Just give it a try," she said. "If you seriously, seriously cannot handle whatever is doled out on you, *then* you can say you tried. But until then I want you to get in there and show 'em what you're made of."

"I-I guess—"

Still unconvinced of his valor, the rabbit continued with a higher, urging tone, "I could always hop on the ship in your place. If you don't go I might just be inclined to steal some of the thunder for myself. Maybe meet some new folks. Then when I come home, I can tell all those stories of the neat stuff I did that little Varian *could* have done, at least if he wasn't busy being a bum at home."

That fumed the ocelot right and good. "No, I'll be fine!" Rena only smirked. "I can handle it."

"And besides," Rena teased, "you might find that cute techy you're looking for."

"Well when you put it that way, how can I say no," Varian replied dryly.

"Just quit jim-jamming and do the thing."

Varian shook his head. "But I thought you wanted me to hang out with you? See the family and that whole spiel? Again, I'm going to be a bit out of touch if I decide to do this."

"As much as I'd like that," Rena continued with a drooping dulcet in her throat, "I care more about your future. I'll take any chance I can get to corral you into making a good decision. I think this is just that." Rena smiled warmly. "So go. We'll keep in touch other ways. You've got your phone, don't you?"

A few moments of contemplation passed, and finally Varian settled with a nod. Turning his head toward Sparklight yet again, the ocelot's pygmy heart fluttered with excitement. He was worried, certainly, but equal parts of him wondered just what he might find. There was a sense of adventure with something so unknown and looming.

There's literally no way this place is what it says it is, Varian couldn't help thinking, recalling the rumors that had whispered their way into his home via his open window from the autumn streets. They had risen only recently; he'd heard the mythical, indie project of 'Sparklight' acted as the Santa Claus of this day and age, traveling here and there to repair and regale. Where it came curiosity and childlike wonder followed, with the youth often crawling out of their beds to grace their mornings with its presence. *Even if it's more than it touts itself to be, can't say I'm not a little curious*. And that was that.

Varian shook himself free of thought; he took further unhesitating steps, disappearing into the darkness atop the lowered ramp leading inside the vessel.

The clank and pound of partially active machinery was a mere hum, the song of the coyote's everyday, and an attenuated symphony she embraced. Pacing and only half doing her job, she let her eyes drift about without truly scanning her workplace for imperfections like she should have been. Pistons thumped the floor for moments after their deactivation, providing percussion to accompany the occasional huff of steam as machine parts released; the clatter of metal parts that followed their descent further contributed to the orchestra.

To her right lied what Battery assumed must have been an old dishwasher from at least a decade ago. Her ears flicked; it was quiet now, and wasn't one of the workshop's many instruments. It was admittedly a well-kept and finely polished relic, but still a relic without a doubt, for there was no hiding its age. The coyote swore she heard an awful pained sputter around half an hour before; this was definitely the cause from when it was brought in, turned on, and inspected. Several little figures proceeded to dash about to rapidly dismantle it with the mind to alleviate whatever its problem was at the source, as was protocol.

"None of my business what people send here I suppose," she thought aloud, cocking her head with a tiny breath of a sigh. Medium of height and somewhat toned of frame, Battery's previous life of physical work was clear as day. A lime bandanna wrapped around her forehead propped up her straight bangs, the length of her brunette hair otherwise swished to one shoulder. "Not hard to guess why it's in a repair shop now though, hm?"

But of course, she thought, this time wordlessly and rather sarcastically, *I don't happen to be the one working*. She didn't mind all that much though, not when *her* job was so much simpler. Rounding off clients, making certain that their assets were being handled, informing them of the progression of their business... and keeping a sharp eye on the workers themselves, of course—*that* was the brunt of it.

But oh, she would lament, how sometimes she would catch herself almost staring *daggers* into them instead. Too sharp, yes, much too sharp. More often than she'd like, she couldn't help thinking that with all her personal training for the labor involved, she could do so much better than them. Her eye for mistakes and habitual hands-on attitude were just too keen for her way of thinking—or so she enjoyed assuming for the sake of an answer.

Note to self: try to avoid coming off as abrasive, she thought again. Beyond her primary work as foreman it was only a matter of manning the phone in her office and making big old circles around the names of clients on a slip of paper after all, which had nothing to do with the employees themselves.

The coyote suddenly peered down upon hearing a squeak for attention. The squeaker in question was a hyena, shrunken to inch-high levels, flecks of black erring his muddy fur. Battery bent down and laid a hand onto the ground beside him, urging him to step onto its palm, which he did without fear. Intriguing, she thought, how time could dull instincts and build resistance to apprehension, despite the dual-edged blade of logic. Then she raised him to her face—still, no opposition to be found—having the slightest difficulty focusing on his miniscule form atop her similarly-colored palm.

The hyena pointed behind him, to the many other workers—some shrunken, some not. “We’re supposed to be working,” he said, the bangs of his rough black mane flickering above his dim eyes. “Are you going to make the announcement or what?”

Battery shook her head—she might have been lost in absence, but she hadn't forgotten, no *sir*. Why, the fact that he could even suggest it—and technically work didn't start for another five minutes. Volunteers for early-bird work were on one hand of the clock, and a schedule to be upheld was on the other. Some respect would be nice; she just barely avoided demanding it aloud.

Battery swept her eyes across the large steel room, eying the machines that possessed levels of damage ranging from natural wear and tear to... well, it was mostly wear and tear. Then she nodded and set the creature down, watching him scuttle back onto the safe-zone of a nearby mat.

“Alright everyone,” she touted, somewhat light voice becoming strong and prominent. Any bustle present descended into silence. “New day, same schedule. You know how the system works; most of you are interns with some mechanical experience. Some of you stay, some of you don't. That's all up to you.” Battery let her gaze halt for a few seconds whenever it caught one of the shrunken mechanics, oilers, or spotters, and bore into one individual at a time to remind them that they were being spoken to. Her words had been rehearsed to a stale point simply through experience.

“For those of you just entering, the ionast baths are located between the men’s and women’s restrooms,” the coyote extended a claw to a central door flanked by two others at the end of the room. “Right there. Use them to suit up and shrink down when you’re ready for work. Employee showers are at the opposite end of the building for break, lunch, and after-hours to wash off the chemical residue.” She pointed left, and about three dozen pairs of tiny eyes followed. “Now, let’s get to business. Come to me if you have any questions.”

In response to the silence that ensued, Battery raised her fingers to the air and snapped twice; her command was both absolute and well-known among her peers, who did not hesitate to return straight to work.

The caramel-furred canine sighed. It was all nice. It was all routine, and she could ask for little more. But she couldn’t help wondering when the next disaster would come. The next catalyst to stir the mix of the mundane... even if only out of a bit of curiosity. After that, after a taste of fresh air, she might just like to return to the cycle and continue on as though nothing would change—and as far as she was concerned, nothing would. The less people she had to deal with, the better. Few truly showed any amount of respect to her as a person, let alone a supervisor, and there wasn’t much she could do about it.

A terse hiss emitted from Battery’s side. Her eyes darted to the automatic door which had just begun to slide open; the telltale sign of a newcomer. “Speak of the devil, I hope,” she muttered.

The ocelot’s chocolate-tipped paws found unease in every step, making sure each was both cordial and unobtrusive to the goings-on of anything in the room. His demeanor was, if she could pin it, simultaneously shy and determined as if he’d overcome a great tribulation in coming.

The coyote analyzed him curiously as he entered and approached her, then shook her head. She pinched her fingers and put them between her lips to whistle, urging him over.

The ocelot seemed bewildered at... just about everything around him, least of all the start from her sudden call. Typical city-goer, Battery thought. However, of all of it, he did not seem to notice the other workers—or at least if he did, he wasn’t at all perturbed by it. The latter conclusion was difficult for Battery to believe.

“Hello? You’re... Battery, right?” The look on his face projected his apparently less than stalwart hope that it was not a dumb question to ask. The ocelot’s gaze swiveled about, taking in the very walls of the workplace. It was wide and spacious, about the size of four basketball courts placed in quadrants, with blue mats littering the floor—each with its own device in need of a good quality assessment.

“Yes, hello,” Battery replied calmly, albeit while clearly inspecting him with hazel eyes darting over his form. “Safe to assume you’re all signed in and ready to go?”

“I... I did sign in. The sheet at the front told me to meet up with Battery... and, er, looks like you’re here.” He shuffled his feet, taking care not to strike anything with them, and his eyes darted to her right bicep,

striated with a red band emblazoned with two overlapping diamonds; the symbol of Sparklight. “Um. What’s going on here, exactly?”

However, his question would go unanswered for the time.

“Ooookay, you would not believe the state of the break quad right now, Battery!” The loud, effeminate voice rung out from the back of the room, beside a door that he’d apparently missed coming in. It belonged to a kangaroo with a snowy pelt. Her hair, otherwise a similar color, bore a startling blue streak along its bangs. “There’s beer everywhere, some guy couldn’t keep his stomach on lock and it’s pretty gross. Oh, and I could swear there was a bit of an argument brewing right as I left. Reason why I left really. Work’s started early, huh?”

A number dangerously approaching triple digits of questions destroyed his focus, to the point where he could voice none of them. The white marsupial was, naturally, a positively hulking figure. Where the ocelot expected safety gear or some kind of air of principle coming from her, all he found was levity. Her muscular—and rather jutting—chest was garbed by an indigo logoless tee and open off-white peacoat that hung just over the hem of a pair of darker jeans, tight-fitting to a point where he suspected her thighs might burst out for air at any moment. He found himself reminded of the ‘popular girls’ back in high school; the ones who could afford to consistently wash anything noticeable out of white clothes, or the ones that were careful enough to keep them pristine.

Suddenly the white kangaroo’s gaze was upon him. “Oh! I don’t think I’ve seen your face before! Ooh, now that’s exciting—and so early, too; we’ve only just landed. Imagine that!” The kangaroo’s words shook him awake; the thick pads of her feet thumped eagerly off the smooth floor as she bounced forward to meet him, apparently quite pleased with the new presence. In all suddenness, she was looming over and inspecting him with elated round eyes, casting a veritable shadow upon his meek form. “And an *ocelot*? Look at that, Battery, these guys are just the cutest!”

“Oh, what?” Varian asked, taken aback to the point of taking a spot in the conversation. “I am not!”

“Aww, you’re just like a slightly bigger tabby with spots. How do you not have to blink all the time with eyes as big as those? Or do you do what geckos do and lick your eyes to keep them clean? Eee!” The marsupial squealed with excitement.

“Quit it,” Varian grumped. A certain coyote was heard chuckling behind a hand held to her face, her other arm folded just over her chest.

“She’s only teasing,” Battery said. “Looks like you’ve been targeted.”

Sienna released a hearty, girlish laugh, mountainous yet feminine all the same. Varian couldn’t help wondering if it was something he’d get used to. In contrast, the common initial reaction to his species’ young and innocent appearance was something to which Varian had already become by and large accustomed.

"In all seriousness, it's real nice to get a fresh face around here," the marsupial said, shaking the cat's attention. The ocelot was caught craning his neck up; the stature of the kangaroo was well over six feet and with muscular bulk to match it, easily—and intentionally—looming over the his meekness. It was all Sienna could do to hide a snicker. "And an adorable one at that! Oh, and I would like to also extend my inexorable welcome—so, y'know, welcome!"

"Thanks." Varian barely managed the word while halfway attempting an analysis of the newcomer. She seemed so bubbly she could barely keep a conversation on a single track, flicking the switches as soon as new ideas came to mind. "Er... I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Right as he said the words, his pocket began to buzz like a nest of bees. He jumped with a start and dug out his phone, flipping it open to ease the noise. He glanced at the screen; not surprised at the identity, but at the timing. Varian hesitated to answer, but thumbed the green button anyway. He turned from the coyote-kangaroo duo and spoke in hushed tones and mewling whispers, clearly embarrassed.

"Now you are," Sienna snarked.

"R-Rena, not now, I'll call you back," Varian said firmly. His golden eyes swung like pendulums backward and bore into Sienna as if to simultaneously apologize and blame her for finding the situation funny.

"Oh, and what's this? That yours?" the white kangaroo insincerely asked, deciding to stand up to her full and daunting height. She plodded close and plucked the cellular device straight from his closed palm as if it offered no resistance at all. "I'm sorry, but Battery'll chew my head off if I don't say this straightaway: we can't have these on very often, so I'm gonna have to take it off your hands."

Varian seemed to panic. "W-what, why?"

"We're not paying your phone bills, kitty-boy. You know that service is SS-based, so we have to provide our own service here. That means your phone automatically switched to it; problem is, it's for business use only. House rules, sorry! As an intern, we can't trust *you* not to make a buncha calls or texts, so until then, we have pay-per-use stalls in the break room." Sienna shrugged. "With us you'll have all the company you'll need anyway! Fifty employees at a time, me 'n Battery—the possibilities are endless."

"So when I get hired for real, I can have my phone back?" he nearly whined.

"Mhm! Calls'll be docked off your pay, though. It's just that if we didn't do this, we'd have upwards of fifty people chunking up those bills a day. Nothing personal, I promise!"

Varian held a finger up, then relented. There was no winning; that and the last thing he wanted to do was argue with potential employers.

"Well, I've just been considering applying is all." He paused. "If you're full up or whatever then—"

"You're onboard then," Battery said, blunt as bricks. "Welcome." Her hand met the ocelot's long before her gaze and gave it a single thorough shake, though not before gently shoving aside the kangaroo obstacle, who then took to leaning against the wall.

Varian let out only the quietest of scoffs. What faint hope he had that there were no more openings left faded out of existence. "Oh. That was fast." But he had to admit; it was quite a relief to be all done with the process. The coyote did seem to want little to do with him, however. He began to wonder just how well he'd fit in. "Glad to be here, I think."

"That's all there is to it, y'know!" the kangaroo chirped, crossing her arms. Pink nose twitching, the ocelot couldn't help but feel miles more welcome by her reception. "No applications needed. We're more of a paid service than a regular ol' run of the mill job, though you'll start off as an intern until you think you're ready. Just a run of the place 'n stuff, though Battery probably has work for you to see how fit you are. Actually, if we're gonna be workin' together it'd probably be good to get a show of names and such. You are?"

"Varian Cadenza," he said with sureness, but said no more. The kangaroo brushed back a lock of straight white hair and locked gazes with him, smugly fingering his confiscated phone. Hmph. She was enjoying dangling it on a stick far too much.

"There's no need. Your ID was assimilated into the mainframe's employee banks when you signed up out front," Battery said flatly. Her larger compatriot seemed unamused, likely preferring the pleasure of a more genuine greeting.

"Sienna here, and I take it you've already had the pleasure of acquaintance with Double A. She and I will be your supervisors when you get to work—which will be..." her gaze shot to the arrow-handed clock three feet above her head, "Well, right now! That means that you answer to us, and come to us if you have questions. We're your superiors as far as formality goes, but try not to look at it that way—look at us more as friends in a work environment." She said the words with more sincerity than the feline would have expected. "By the bye, it really is quite nice to get a new face in here!" she finished, nudging the coyote with an elbow.

Battery quickly took over, ears pointed and serious. "You'll be in the same room as fifty other employees also staying with us, not counting those who have alternate shifts," as if to remove any sense of importance from the new blood. "You'll all work at the same time, for the same time. You did miss the morning seminar-and-rundown, though." She coughed lightly. "Would've made things a bit easier.

The ocelot complied with a subtle shrug. "So wait," Varian started, hands held up. "I'm pretty confused. What is this place, really? I thought it was just a traveling workshop." Some phrasing of how it was without a doubt much more than that never quite escaped him.

"You got the gist of it," Sienna remarked with only a hint of sarcasm. Battery sighed lightly, evidently the slightest disappointed.

“Yeah, but I’m—well, I’m this size! I had figured that was something only regulated within the cities.”

Okay, *that* was a valid question, Battery mused. Not everybody actually knew the ins and outs of Sparklight—few outside really knew. Clients simply sent them objects in need of repair with their address attached, they fixed it, it went back. As far as she could figure they were probably something close to a fairy tale.

“Funny you should mention. That’s the *only* thing Sparklight has in common with casual city life, really.” The coyote had said it with the hint of bitterness befitting one who hadn’t stepped inside the Synchronization Server in years for any more time than it took to use a latrine.

“Well,” Sienna started. Snaking her neck over Varian’s shoulders, much to his apparent irritation with curled lips, she allowed her tone to hit a high and playful pitch. “We may have, ah, ‘borrowed’ some of the city’s more core tech design. Call it following the leader!”

The feline sized her up, eyebrow raised. “Pardon?”

“Some like to refer to it as third-party,” Battery whistled innocently. “Whatever you like to think, though, we’re all good people. And it’s all for a good cause. We never actually *stole* anything, if that’s what you’re thinking. Just... emulated.”

Varian let his eyes fall, nodding. Though he had some experience, he could not fathom the tech-savviness that would surely be needed to dig into the heavier material that allowed for server programming. That was stuff well beyond his years, mentioned only offhandedly—if at all—during his academic years. “Right. Gotcha. Sorry.” He still wasn’t completely sure, but found little use in continued thought. “So, we can get to work soon, yeah? I’m pretty sure I’m all set for that much, assuming there aren’t any gimmicks I’m not aware of.”

Sienna’s cheeks puffed in glee, but Battery took no note of it. The coyote instead allowed her heavy gaze to fall upon him; he was visibly pressured by its weight. “Depends on what you mean by that, really...”

“Say, hold up Mr. Kitty.” Sienna drew close, forcing a splay of his ears he could have sworn he’d already done once, frame-by-frame, within the past minute. “Not that it matters all that much, but just how familiar are you with gimmicks? You sweeping in from Overflow loitering or do you actually know what you’re doing?”

The feline’s posture sprung stick-straight; teasing as she most certainly was—not that he would stand for it—he knew *that* was a question he couldn’t let slide. “Three years’ worth of community-level classes in engineering, thank you!” The coyote’s eyes perked in the background at the mention. “So unless I’ve been falsely advertised all this time I’d like to think I’m fairly qualified.”

“You’d like to,” Sienna echoed, “And you’d be the first to have that much experience in three months. How’s that make ya feel?”

Though Varian found himself curious and raised a finger to reply, the coyote was prudent to intervene. "Everyone else is already at work, so let's get you geared I suppose," Battery said.

"Thanks." He barely managed the word. "Uh... don't you guys have an, er, a pamphlet or something?"

"Well, to be fair our advertising department may as well be run by the cafeteria with its current state..." Battery muttered with a flick of her hand upward, as if to toss up any remaining shits to give. "But anyway. Let's get you squared away. Hardly enough time in the world for goofing around this long."

As he stood to join her, he found himself tailed by heavy footsteps. A cool breath of air from pursed lips whispered into Varian's twitching ears, "Three years in master's level, baby. Programming and Source 500. Better catch up." Sienna then giddily hopped in front of the trio to lead the way, leaving a somewhat flushed ocelot in her wake.

Like it matters, Varian thought, rubbing his cheek in the hopes there was actually something there to justify the action. Oh, she was challenging him, no doubt. He crossed his arms, nearly pouting. "Okay, how do you fix the desktop of a Relian OS when the bar at the bottom disappears?"

A single half of Sienna's brow raised and disappeared into the blue streak of her bangs, lips pursing ever so slightly and lower jaw inching in thought. "Right click, edit preferences, source code: check visible, enter model name. That only happens when the system overheats." Sienna turned to smirk. "Is it quiz time already? So standoffish! You don't want me prattling on about what I do know versus what I don't, trust me."

Varian grunted, but couldn't hide a laugh. "You think you're all that and a bag of chips, don't you?"

The kangaroo's forthright grip suddenly met his wrist. The strength in her fingers was almost bone-crushing. "Nah, just all that! Was a cute try though. And y'know, you just seem the type to take a bet pretty well. Whaddya say we indulge in something like that?" And off Sienna went, Varian in tow, in the shadow of the coyote whose tail flared to the left and right with every swing of her hips in time with her own purposeful steps.

Head bobbing with every one of Sienna's giddy hops, Varian barely managed a simple glare in her direction, let alone words. "A b-bet? What k-kind of bet?"

The kangaroo's head humored him with a glance, barely adequate to show a gleeful glint in one of her blue eyes. "Me betting that we can make your time here a little more interesting than you make yourself out to be. You seem pretty confident, you do! So—how long do you think it'll be before you shove off for real, like just about everyone does?"

The coyote in front growled in a "you're going too far" tone, though did not bother to speak up. In fact, she patiently watched for his reaction.

Varian felt a resurgence of his sister live on in the tundra-pelted behemoth, who had begun to slow down after catching up to Battery. "You're pretty much on. How long were you thinking?"

"Oh..." Sienna's voice practically melted into song. "Today."

"Today? You can't even be kidding. That has to be double sarcasm."

"I'm serious as an oxymoron." Her words belied their patiently confident tone.

Varian exuded a mental sigh, despite his cheeks somewhat flushing at being tugged along by Sienna. Whatever antics the coyote and kangaroo duo had in mind or whatever it was he'd gotten himself into, he'd hang on a bit longer.

There was the door; Sienna halted and released her giddy death-grip. The lithe, yet muscularly competent form of Battery—if Varian could trust that being her real name—used a hand to motion toward the wide-open office door. Kempt and straight tail swishing behind her, the brown canine held open the swinging door open by its top, strong fingers clenching around the rectangular slab with Amazonian strength.

"Alright," Varian conceded. "I think you're full of it."

"You do." Sienna nodded in agreement.

"But whatever. Let's see what this is all about."

The chamber was the size of a bathroom, and not enough elbow room for the ocelot would like for his tail to flick about without striking the cold metal walls. No care was taken to decorate them at all; they were greys and silvers and everything between, though with not one sign of rust having taken root. A curtain acted as a barrier that cut off half the room—as if there was enough of it to go around to begin with.

"If you're ready," the coyote said with a motion toward the curtain, "step in."

"Uh, just... what did you say is gonna happen when I touch this stuff?" Varian had to settle with a sigh in thanks that Sienna wasn't present to mock the question, instead honoring his privacy. "I'm *pretty* sure I misheard you."

"If you bothered to listen at all, I'm sure you didn't. This is ionast, Cadenza," Battery said matter-of-factly. "Not terribly surprised you haven't heard of it and that's great, but let's get this over with already. No sense in hesitating so much now that you're here, yeah?"

The ocelot found his heart palpitating; it seemed so strange and more than the smallest bit worrisome, but a part of him said it had to be a joke. Sienna being who she was after all, it wouldn't startle him if this Battery—was that even a name?—was just playing along.

And yet, with what he knew of the wibbly-wobbly peak of science, another microscopic portion of his head rationed that it wasn't really all that out there or unlikely.

Ignoring his thoughts, Varian's only visible response was a nod. Into the small chamber he stepped, accompanied by a swish of the frail barrier as it swung itself back into place, isolating him from the rest of the room. A quick survey of the cylindrical area made known that he was, in fact, accompanied by what couldn't look much more like a bathtub; a large one at that. It could easily substitute for a hot tub at a local pool.

An inverted oval dome filled to half its brim with... something. Ionast, if what Battery just said held any merit, which he didn't doubt. The clear-blue liquid was not unlike water as it appeared at sea on the sunniest of days, glimmering, and likely thin. Yet, some aspect of it, perhaps just *how* clear it was, was just off-putting enough to remind him that it was something more.

"Just jump in, Cadenza," a voice called from behind, just hinting at impatience enough that it was as if its coyote owner had it pinned in a death grip. The ocelot could hardly bring himself to argue. Something about him being referred to by his last name irked him, though.

The ocelot took a first dainty step inward, rearing a leg high and arcing over the tub's wall. A single toe measured the remarkably thin consistency of the liquid, which gave not an inch of resistance to his weight. *Eh*, he decided, *the worst's already come*. With that thought he hesitantly submerged himself for a few brief seconds and then brought his head up for a breath.

At first all seemed as though he'd simply gone off and soaked himself uselessly. However, he quickly noticed something odd. Though his fur and the hair atop his head was straightened out and appeared drenched, he wasn't dripping. In fact, his body felt tighter; cramping even.

"What the—" before long, he couldn't doubt that his size was altering much on its own and without his formal consent. His clothes hugged fiercely around his body, cramping then easing with unnatural rhythm as they followed his descent lower into the tub. Gripping the edge of the tub did little to assist; before long, he was hovering above an unofficial lake—slowly becoming an ocean. His grip lost, and he found himself struggling to stay afloat.

"W-wait! What?" It had not taken him long at all to regret his decision. His voice was barely more than a squeaky, panicked mewling. "You *did* say I'd shrink when I came in, didn't you? I thought that was some crazy joke!"

A few moments passed before a familiar *swish*, though amplified to levels he could hardly believe his eardrums were able to handle, echoed from beyond. A gigantic furry winch reached from the heavens to crane him from his fate, carrying him swiftly through the air. The experience was hardly enjoyable;

pressures pinched around his midsection with uncomfortable—though certainly attenuated—force. He doubted it was enough to truly harm him, but he wouldn't hesitate to say he was out of his element.

Huddling his legs close to his chest, Varian clung desperately to the furred fingers—he realized that was what they had to be as a glance down revealed sharp, conical black claws half his size—as they carried him to the ground. The sensation of plummeting to his doom suddenly halted, and he was let to the smooth floor.

"You can't swim?" The voice was like thunder, the owner of which clearly and fittingly the same being that owned the massive paws set before him. One of which was tapping impatiently; waves of air brushed his face with every repeat of the motion. The ocelot let his breathing slow, kneeling to the ground like it was the most wonderful thing he'd felt within the past five minutes—and it most certainly was. "You *really* should have mentioned that. Now you've taken enough ionast for a microchip worker; I was only going to set you to a toaster for work."

Despite her tremendous stature, her words were calm as night. This wasn't at all a new experience for her, Varian realized in all suddenness. And now he looked like a complete fool.

"I'm sorry," Varian admitted. His new perspective made the floor a veritable landscape; Battery's paws before him were like monoliths in tribute to some coyote goddess, and their owner bent down to inspect him. His less than centimeter-high form crumbled into tiny cat bits at the sight of the behemoth as she loomed ever closer.

"Don't be. A first time's a first time—Sienna really wanted to surprise you, so I stayed quiet." Battery's amber eyes dug into him; he had barely paid them any note before, but now they were all encompassing and impossible to ignore, even if he looked away. Their sheen was that of brown autumn leaves, with something of her true nature and jubilee repressed behind them. "It seems she's taking a shining to you."

At this size, almost every detail was visible to Varian. How big the massive coyote's eyes were in relation to the rest of her head, the slight pressing of fang against lower lip accompanying every single peripheral shift of her gaze over his own miniscule form. Even the soft rustle of fur on her cheeks as it was beset by the most miniscule nuances in air currents was notable. It was nearly overwhelming.

Varian shook his head with ears folded against his head, drooping low. "Shining? Is that what you call it?"

"You also missed the go-through where I remind everyone of how the system works. I mean, the planets were practically aligned for you *not* to know what ionast does. So there's that." The coyote squatted and placed her palms on her knees, tail curling around her ankle and beside the paw thereof. The very motion sent a light breeze adrift in his direction. "But don't worry. Now you know, don't you?" she finished playfully.

“Oh sure, just in time.” Suddenly Varian’s eyes widened. “Ugh... God, what if she sees me like this? I can already tell I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Battery chuckled lightly. “Chance may just have it. She digs a challenge, by the way—you refusing to play along too much is only egging her on.”

The ocelot could feel a disturbance. Something wasn’t quite right the second Battery finished her sentence; an air of caution settled over his diminutive form.

“Somebody call my name?” The door burst open, hinges sobbing in pain. Predictably, a white kangaroo now stood in its arch, hunched over to fit her mammoth form and with the palm that had nearly blown the door off its hinges outstretched dramatically.

Varian’s breath swept out of his lungs like soot from a chimney. “Fuck.”

A heinously loud thumping of thick paws followed her long and eager steps. It was remarkable how much ground she could cover with such simple movements. The kangaroo always stretched her powerful legs in striding steps. The possibility that smaller shuffles would only send her heavy form off-kilter and break her semblance of perfect balance struck Varian. Before long, she was nearly upon him.

Varian could hardly comprehend her sheer scale, let alone in comparison to Battery’s own. It was not long before the wan behemoth picked him up roughly between thumb and finger and brought him to face level. Her wide, white muzzle was chocolate-tipped by a tender button nose, flaring and easing as it breathed, with warm air washing over his face.

“Well well,” she sang, blue eyes hanging heavily over him.

Ears still playing dead level with his cropped hair, the miniscule ocelot replied, “Well what.”

“Nuthin’! Just wondering how you’re taking the sudden change of pace.”

“Fine, so far!” he retorted. His cheeks raged with embarrassed fury as he peripherally eyed Battery in a nonverbal plea for help. “Why?”

“I shouldn’t have to give an answer to that; look at you now!” Varian shuddered. “Too damn adorable, don’tcha think? Got me my own lil’ Varian.” The kangaroo’s powerful fingers pinched the arms of the ocelot and danced them around like a puppet yanked by winches. She deepened her voice with wry intent. “Isn’t there a *pamphlet* or something? I—”

“Yeah, real cute of you,” the ocelot interrupted amidst his flurrying arms, still suspended. It was a wonder she even had the dexterity to hold him without crushing his limbs at such a size. “I sound nothing like that. Kindly put me down! And possibly return me to normal!”

“Buuummer. You’re the only cute thing around here, I’m afraid!” She continued playing with his limbs like an expensive, noodly-armed doll, childlike vehemence emanating from every inch of her face. “And pardon me, I was simply sure I could pass for the real deal.”

“Y’know, this is the exact sort of thing I was worried would happen. I swear this whole thing was a trap. Rena set me up for this,” Varian muttered bitterly as one of his hands slapped against his forehead awkwardly, courtesy of Sienna. “And look, giant kangaroos, what’s next? No, you know what, I’m not even going to try and predict anything. That’s just asking for it.”

“Good boy!” Sienna chirped as she relented control of her plaything, who rubbed the fur of his arms gratefully as soon as the pressures released. “So, seriously, I think Battery’ll start rolling heads if I dick around for much longer. I’ll leave that for another time,” she said with a high note.

The coyote shrugged. “I might.”

Twirling on tips of her toes, Varian’s kangaroo captor unhinged her fingers and let him fall onto the fuzzy surface of her muzzle, briefly focusing on him with crossed eyes. There was little resistance now. It seemed he had just about resigned. Unable to decide between fuming or curling up in a confused ball, he flumped flat on his back with arms spread—encompassing hardly more than a mere wrinkle—and released a tiny groan-squeak.

“Man, what are we gonna even do with him?” Sienna asked with a light chuckle, bouncing him up and down. Oh, she had far too many ideas in her head. This bet was as good as hers!

“Get him to work and see how that goes, even. I’ve said it once, twice, probably what, a billion times more by the end of the day?”

“Y’know Varian, even though ionast washes off nice and clean, there is one environment that the stuff won’t come off: the stomach.” The ocelot shot upright, only to see a devilish glance cast by her two oceanic eyes. “The conditions are always the same kind of hot and humid—just what the chemical needs to thrive. Just between you and me... Battery will totally do it if you mess up enough.”

Predictably, Varian looked toward the coyote titan in the distance, who returned an uneven shrug. “Better get your ass in gear, Cadenza.” Battery’s voice transitioned into something powerful and commanding as she followed the kangaroo’s march out of the room, giving him a sense that ignoring a single syllable that escaped her lips would be a risk not worth taking. “Ionast has the property of reducing effective size by a fraction of the bearer’s original, as you might have noticed. The stuff washes off right and proper, so don’t you worry too much about that. Lots of the things you’ll be fixing up should only require a few minor tune-ups—sometimes I’ll hand you a chip or something you’ll need to replace. Just let me know if you need help.”

That last statement took the kangaroo off-guard. “You’ll be in the office, then?” Sienna inquired innocently. Battery responded with something of a dour nod and took the lead, her careful and practiced stride carrying her through another door at the far end of the room.

The earth beneath the ocelot trembled audibly, his kangaroo captor humming. "And she's gone. She seems a little down."

Varian wasn't sure if speaking now would be taboo, but he decided to take the chance. "Any reason for that?" Varian dared to inquire.

The kangaroo's massive eyes refocused on him as he sat cross-legged on her muzzle, sunset-irises seeming to brighten. "Oh, well how kind of you to ask!" Sienna said sweetly. "FYI, that howl-dog does have to put up with some dumb people, but I don't have to go on about that. It's gotten her real cynical about new recruits."

"Oh... so, like me? Also, do I get to ask what the hell is happening yet?"

The kangaroo nodded, an act that compromised the ocelot's poor stability and sent him rolling up and down the inclining bridge of her nose. "To your first question: I'd surmise. Not a hard guess to make and to be honest, I don't blame her all that much." She seemed to stare on into the emptiness of the grey door the coyote had disappeared through. "A few rascals having partaken in the lesser crimes of this world, namely reckless skullduggery and general acts of dickery. Only so much of that you can enjoy. You don't seem all that bad though!"

"Er..." The ocelot avoided eye contact. Difficult, but possible when he stared down into the veritable field of soft, smooth fur beneath him. "Thanks?"

"Take it for what it is," she replied casually, immediately changing the subject. "Battery also gets kinda peeved at people having marginal knowledge in their line of 'work' at best. However, that's considering how easy everything else is when you're shrunken to that endearing little size of yours. At that point it's just a matter of putting what where, 'cept the really broken down cases. But being littler than a mouse sure does make it an adventure, doesn't it? Guess you'll be seeing for yourself!"

"I get the feeling that you're enjoying this too much," Varian retorted.

The kangaroo suddenly snooted with a huff that flung him into the air, moving her muzzle to the side and out of his path as he fell back down—only for him to be caught by a padded black palm, stomach up. "Hah. Heads!" She looked down and unleashed a toothy smirk. "Frankly, I'm enjoying this just as much as I should be. Don't tell me you're not having any fun!"

Varian said nothing, opting to silently fume as he sat up to rub his back. Darn kangaroos and their... strangely white and inexplicably comfy fur. Was that a natural color? Probably wasn't wise to ask. Faux-pas or no, it would be wiser still to avoid this one as much as possible—though if what he understood about her duties was correct, there wouldn't be many possibilities to do so at all.

"Oh, come off it," the kangaroo finished, interrupting his thoughts and setting him down on a blue mat. The texture was soft and foamy to the ocelot, who could practically kiss the ground—again. Behind him

towered a device that dwarfed him as much as a hunk of metal truly could; clearly his current charge. Neither of the two bothered to identify it. “You’re just so hard to please.”

“Right,” Varian said with a scoff. “And this is the part where I finally get to work so Battery doesn’t bite your head off?”

Sienna’s eyes glinted with amusement. “Y’know what? Yeah, yeah it is.” She put her hands on her hips and reached forth with one leg, hefting a paw ever closer to his position. Its toes flexed as it reached the apex of its ascent and blotted out the light above; Varian narrowly avoided flinching as it stomped on the mat, clawtips mere feet away. “I’ll be doing *my* job as well. Take care not to get in the way for both our sakes, hm?”

Slyly, the paw slunk away back to its owner like a reluctant hound, nearly scraping tracks into the ground as it returned. Varian knew, he just absolutely knew he had signed up for more than any initial mental bargain he’d made, and he might just regret it. But, he thought with a sigh as he watched Sienna return to lumbering about in her patrol, things could be so much worse.

Curiosity had killed much more than the cat—he was only one of many targets, and curiosity was here to stay. He would live, though it might be the death of him. In quitting it now he’d only meet a warm reception from an expectant Rena, who would simply be brimming with disappointment.

And then he’d have lost the bet with Sienna.

A place to chat and trade anecdotes of what passes in the too-similar daily lives of each—such was Sparklight’s break quad. The clinking of glass and shifting of jeans over toadstool-seated chairs was, though audible, drowned out by the mingling of tales and simple conversation. Wafting through all the perfectly square room whose shape was defined less by walls and more by its patrons, scents of beer and, for those with less discerning tastes, ciders and fruit-tinted water.

“Yes, it won’t be much longer. We’ve just acquired a new recruit this morning—I’ll get him on it shortly. Thank you. Yes, have a good day.”

Some time alone was just what the coyote needed; a fact she lamented as she once again clacked the phone against its receiver and took to doodling circles around her client sheet. Three times—three times that morning she’d been accused of “pointless debauchery” and other such menial insults to her pride in her work, all because her customers underpaid and didn’t get what they wanted right away. Even in the break quad she couldn’t escape the phone.

She could only do her job so well; she wasn’t a *worker*. That should have been clear when they read the directory and the name next to the number they triple-checked before dialing. *You know, no big deal or anything, but the title of supervisor maybe should have given something away.*

With a sigh, Battery set her pen down. A break would do her well. She shoved aside the list of clientele and their commissions, swapping it with another sheet of paper that had been angled near the edge of her desk. Twenty-four questions precisely—her bi-annual job review.

4. Describe your job in three words.

“Fuck customer service,” Battery mumbled, making a conscious effort to stay her pencil hand. Answering any bit of this questionnaire was a peripheral thought at best; all she needed was a bit of downtime before returning to the cycle.

She hoped.

Unfortunately, her troubles were not limited to presences outside the workplace. Right as the tiger strode up to her, she began to regret migrating her work to the break quad instead of the office. Quick as lightning she snatched her client sheet to make her appear busy. His form was thin but toned, and his eyes sunk deep into his skull, giving them a beady and somewhat dim appearance; an observation Battery would gladly posit as fact.

Slouched and garbed in a green jacket, unzipped and leaving his bare chest on display for nobody’s enjoyment, Evan was accompanied by his own personal entourage of two. One, a prairie dog, had an air of innocence about him, as if he was blindly following a friend. The other was a dingo whose sharpness was admittedly visible in his dark eyes—as if he very well knew where and why he was, and had no qualms with following the leader.

“Battery, hey! Baaattery!” the striped feline sang, brushing aside a thicket of dark black hair that hung to one side of his face. He sidled up to the coyote at her desk leaving his two compatriots to wait, and loomed, nearly able to peer right down her shirt. She was far too aware of that fact but part of her knew that the situation would be hypocritical if he actually dared, and therefore she did nothing to amend it.

“What.” She didn’t bother to so much as look up, instead crafting an incredibly patient, intricate circle around one of her chosen clients’ names and refining its curves to a point of near perfection. Her assailant smelled much like she would expect the grime beneath the sink to smell, albeit sweatier.

“Why do they call you that again? Battery? Don’t you have another name or somethin’?”

Battery hesitated, and considered heavily just remaining silent, but mentally shrugged. Evan was a slacker through and through, but it wouldn’t kill her to answer. “Yeah. I get that because I have two A’s in—”

Suddenly he shouted, “You heard it here first folks! Battery’s got the double A’s!” He broke into roaring laughter, as did several fellow patrons in on the joke. The bar filled to its brief ceiling with howls and dumbbed guffaws. He slapped her once on the shoulder as she hunched closer to her work with an attenuated growl.

“Oh, a bra size joke. How original. Screw off, Evan.”

“Why, more people to corral around and bitch at? Too busy for me?” Evan pressed. His arms spread wide like wings, challenging.

Battery’s bridled fury was as tangible and pestilent as static cling—and just as likely to deter her attacker. Its very presence in her cold glare was a wordless demanding of his leave. At such, he let out a scoff and brushed aside his thin bangs.

“Whatever. You’re boring today.” He snapped his fingers, rallying his posse. The dingo marched close without hesitation, though the prairie dog waddled his heft after something of a pause.

“You should be working,” Battery spat. She dared not dignify his presence with further eye contact, however. “It’s break for nobody but me. Yours starts in an hour. Or do you need me to baby you all the way to the ionast baths again? I wouldn’t be surprised if you already forgot where they are.”

“Oh, lookie there. Tiny-tats is acting all big.” The tiger released a flat guffaw. “Like she’s got big anything. Last big things you got are balls!” he finished with a growl.

“You challenging me?” the coyote returned with a sneer. The canine’s steel grip was stringent enough to snap her pen in two, bloodying her fist with light ink. “There are two reasons I’m letting you stay here, cub, and the first is catharsis!”

Battery’s muscles grew tense, more than ready to pound tiger face in a brief but satisfying fight—a perfect end to the month. However, before she could so much as land the first blow, the double doors leading into the chromatic bar burst open, followed by an echoing call. “Oy! I hear shit a-brewin’!”

Battery held her breath—and her fist—as in lumbered a white-furred behemoth, eyes darting about with vigilant fervor. It was still startling how her very size managed to quell her fury for fear of it intervening. Sienna had arrived; perhaps just in time for her temper.

“Oh, you’re just in time, supervisor,” Evan said with a cock of his head and brow as he turned to face the newcomer kangaroo. “Battery was just about to get all... *coyote*, y’know. I just asked a simple question and she practically blew up on me.”

Sienna’s tone became admonishing, yet playful. “Playing pretend is for four-year-olds. We all have to grow up some time. You get back to work or I’ll sic Battery on you for real,” she said smartly, planting a heavy palm on his shoulder, which quaked with fear and newfound weight. The scent of peach mingled with that of alcohol to the tiger, who couldn’t decide whether or not to be intimidated.

“Oh, right—I forgot you two are a total tag-team. You’re gonna try shit too? Give me a break,” Evan remarked. The coyote shook her head as the crook of her lips began inching upward. Damn if the bastard wasn’t a right persistent bug, and damner still if Sienna didn’t know how to put a smile on her face.

"Fine. Maybe this'll get your brain noodle working," Sienna said, straightening out her posture to loom a good foot and a half over the tiger. Her very shadow overtook his comparatively frail body as she cracked her knuckles threateningly—but not for a moment did she ditch the smile, warm as a fireplace. "Kid, I will shit on your *dreams* unless you get your sorry ass out of the bar and back into the workroom. I'm not above a bar fight or two, either, and I'll give you ten guesses as to who's gonna be able to get away with it, let alone come out with a functioning nose."

Moments of silence passed, each one carrying the empty failure of a lack of retaliation. Evan's shoulders slumped—this was not a fight he was interested in having or losing, even with his friends at his side. With a hiss, he finished, "Fuck it. Be seeing you around, A-dubs."

Battery grunted and fingered the cold, steely edge of a barrel at her waist. *Don't do it. Don't do it*, she kept thinking, but... it wouldn't hurt to give him a quick stun on his way out, would it? Humming, she clicked the trigger, and the metal plating began to heat up with soft whirrs.

"Dooooo it," Sienna whispered with a wide smile.

Okay, now it was officially a bad idea. "You make a good shoulder devil Sienna," the coyote mumbled as she clicked off the stunner, feeling its warmth fade out. It's not like he would remember it happening, but still... it was miles different from a fistfight.

The steam hiss of a steel door being opened followed, shortly accompanied by a loud *thunk* as the twin sides came together again. Evan and his band had left.

"Ha! Just like a little bitch," Sienna remarked with a snort of a laugh. "Oh, I mean not you. Him. He gave up real quick." She shrugged. "Oh well. I'll hold up on writing that report. Crap like this is just too fun."

"Real talk? Shit like that is why you're my best friend. Kinda wish that you'd hurry up with that whole 'banning his ass thing' anyway. Can't stand that guy... even if it is pretty funny watching you bust him."

"Right. I could slap a ban stamp on that kid any time I wanted and I'm sure Mr. Redowli wouldn't have to blink twice before complying. But for now," Sienna said, twirling and falling onto a nearby stool before stretching her legs, "I'm pretty easy to please."

"Helps to have a dad in high places," Battery retorted.

"Hey, *and* that Evan's got the bad streak of an athlete with a lame leg," the kangaroo exclaimed defensively. "I don't get nepotism from dad either, so that point's moot. Old Redowli's a fair guy."

"I suppose." Battery reached into her shirt pocket and retrieved a silvery card, which she then swiped against a small calculator-shaped contraption protruding from the table. A few rings of contemplation echoed from its confines, then a jingle of confirmation. Seven beverage options appeared on the screen; she tapped the top left.

“Hey now, just what do you think you’re doing?” Sienna pressed.

“Just grabbing a drink. That a problem?”

“The problem is that you’re paying!” Sienna chuckled and bapped Battery’s wrist lightly. “I think you deserve something on me after that little fiasco.”

“Well...” Battery’s ears splayed. That wasn’t Sienna’s problem, though—she had to fight her own battles, and certainly she didn’t deserve a free drink. “Thanks, but not now. Maybe later.” She paused meaningfully. “I still think I could’ve taken him.”

Sienna rested her feet on the cold metal scaffolds of the stool and hunched forward. “Heh, probably. But he did have two others with him, for one. And for two, I don’t think you should be fighting him.”

The coyote put on a look of slight confusion. “How is me not standing up for it a good thing? Is the best thing I can do leave it be so Redowli doesn’t chew me out?”

The only feature of Sienna’s face that changed was her brow, which mushed together at the center. “Um. Well, okay, I know that we have some degree of protection from fighting with our employees given the nature of recruitment. Anyone can come so you’re like to snag some bad apples, right? I mean we’re not favored or exempt from punishment entirely; just, like, you won’t get fired or anything as long as you don’t up and cave in his face just because you feel like it.” She held out a hand as if to halt Battery’s bubbling protests. “But that’s not the point.”

“What is then?” Battery blurted, deciding to wipe the ink from her hands onto her trousers. “I don’t see what you mean.”

“I mean, sometimes it’s better to leave things out of your hands. Let them sort themselves out. I can beat the guy up, but where does that leave me?”

“Oh, come on. There is no moral high ground to take here!” Battery exclaimed.

“Kay, here,” Sienna offered, finger tapping her chin. “Lemme put it this way. This is a professional environment, and it looks really bad to go around laying into the workers.”

Battery’s eyebrow inched up at a snail’s pace. “Yeah, except for the part where you’re one to talk about professionalism.” A pause. “And you just got through encouraging me to bust my stunner on him.”

“Hey!” Sienna stamped a paw, then shook her head. “I just skirt around the rules, I don’t break them. There’s something to be said for having the right amount of restraint at the right time. When to hold ‘em and when to fold ‘em.”

"You said it yourself; scuffling with the employees isn't punishable unless it's unprecedented. I could've gotten away with that a thousand times over."

"Think of how you want to be viewed, Battery," Sienna said rather sternly, a far cry from her norm. "It's a real ball biter but if you want to be treated any differently, you're gonna have to man through it. Suck it the fuck up please. And I was just kidding with the stunner, you know that."

Battery rolled her suddenly aching shoulders. She was right. "Fine, I guess... thanks. And sorry for getting a bit frustrated. Ugh, it's just... well you understand: there aren't any real rules against people like him." Battery let her head fall slightly, looking more at her own feet than her partner and admiring the sheen of her claws. "'Getting certain people is just part of the job'. We're just supposed to sit back and accept it; it's all up to me and you to keep people in their place, not anybody else. And nobody else can intervene unless they catch him in the act."

Sienna shrugged. It was true; Evan was a free goat as long as she refrained from filing reports every day of the week and spoke to Redowli about it personally. But perhaps it was her sick sense of entertainment, her vicious love of seeing him writhe whenever she was around to protect Battery, or watching him get a blue card that voided him of the next lunch break every time she *did* report him. Whatever the case was, while she did feel bad for the poor coyote, she didn't want it to end quite yet.

"You're right. Don't worry though—we won't have to deal with him forever. After all, I think I have a new barrel of fun," she muttered, resting an elbow upon the table and supporting her chin with a palm.

Battery shot a lidded glance. "Varian?"

The very name tickled the kangaroo's stomach into giggling. "He's just too adorable. Acting like he knows what from where—and then ionast happens and ugh he's even cuter when he's small like that! God, almost nothing is cuter than an ocelot."

"He's mixed," Battery stated wisely. "It's pretty easy to tell."

"Probably. He's got the big eyes and nose. I'd guess rabbit," Sienna agreed, then shook her head. "Either way I can't wait to see how he takes to this place. He's freaked, but it's hard to walk out of a bet of kangaroo caliber!"

"Just don't scare him into leaving," Battery sang as she turned half of her attention to her client sheet. She began crossing out names and mapping out the finishing touches on what projects had been finished during the past couple hours. What needed to be done, what had been completed—the coyote could swear she had three jobs rolled into one fat misnomer. But then, so did Sienna; safety manager, nurse, and the duties of supervisor they both shared....

"I won't! Probably. I think he's putting up with me at the very least," Sienna said with a laugh. Suddenly, her gaze snapped to the canine, eyes glinting with some terrible intent. "Anyway, what about you? What do *you* think of the new guy?"

The coyote remained silent at first. She had no opinion, and saw no reason to have one. The cycle went on: people came and went. For her there was hardly a point in devoting much time to the new workers—not when they'd simply leave in a couple days and be replaced.

Aloud, she merely let slip the flat words, "I don't think anything."

"Oh, Allison. I dunno about you but I think he's pretty cute. Hey! You know what else I think?" Sienna swiveled her rump on the squeaking stool, voice full of gaiety. "You should check him out! He's the only person that's come within the past few months to seem to take this stuff seriously."

"That's..." Battery froze. She admitted—to herself if not Sienna—he had caught her attention at his mention of prior schooling. But she had no motivation to favor him over anybody else. "That's none of your business, to be honest," she said with a wave of her hand.

"Oh, come on," Sienna moaned. "You can't even be bothered to... well. I guess you're right." Even now the coyote looked simply crestfallen; while the kangaroo knew someone to dote on would do Battery's spirits justice beyond measure, the time was not proper to prod her about it. It took effort for the kangaroo not to splay her ears. "I'll leave you alone about it for now."

"Thanks." The last thing Battery wanted was to get Sienna down or make her feel bad—if that was possible—but she simply wasn't feeling it. Some time alone was just what she needed, she repeated mentally, just a bit of time from everybody so she could relax.

"I don't like that sulking. C'mere, c'mere." She wrapped those tree-trunk arms of hers around Battery's comparatively thin body and squeezed tightly. A tiny arf escaped the coyote's smothered mouth, her amber eyes glowing with glazed, hesitant acceptance. After a seeming eternity, Sienna's steel embrace relented, letting her lungs regain functionality, and the kangaroo stepped back. She wasn't ready for that. "Really though. Here for you if you need me; just text me."

Battery considered it, then nodded absently.

"Still, I'd best be going," Sienna suggested, hopping to the ground from her perch. "Better make sure nobody's, like, died or whatever. Never know what people are gonna get into when your back's turned for five seconds!" she finished cheerily.

"Yeah," Battery sighed. A glance revealed to her that her drink had appeared on the bar end; for it, she couldn't be much more thankful.

"Oh, quit moping! At this rate I might just have to kill the tab for you. Shit's infectious! Ooh, ooh, and I'm also grabbing you something sweet later, so you can thank me then. I insist on this one."

A pause followed, then finally a smile of admittance. "Alright, you win."

“Atta girl! See you in two hours. Dunno about you but I can’t wait ‘til break.” With that, the kangaroo was up and off, leaving several pairs of eyes within the Break Quad to follow her swaying gait.

As long as they’re away from me, Battery thought. And suddenly she was alone—left to her devices, her work, and herself. The clamor settled once again to the clinking and chattering of fellow off-duties and their unremarkable excursions; the dust had fallen and the brief squabble was no longer of any interest to anybody.

It was just the cycle of things; all of it was. But she could never abandon it—no matter where she went, there was a cycle. In the SS, it was nothing but the same—you were taught all that you wanted to be taught, no more than that, and that was simply too... *free*. Here, people left and came, and Evan Helry was simply another wall to push through during the day. In the end, what she had was an opportunity to lead herself without handicaps, and she wanted nothing more.

But living out the weave of a pattern? Being the needle of a quilt as it threaded the routine of her life? She enjoyed it. Familiarity was something she would never push away. And that aside, there was always some new patch to work into and around... like the new recruits. Like Varian. It kept things fresh without pinning her down and stripping her freedom, giving her rules.

Her thoughts were becoming little more than nuisances she didn’t want around, and so she dismissed them. The coyote sighed, reached for her glass, and took in the bitter taste of vodka. Suitably, it was right then that the phone began to ring; she tapped the lower half of her pen between her fingers, counting down the seconds until voicemail, and then lugged her tired body to acquiesce—not once ceasing hold over her drink.

“So. Assuming the coils inside have all burnt out...” Splotched, fuzzy fingers hesitatingly prodded at the spiraling chutes of metal within. The toaster had been dismantled, one half laying on the ground on the other end of the blue mat, as he inspected its metallic innards. “Oh, who am I kidding. I don’t know shit about toasters. Microwaves, maybe; hard drives, absolutely. I have no training for kitchen appliances.” He shook his head vigorously; he could practically hear Rena’s giggling at his asides. He probably should have told Battery what his skills actually were, on further thought.

Varian huddled a hand around his chin, wryly poring over his charge. If what he knew applied, all he might be required to do was completely replace the coils that had busted and then patch the shell back together. Someone paid *money* for this to get done? He didn’t know for sure if that was all, but it was simple enough to guess.

In all truth, the ocelot had not reached a verdict. Not about the toaster, but about his place in Sparklight. It had only been half an hour and already he was questioning his place. Was this really how he wanted to spend his time? Working with only the most mundane of household objects, subject to massive kangaroos and potentially others?

That said, it was simple. At this size, finding and snuffing out the problems of such objects wasn't at all a complicated task—Battery was right about that much. All it took was some cursory scans and perhaps some feeling around for something off. He could see why ionast was helpful here: it provided an alternative, something new, which was always welcome in the ever-evolving peak of science.

Still, he was so miniscule, so powerless, so... quite unlike his normal size in the Overflow. The feline was accustomed to being large, as much as he disliked it, and being smaller than a mouse and able to be crushed by the head of a lug nut simply did not feel right. Neither size extreme did him any justice—it was why the SS was so homely to him.

Well, it could be worse...

But it was much to the irony of his thoughts that his twitching pink nose picked up a new scent. Even in his unfamiliar location, there was something about it that he could only describe as off—it didn't belong in a workshop. He wondered if his ability to detect it from so far away was in some way due to his shrunk size, or if his nose really was just stronger than he'd thought. That or the smell of perfume and mothballs was just that absurdly pungent.

Turning his head to where he believed the source was, he noted that his latter induction might not be wrong. At the eastern end of the room stood a lithe, yet somewhat petite shape—petite as far as relativity went, for even from his extreme distance he could tell that she was miles upon miles tall from where he stood.

She was a vulpine, easily distinguished by her creamy orange pelt and tail dipped in liquid silver, being a figure whose authority was absolute, clear in her strut, as the reverberation of every heel-toe footstep sent shivers down his spine. Her eyes were like those of a hawk's, angled to seek. A single glance at her chest was all he needed to recognize her badge of office—shockingly, hmm, hopefully coincidentally homogenous to that of a Server Peacekeeper, detectives and authorities on legal matters originating inside the server.

No, there wasn't a chance that she was anybody else. Worse still, he couldn't come up with many reasons regarding why an SPK would be here—but of the few that he could, he himself ranked high and dandy among them. Without thinking, Varian began plodding away from the towering toaster and toward the floor between mats. He had a good enough idea; SPKs were no fans of anomalies in the system, and a thorough questioning was always clutching their coattails. With his profile data scrambled beyond recognition, he had an unpleasant inkling of what might happen if he were caught now.

What a fun fucking time, Rena, Varian thought bitterly, almost mentally targeting his sister for the set of circumstances. He threw his arms and patted his cardigan, then looked off into the vast horizon of the workroom; a sea of empty metallic floor spotted with blue islands, each with their own set of indigenous locals setting to their own jobs.

The ocelot shuffled his paws along the ground as he marched off the mat and onto the no-man's land between islets, the tiled floor. Something about being in the open was mildly off-putting, but the feeling paled in comparison to the relief of distancing himself from the SS vigilantes.

But damn, he hadn't even fixed one thing! Damn it, he really wanted to prove he was better than this. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to go snooping about and asking if he could be put to different work.

So, then, what of Battery? Of Sienna? What would they have to say? The former simply up and disappeared the second she got a chance—and seeing her at the size she now was in comparison... well, he would be a liar to say that he wasn't awed or inspired. How a single twitch of her paw could overpower his meek body, how the height of herself could pose a veritable landscape—or skybox, he thought with a laugh—and... just, wow. She was... okay, he could say she was kinda pretty. That was an okay thought to think.

Ugh, Rena would be poking every last button he had if she could read his thoughts now.

The ocelot's ears shot up as a familiar singsong voice fluttered amidst the air. Thankfully, it wasn't at all directed at him, and was merely some aside as Sienna jotted something in her clipboard that could substitute for an airplane runway.

Ah, there she was again, the kangaroo who he'd come to be so... intimate with. Yes, surely, there was nothing more telling of a blossoming friendship than her jumping at the opportunity of his newfound size to mock him and string his puppetry. It was strange in hindsight that registering her enormity was more or less an afterthought; even miles from his position, she did not blur in the horizon. She had also ditched her jeans and pea coat in favor of the lone tee and a pair of thigh-hugging denim shorts, he noted peripherally; she even had the same red employee band over her bicep as Battery did.

The ocelot brushed a hand against his cheek, wondering. Many things to wonder about as he kept wandering forward, not really in the direction of any particular blue mat. Rather, he was practically meandering the labyrinth with azure walls, waiting to come to some mental conclusion that might settle him. No such one seemed to come immediately.

"I can handle this," Varian repeated. "I really, really can." He wanted simple—new, but simple. The cat sighed, ears flattened. This was anything but simple. First Sienna, then the shrinking, now of all things he was getting tailed.

It wasn't difficult. There, however, lied the problem. There wasn't a single reason he yet had to serve as an excuse for his sudden departure, should he decide to do so, because all he had were uncertainties. He had no way to judge any of it, likely on a basis of having only been exposed to Sparklight for a scant few hours, but that was arguably the worst part. It was as if he knew something would go wrong during his time there that would send him fleeing tail tucked between his legs, but he didn't have that scapegoat yet. It would come. The path there was just cloudy, sparsely lit—not unexpected, yet still hardly predictable in a way he truly despised. And until then he was trapped.

He stopped moving, instead continuing to stare at the cold, wan floor. “Hold on. Is something...?” His thoughts ground to a halt, erased by a terrible feeling of foreboding. More than the simple glimpse into the near future of his potential extrication; no, something much more... immediate.

Varian’s downward gaze at last availed him as a pool of inky darkness stretched from behind his feet and into his field of vision. The shadowy void overtook him—and enough space behind him to encompass over thousands more of him.

Suddenly and with a gasp, Varian looked up to see that he’d just wandered in the way of the patrolling kangaroo spotter. Sienna was a towering mass of muscle and white fur, reaching to the heavens and the ceiling of steel beneath it that he could barely make out in the distance with a simple, gleeful stretch.

There was no doubt: she was by far the largest thing he’d ever seen in his life. Even Battery herself was dwarfed by the massive marsupial. Sienna’s generously curvaceous body was thick and mighty at every point, her tree-trunk thighs transitioning seamlessly into an exposed, thick wall of muscle at the stomach, and twin mountains a short trip above. To scale it would take hours, if not days, he mused.

Varian snapped out of his stupor and called out once, but was silenced quite promptly as a white, furry ceiling with black pads began its descent upon his world. Sienna, cheery as ever and head swerving about in every direction but below her, showed no signs of noticing the little feline underneath.

He noticed right then that the ankle of each thick, powerful paw was clipped with a bright yellow tag with a basic warning sign and the words “Watch My Step” emblazoned onto it—suited, he had to think quickly, but far too much so for his posthumous tastes, and so did his shoulders slump. He wasn’t ready to die, but his frantic, disbelieving mind wouldn’t let him think coherent words as such. Toes ending in blunted black claws spread apart as the gargantuan paw finally began to make touchdown. It was nothing more than a casually delighted step, weighed down with the bounce of a bubbly personality as it plummeted, but to Varian it was like a padded asteroid that could smush all he held dear.

Varian’s jaw bobbed up and down to mouth gibberish words that never escaped him as his eyes fixated on the paw’s sole before shutting tight—followed shortly by meteoric impact. The ground seemed to quake without a single rupture of its features, with what was only a slap against cold, tiled ground to the giantess above being a piercing, drawn out slam of weighted fur and flesh to the ocelot in the all-too quick moment that it struck.

But he opened his eyes. He was alive; rather, he was quite fine.

Two white toes walled him in just so, each well beyond twice or three times his height. The one at his left was adorned with a smooth, silver ring at its base; it had not been engraved, clearly for show and nothing else—and it did that job quite well. Like bulwarks at each his sides, they had saved him with not a foot to spare; a *mathematical* one, he mentally corrected. The texture of white fur on Sienna’s lower body, particularly the lowest point below her ankles where he happened to have a more than decent vantage at this particular moment, was shorter and finer. He couldn’t catch a speck of dust between the kempt hairs, which were smoothed downward to create an immaculate tundra atop the silken paws,

and soft-looking to the point where he almost suspected being caught underneath *wouldn't* kill him, but instead blanket him like freshly fallen snow.

And yet the back of the ocelot's head knew such a thought was, tactlessly put, idiotic.

"S-she—she nearly stepped on me," he finally blurted, bemused at his continued state of living.

Sienna was a large girl on her own, but with him in his new state the difference was all too jarring, and his detailed, dizzying absorption of his surroundings was in no small part due to a never-before-felt sense of inferiority. Was this what it was like for the smallest rodents outside the SS? He suddenly had a brand new appreciation for the world he lived in—or at least, one he would keep living in if Sienna didn't make any sudden movements. She seemed to have paused after making that one lumbering hop that came far too close to crushing him underfoot, possibly as she gave the room a more detailed sweep.

All of a sudden the toes that kept him safe flexed shut, and the ocelot was pinned between tremendous walls of white and left begging for a quick breath, any breath at all. The warmth and permissive softness of the fur and flesh that viced him so was of little comfort given the mighty musculature that was buried just beneath. His dangling feet wildly brushed and shoved at the metallic silver ring, trying to use anything for leverage and squeeze himself free, but without avail.

With what little movement he could make of his neck, head poking out and legs suspended from any earth, Varian peered up to see the set of tools that could only belong to the jolliest of hedonists suspended upon an otherwise gentle face that had been turned upside-down. A raised brow, lips curled to a point of ardent levity, and blue eyes glistening with a particularly icy and brutal level of amusement—all combined to present to him the fact that she was quick enough to notice him at the last second, and mock him for it.

"You sure have a knack for getting yourself into trouble, don'tcha?" Sienna echoed from on high, forcing an inhibited splay of his ears. Her words were startlingly lucid, even from the impossible distance between them. Varian was suddenly reminded and jarred at the fact that she could speak to him and that he could speak back, for the time of her unawareness painted her as a silent moving fortress of death, and shortly afterward as an admirable statue.

But his judgment returned to him with the swiftness expected of one who would never confide those moments of admiration. "Sienna! Can't you watch your step?!"

Her expression did not waver, not even in the crook of her smirk. "Maybe! Can't *you* work like you're supposed to... what was it, Varian? That it? *Pretty* sure I got your name right. Oh, and by the way."

A finger reached from beyond his peripheral vision to lightly tap the tag attached to her ankle, the force bending its surface for just brief enough of a time for him to glimpse its words again. *Watch my step, watch my step—gah, now she's just rubbing it in.* Trying to watch the hand as it reared back to a rested position at her side, however, gave him an uncomfortable sense of vertigo.

"You *could* be a lot less empty-headed and look at where the giant scary kangaroo monster's stomping about, too! As in, do your half of the watching. That would help prevent these situations from almost happening."

Varian sighed despite his still-palpitating heart. He was no longer scared for his life, more annoyed than much else. Sienna was just... well, she certainly would take some acclimation. "Yeah. Sorry, I'm still... getting my bearings, I suppose." A massive difference in scale was simply something he'd have to get used to—such meant more than anything that he was in no place to remain conceited, let alone confident, as he recalled that he was smaller than a mouse in the Overflow would be to him.

The ocelot measured himself against the avalanche of paw. He was less than a fourth its height, maybe a fifth; fractions weren't his forte. All he knew was that, if positioned directly beneath one of her blunted ebony claws, he wouldn't be tall enough to touch it, no matter how much he jumped or stretched. Less than half. He'd roll with that.

The force that kept him in a vice loosened and he fell to the cold ground, him curling his tail so as not to strike it upon plummeting onto his rear. However, the marsupial's mammoth paw did not move; it became clear her business with him was not quite finished. Sienna loomed closer at her prisoner between the open space of two digits, inviting an audible lurch of wind to sweep over him. Her white muzzle grew to encompass his entire field of view, her eyes like twin streetlights under a night sky as they drilled shudders into him.

"Now listen, cutie," she began. Cool, minty breath punctuated the greeting. "Last thing I want to do is hurt anybody—no matter what I say or do, you know that's true. It's why it's my job." A wayward hand brushed a lock of snowy hair over the other side of her neck, it hanging down as a silken tapestry from her intent ears. Those ears twitched with purpose; and yet, it was far too clear she wasn't above spicing up a message with some playful intent, given that it hadn't died down even a smidgen. "But I do, however, suggest being a decent bit more careful, 'kay? And I know you can," she mixed in sweetly, "and it's your first day and all. So get to wherever it is you need to go, and be mindful enough not to get squashed by the supervisors. I don't want kitty mush all over my paws, you understand!"

At last, the shadow encompassing Varian lifted and faded as the hulking form of Sienna reached its careful steps over him, on a quest to continue her patrol. Her leave was entirely expected and forced a mix of relief and annoyance to well up inside the ocelot's stomach. Why he was annoyed, he couldn't be entirely sure, but the feeling was there and left rather unfulfilled.

Suddenly, Sienna stopped, then turned halfway. Varian cocked his head then took a glance toward the horizon—the vulpine Server Peacekeeper had not left. In fact, she'd drawn closer, and her predatory gaze was dangerously close to finding him.

It was within moments that Varian pieced the kangaroo's reaction together, but he did not dare to move. The gargantuan mountains that had nearly crushed him returned to cast a sense of impending doom before falling atop his world once more—this time with pinpoint accuracy and lightning quickness. All went as black as the underside of her pads.

The marsupial was no stranger to tension; she was just remarkable at shrugging it off. She eyed her newest visitor, who, if her hunches were correct—and they usually were decidedly infallible if she could say so herself—was not here to apply for work. The vulpine aged somewhere in her mid-thirties, riddled with the holes of experience and filled in with jade, garbed in a dark grey skirt and similarly-shaded longcoat. The neck of her coat heralded an ocean of ginger hair that swept down to her conservative neckline.

The fox spoke first. “Nadine, for want of formalities. This is not the first time we’ve met under similar pretenses, miss... Redowli.” The newcomer shook her head. “Although last time, we’d met under a government roof. It was your own house if I remember correctly.”

“My summer home?” Sienna asked sweetly. “I’m positive the circumstances were not at all the same.”

“So you know why I’m here then? I expect to make this quick and clean.” Nadine’s heels clicked harshly against the cold floor to the rhythm of her flicking pupils, darting around like those of a predator. “...In any case, I would make it clear, Miss Redowli, that while I am personally keeping a vigil on you—”

“This has nothing to do with me,” she interrupted. “But it *does* have to do with the company. I understand and disapprove. Rather rude of you to bust on in here, using me as an excuse to broaden your snooping.”

“Irrelevant,” she snarled. The vixen’s brow tensed cautiously. “But I’ll play along since you like your games so much. You may fool the wardens easily, but I see right through you. This is your real home, is it not? Complete with what I might be inclined to call... illegal sync tech? And yet that isn’t what your WAE profile would indicate. How long you plan on playing loophole, I wonder.”

Sienna reared back in a mock show of offense. “Oh, so direct! You wound me, instigator.”

“Investigator?” Nadine corrected with a low growl.

“Sure, that one. Or do you prefer constable? Detective? Officer? And here’s one for you history buffs: dick. Which you’re acting like right now, mind you. You’re not here for me, so please stop wasting my time or I’ll kindly ask you to leave.”

The vulpine’s tail flicked, the anger in her wrinkling visage seeming to enter a grizzled pupa stage, falsely calm. “Oh, is that so? You mistake your privilege, Redowli. Do you think yourself above the law?”

Sienna perfected her posture with faint pops of her spine, leering at Nadine. She took faint, strafing steps sideways, as a wolf would to encircle its prey. “I hate to break it to you, but you aren’t the law, no matter what office you shuffle and sort papers in during the day. And as for me? I’m not above the law—I’m beside it. I’m above *you*.” The kangaroo made sure her eyes made contact with the fox’s swamp green ones—and when they did, she could practically see her confidence flake away. “So I’m gonna ask you one more time: what do you want?”

Nadine swallowed, but not without returning a glare that screamed her reluctance to comply. "...A Mr. Cadenza. Varian. I would speak with him. My sources indicate that he is to be found here—take me to him."

Sienna's eyes widened for a fleeting blink. Innocently she shuffled her paws and shut her toes against each other like prison gates—smothering any meep of the ocelot beneath an avalanche of snowy white digits and ebony pads. "Not that I would be aware of," she said surely, looking down only once. She inched her toe further to smother a wayward thread of a spotted tail, then met Nadine's attention once more. "Have you spoken with any of my superiors?"

The kangaroo felt a light, squirming tickle beneath her paw after she shifted. In response she grumbled a nonverbal "Shut up" and scrunched her toes against the rubber mat and the fuzzy anomaly somewhere between them, feeling her heavy, callused pads blindly sweep over his miniscule torso, his tiny toothpick limbs and tail, as her captive was clenched tighter within the leathery cell walls. Good *lord* why was that borderline cathartic?

The vixen's eyes narrowed and dipped lower for a moment, apparently finding nothing of note at Sienna's feet as they darted back up again. Mimicking the kangaroo's gaze bore no fruit. She took a deep breath, then sighed clouds of venom. "I thought you saw yourself as the most superior thing here," she snarled.

"Only between you and me, darling," Sienna whispered icily. She rose her neck and pulled herself away from the seething representative. A smirk broke out upon her lips; she'd successfully broken the vixen's bravado and there was nothing more to say. Both of them knew it. "If that is all, I appreciate your time and dedication, but it won't be needed. I wish you the best of luck with your search."

Nadine mouthed one retort after another. Eventually she gave up wording them, drooped a finger, and huffed. "I'll still be around, you know. I won't just up and disappear like I'm sure we'd all like. You may speak to me if your mind on the matter happens to change."

It did not take long at all for the vulpine to disappear between the arches of the east door, fluffy conical tail swaying with her sashaying hips. The second she was alone, Sienna raised her foot and surveyed what was beneath—to her relief, a perfectly safe and hidden Varian sprawled out on his back, not much worse for wear than before. Albeit a bit shell-shocked.

Sienna set her paw back down again, this time only pinning him by the tip of her toe. "Sorry 'bout that. Well actually, guess I'm not that sorry, but hey, you gotta do what you gotta do!" Sienna giggled heartily, as the ocelot found she was occasionally wont to do. "Not that I bet it was all that bad under there."

Varian did not protest, likely stark shocked at what had happened, how she handled the situation... or how he couldn't bring himself to disagree—wait what was he thinking? He struggled in an attempt to scurry out from beneath the ebony ceiling, but the weight was an impossible prison. He quit his flurrying with a resigned sigh.

She smirked, shamelessly enjoying the battery of his little arms against her paw. "Seems like you've got yourself an admirer, 'Mr. Cadenza'. Is there a story you'd care to share with me?"

“Uh.” He swallowed hard. If she was going to leave him be before, any chance of that happening had just evaporated into little bits fluttering away before his eyes. He quietly damned himself.

Sienna released the force of her step and allowed him to recuperate. She lumbered backward and forward with step after graceful step, pacing, the act sending echoing shockwaves reverberating through the cold floor. Varian’s face became a beet beneath his fur.

She held out a palm and placed the other on her mountain of a knee, then widened her eyes as she spoke. “I mean, now I don’t have a choice. We *have* to hang out after that. You know what, you’re a pretty fun little guy; enjoying our little rivalry while you can, I take it? Oh and look at me, we’re good friends and we haven’t even had a good and proper conversation!”

“Good friends? We’ve only just met! We’re hardly even acquaintances,” he meeped.

“Oh, like you’re gonna say no. And it’s not like if I just totally saved your tiny ass, nothing like that!” Sienna craned down and pinched the feline between two fingers, once again raising him to her face. The force of rushing wind threatened to rip his eyeballs from their sockets as a blur of white replaced everything he could see.

His vision returned to clarity in the form of an endless runway of white muzzle punctuated by a thick, flaring charcoal nose, one cave-like nostril of which outsized him by a considerable amount. The ocelot flinched and scrunched up his legs as the nose flared and thinned, absorbing and exhaling gusts almost powerful enough to dislodge him from her grasp; the giantess took in his scent, apparently pleased with the result.

“Mmm. I think I like you! At the very least you’re breaking up the fine and dandy monotony. Besides, we still have that bet going on. What’s a bet *but* between friends?”

“You know, it’s proper etiquette among the smaller folks in the Overflow to *ask* before picking them up. I’m inclined to say that should just as well apply here,” Varian offered with a series of squirms.

“Oh, stop. That’s one too many questions to ask. And besides, you’re not a squirrel, mouse, chipmunk, rat, finch, or any other species that would fall under the ‘small’ category. You’re just super teeny because you work here so you don’t count. It’s a good look for you, by the way!”

Varian sighed. There had to be some trick, but there was no way to trigger the bear trap without letting it eat a leg. “Fine. We’re friends.”

“Yay! Y’know, it’s always good to have buddies to hang around with, especially in a new place. Like, look at me and Battery. We’re surrogate sisters, plain and simple. Knew the girl ever since she joined up this place and, well, here we still are!” She plopped the ocelot onto her muzzle once again, leaving him to scramble to his feet and use the floor of thin white fuzz beneath him as grips. The wrinkling of her nose gave rise to innumerable hills and valleys beneath his feet and far beyond, like the snowy dunes of a stretching tundra. Her thundering steps then continued as she wandered across the room, tremendous beryl eyes lazily scanning about.

"What does this have to do with me?" Varian asked.

"Hardly a lot," Sienna said bluntly. "But there is this much to say: you're an adorable little kitten and you're way too much fun to bat around. That and, well, maybe it would be prudent of me to apologize." Her voice wryly curled at the tip of its mirth, her eyes then deciding to focus on him and only him, forcing a shudder and splay of his ears. "Don't take it as a sign that I'll quit teasing you any time soon, but I'll let you ease into your first day a little better. How's that?"

"Better," Varian repeated. However, the fact that Sienna did not stop moving well after she reached the edge of the room managed to unnerve him just so. "Er, where are we going?"

Sienna smirked, though Varian could only detect it through the gargantuan kangaroo's puffed cheeks. "Well, I wanted to have a little chat with our newest sailor. In return, I'll offer *you* a bit of an early break period, not that it seems like you've done much to earn it. Generous of me, hm?"

It was crystal clear through the prisms of her eyes—she had a plan. Gold-black tail flicking nervously, the ocelot shuddered and steeled himself for it.

"I'm afraid of the nature of this chat," Varian remarked. Though thin as glass on the inside, he remained as cynical as ever.

"Don't be! I don't bite. Or bark. Or claw, none of that dog stuff. Might paw a little, but that's more of a cat thing—and in the end you'll be right as rain. You get to have some one-on-one with little old Sienna, and get off work early! Why, it's a total win-win."

Varian sighed in admittance. There was nothing he could do. It was frightening how she could be both blunt and vague about her intent, and without exerting any amount of effort, at least if her face and tone could be judged. The mammoth kangaroo continued her waltz through a single steel corridor, prying open the door to what appeared to be a rather sizeable bar with uncharacteristic slowness and care. The occasional fizz of a spigot being cranked perked his ears, but he did his best to remain still upon the landscape of a muzzle, white fur sprawling in every direction. The horizon was tipped with an ebony mass, twitching as new scents buffeted the mesa of a snout upon entry to the bar.

There was no telling what kind of trap Sienna had set; a reaction of any kind would only encourage the marsupial, of that he had no doubt whatsoever. Perhaps if he remained as dull and cautious as physically possible, he could spring free of her interest... and then he could return to work.

"So." Sienna reached forth and plucked the tiny cat from the bridge of her nose, then set him on a ground most wooden.

"Yes?" The ocelot looked around, only slightly paying attention; a few rings of moisture dotted the landscape resemblant of those left behind by a filled glass. Right—this was a bar. He was on a table. Rather unfortunate choice of location for a discussion of the rigged kind.

His thoughts dug back to when he first entered Sparklight—why did he do it again? As soft and pleasurable a sight as Sienna was to his tired eyes, he doubted he would get a chance to settle down for more than three minutes before some new excursion drop-kicked him into submission. Perhaps that excuse to leave would come sooner than he'd anticipated. A career in psychic prediction suddenly became appealing.

"Before anything else by the way, I know you're worried. Don't be! I just want to get you all comfy and let you know you're accepted into the fold."

His thoughts dashed themselves as the ocelot could no longer prioritize them over Sienna. "*The fold?* As in, comprised of who?" Varian shot.

"Why, Battery and I of course!" Sienna sang, crossing her legs as she at last flumped onto a stool. The ocelot barely avoided gawking as the tightness of her shirt betrayed her endowed generosity. Suddenly, her attention diverted. "Hey Lexi! Think you could shoot me a, uh... ah," she trailed off, snapping her fingers as if trying to force something to memory. As she did so, a tall, brown rabbit rounded the corner off the bar end, making each step cordial and precise. "Oh, scotch! Yeah, one of those for me, and... say, what're you a fan of?"

The way Sienna suddenly shifted her tone to a murmur and inched her face lower told the ocelot he was being spoken to. "Oh, I—scotch is fine."

"Right, gotcha." The kangaroo shot a wink. Her voice raised again. "And a shot glass. Add a vodka to my tab too—I'll pick it up in a sec."

The rabbit nodded fiercely. For a bartender she seemed the least likely person to enjoy her work, and less so its fruits. "S-sure. I'll bring out some additives for you and Battery. She likes a bit of butterscotch, right?"

Varian cocked his head. Was Battery involved in this? Sienna did not flinch at the name once it was outed; because of that it was difficult to tell how much of a role the coyote was going to play. Hell, where was she, anyway? He couldn't see her or... or anyone aside from the massive kangaroo, in truth. But that only exacerbated his worried thoughts that there was no safe haven to be found—and no doubt Sienna would continue to make sure of that.

"You got it. Thank ya Lexi!" The kangaroo's bludgeoning singsong voice snapped Varian awake again. She let her gaze drift lower, crossing her arms upon the table as an impassable white wall between the ocelot and her leaning chest. It was almost as if the motion was reactive to his prior gawking. "That's Lexi, by the way. She runs the cafeteria and the bar—hard jobs! Thankfully she has her underlings to help manage the former, anyway."

“What’s this about?” The ocelot stamped a paw and lashed the tip of his tail against the tabletop like a featherweight whip. “You stealing me when I should be working, saying we’re more than acquaintances, and now buying me a drink?”

“Well to be honest, shots are free, so technically I’m not buying you anything. Feel free to look at it as a token of goodwill, nothing more!” Sienna sang, light scintillating off her alabaster fur. She punctuated her softness with a warm and not-totally-sincere smile.

“I—I dunno.” The feline breathed in and out, consciously, even as the towering brown rabbit returned to drop off the three filled glasses—one of which landed with a loud clatter mere feet from his paws, eliciting a gasp. Even when he was in questionable danger, almost anything could pose a threat to his life. Or seem like it could. “Guh. I mean thank you, but...”

Silence followed, which the ocelot deigned to be a part of. Sienna took to the conversation after a single ladylike sip from the rim of her glass. “I’ve said it once already, but you’re a fun little guy. And I also said that it’s good to have people to hang around with and feel comfortable around. See where those two things are meshing together?” The kangaroo then leaned slightly to pour scant amounts of scotch into the empty shot glass that lay beside Varian, scrunching her shoulders as if clumsily managing a microbe with a pair of tweezers between her thick fingers.

“I... you’re for real, then?” Varian mewed. It appeared she was being completely genuine. He dared look into her face, trying to find any stark grin that would debunk his theory in an instant. There was none; instead, only the slightest raising of his heart as the stale air carried the scent of alcohol into his twitching nose. “You’re not just fucking with me.”

“Yes.” The answer was far too simple for his liking.

Her tone belied an ulterior motive, but it seemed innocuous enough. What did the ocelot have to worry about? Surely nothing. Not unless he wanted to remain a paranoid cat who wasn’t having any fun at all. He had few reasons to trust her with all his heart but... well, she *did* hide him from the Peacekeeper. That was a point in her favor already and a reason to roll with the punches, even if the method was less than scrupulous. It was somewhat astounding how plush and warm his hiding place had been though; that had to be a result of practice—wait, no, bad thoughts. Bad.

“Great,” Varian said with an exhale, his breath hanging with reluctant assent. Lord, his head was already spinning after the events of today. Suddenly, he looked up to face her, ears splayed preemptively. “This wouldn’t... happen to be about that bet of ours, would it?”

The kangaroo shifted in her seat, never once removing that azure gaze of hers from his miniscule form. Her adoration towards his nervous reaction was clear in the way her eyes lidded ever so slightly. “Hah, nah,” Sienna assured, letting out a hearty giggle. “But you won’t have your reminders in short supply, don’t you worry. I’ll make sure of that.”

“Aye.” Varian shook his head. “And I sure as hell won’t be listening,” he said with a snoot.

“Oh, won’t you now?” The kangaroo cocked her head, feigning offense. “Not even to humor poor old me?”

“Hah. You just want to win this bet.” Varian flared up, stamping a paw against the ground with a quiet *bap* in a laughably futile attempt at taking charge. As if to reinforce the failing argument that had thus far garnered a snicker, he continued, “I won’t be leaving, not yet. I may bend over easy, but I don’t break as simply as you want me to.”

The rabbit-like ears of Sienna perked and swiveled, eventually bending to their left in amusement. “No?” A shadow overtook Varian as the kangaroo leaned closer and rested her head just a few feet from him, propped up by a palm against her cheek. One arm lazily snaked a trail along the table and, and—by all that was holy the kangaroo was massive. Varian could barely retain his composure just trying to take in the full scale of her face—which, unfortunately, was aimed squarely at him. “Tell me more, baby kitty. I wanna know why you’re so uppity.”

Varian’s bravado failed and drained from his face, leaving a blotch of red in his cheeks instead. “I’ve taken three years at Univera in engineering—I think I know what I’m doing! Even if—” Gah, her sheer size was enough to project a physical weight, nearly too heavy for him to advance. With a stark swallow of air he shook his head and shuddered, this time visibly—and much to the delight of a thoroughly intrigued Sienna. “Even if you’re trying as hard as you can to keep me from it.”

Sienna’s fascination flared up—not merely in his anxiousness, but in the topic. “Playing your hand close to your chest? You don’t have to go and do that, y’know!”

She quivered her head with eyes shut briefly, shuffling her fluffy white locks along her shoulders as if to adjust them in accentuation of her coalescing thoughts. Her mean to simultaneously evade his assertion while assuaging him went noticed, but accepted. Reluctantly.

“An introduction is nice to have, is all. Even if it’s a bit of a small one. One time or another, it’s something that I wanted to get out of the way—you’re different. You’re clearly interested in the subject matter, not just in walking away with a bit of cash after a few days of internship. That’s something I can appreciate!”

So the truth comes out, Varian thought. It actually felt nice to get some semblance of clarity on the subject... even if she wasn’t entirely correct. Varian turned to his side to measure up the shot glass—no dice, still too big. Even a jump wouldn’t help him hook on. Likely just to taunt him...

Sadly, money really was a part of the equation, and a large one. It was the simple hope that it would come with a new experience and the fulfillment of Rena’s urging that kept him going further than he normally would.

Additionally, he had to admit: getting to know new people might not have been so bad. Sienna’s exuberance and relaxed nature—when it came to where things were right then—were aspects of her

character he appreciated the most. At the very baseline least, he could say he was starting to feel welcome.

“See, this place operates in a certain way,” the kangaroo continued. “We get new folks all the time when we land, but they leave just like...” Sienna seemed to ponder for a moment, then emphasized with a snap of her fingers, “like that. *Just* like that, man. It’s sort of a rotating trust system—we expect people to do their work because that’s why they came, but kicking them out is hard, even if they don’t do their job.”

Varian’s heart skipped a beat thanks to the small pool of consternation welling up within it. So... did she want him to leave or didn’t she? From the pact that they’d forged he would have figured the former—but the way she was suddenly warming up to him spoke miles from the other end of the field. However, that wasn’t worth bringing up. Varian finally stood up, tail flicking. Wouldn’t kill him to make a conversation out of the rest. It followed that was she was talking about was the same thing that had Battery so darkened earlier.

“Well, why is that? You and Battery are supervisors; can’t you just fire them yourselves?”

Sienna’s eyes glinted and shot right to him. “I wish I could say we could even sarcastically. But nope, we can’t quite handle it. We may be employers of sorts, but management of that kind isn’t our privilege, and the rest of the process flat out isn’t worth my time. We have our own authorities, believe it or not.”

“Yeah.” Varian looked away for a moment. Perhaps he could take a page from her book, if only to keep her interest. He nearly scoffed; *look at me now, wanting her interest*. He’d be lying to assert he wasn’t enjoying her company at least a little. “Though to be honest I’m not surprised you’re not at the top of the ladder.”

A sly spark erupted in Sienna’s dark pupils, as if a different mode had been flicked on somewhere in her brain. “Oh, harsh words. So vitriolic. The mouth on you is made for meowing, isn’t it?” The mighty kangaroo heaved forward, looming close. Her face comprised Varian’s entire field of view, at which he could only acquiesce and offer a squeaking meow.

His thoughts raced after a lapse in her reaction, wondering if he’d made a mistake in playing her own game. Suddenly, a white-furred finger that dwarfed his very being emerged from his side and pinned him by his stomach, driving a blunted clawtip onto his entire torso. The ocelot wheezed for breath; someone with her size, girth, and musculature didn’t need to expend any effort in controlling his behavior.

“I thought this might be where this was going,” Varian said amidst gasps. The veritable tower of muscle ground its tip into his chest innocuously, executing what air remained in his lungs. He knew he should’ve quit while he was ahead.

She was trying so very hard to make her end of it, too.

“Hah! You brought this one on yourself,” Sienna said with a chuckle. However, she then lifted the pressure from his tummy, letting him regain composure. “But nah, nah—in any case, I said I’d leave you alone for a bit, and I’m a ‘roo of my word. Gotta stop making me enjoy your company if you want that to keep, though!”

The ocelot took to sitting up and supporting himself with a single hand, the other rubbing his stomach coarsely. “I’ll do my best. Of that I assure you,” Varian retorted with a light cough.

“Heh. You’re not doing so hot so far,” Sienna said. She seemed to sift through options in her head, branching paths that could lead to this topic or that. She was fully in control, her puissance insurmountable, but no doubt about this much: she wanted to know more about the ocelot. How to approach it, though...

Much to her surprise, the ocelot must have been thinking similar thoughts.

“I’ve never seen a white kangaroo before,” he said suddenly.

The kangaroo’s eyes focused on her miniscule captive. “What?” she blurted, but made no effort to cover up the accident.

“Er... I mean, I personally never have. I don’t want to offend or anything,” he continued slowly, raising his hands. “Ah... crap.” Sienna’s eyes bore into him remorselessly. “What? What are you looking at me like that for?”

“Heh. You’re just a blast, you know that?” The mammoth marsupial released a chuckle, one whose sheer power rebounded off the walls and rattled his tiny ribcage. She had to cover up for being caught off guard. “Worrying soooo much, and about nothing. I did say relax, didn’t I?” He ignored that statement well. “You are right, after all. The white fur is something of a rarity, but I’m not an albino. I still got my eye color, y’see.” The stool beneath her creaked innocently as she leaned close to envelop Varian’s entire field of vision with one of her blue peepers.

Like a seeping, impossible ocean that twitched to focus on his every movement, only one of her eyes could very easily swallow him up within its being. He shuddered; she might have considered that herself. He sighed with relief as her soft face returned to its far-away home, along the horizon and not inches from his own.

Propping the collar of his cardigan with little success, the ocelot harrumphed. “Yeah. It looks... n-nice,” he stammered. Without skipping a beat he added, “But white is a color reserved for rabbits and mice, don’t you think?”

“Oh psh. We kangaroos are basically rabbits with actual tails. Also, we’re bigger! I can’t think of a single thing rabbits have that we don’t.”

Varian smirked. “So proud.”

Sienna shifted in her seat, crossing her legs with the utmost confidence and letting a paw hang from the perch of her thigh. “Oh, but of course. Well, rabbits have an easier time getting into an SS to begin with. They can kinda walk in. They had to make a bigger portal for people like me, and like those bigger cats—pumas, lions... oh, and bears. That was the primary reason, bears. Things don’t fit into jack shit. But that’s okay,” Sienna said with a flash of teeth and a snap of her fingers. “I can ignore that minor infringement upon my species’ rep because I love my living situation. I live here, mostly, and the rent is straight out of the paycheck, but I get to bypass the nuances.”

“Oh?” Varian cocked his head, then made a reproaching gasp. “Is that what Nadine was talking about?”

The mention of Nadine would forever remind him of being stepped on and ‘hidden’ by Sienna, it seemed. Dammit, he’d never live it down.

“See, technically I don’t live in an SS... not in a by-the-book way, anyhoo. All the city’s wardens are concerned with is whether or not I regularly stay inside the city. So I get all those nice little benefits of being around people my height—well, relatively speaking—thanks to sync tech, and when it comes time to return home during the summer, I get a sweet discount on estate charges and a few tax reimbursements. Proper of someone who hails from a home in the Overflow, don’tcha know. In other words, I live in an SS, but the papers say I don’t.”

“So people that are making the transition from the Overflow to an SS get temporary deductions on real estate... and you get that every time you go home, is what you’re saying. That’s pretty much tax evasion. What, do you *live* on technicalities?”

“Who says I can’t?” Sienna said with a pitch straight out of a commercial. “Before you ask... yes. Nadine and I have met before, and that right there is the reason why. There aren’t any laws against me gaming the system quite that way, mind you, but Nadine’s no idiot. I’d pin her as pretty smart if it weren’t for the fact that she’s so scared of me outside of her precious servers. She sees me as disreputable thanks to our first meeting... though I might prefer the term reprobate. Much more romantic, don’t you think? A dashing rogue who skims the boundaries of her privilege, hm?”

Figured that she’d nearly gotten into trouble with the law before. But that did bring up something that bothered him, how Nadine mentioned ‘illegal sync tech’. Was that true? Was the technology required to power Sparklight taken without leave, or was it just emulated to a T? Either possibility was puzzling and... he’d be inclined to say equally plausible. Battery and Sienna were clearly no slouches when it came to the fluff work, at least he figured—and that wasn’t even considering any of their superiors or workers behind the scenes.

That said, he wasn’t ready to trust anybody, and Sienna was no shining paragon of virtue. If they’d stolen something, he was halfway to believing it.

“Makes one wonder just what happened during that first meeting,” Varian said airily.

The gargantuan torso before him shifted, stretching on into the heavens. “Well... she decided to approach me one day, the last day of my time off. She said my hit-and-run schedule for the past year was ‘undoubtedly dubious’ to get an exact quote. Then she looked around my house and decided I wasn’t worth trusting, *especially* since she couldn’t find anything that would show I’d done anything illegal. Spoiler: I hadn’t, but she knew what kinda game I was playing.” She shook her head, laughing. “She still does.”

Suddenly, Sienna halted, seeming to reel that she had been coerced to say so much. “You’re quite the curious one, hm. In that case, we’ll be getting along just fine, my little fuzzball.”

“Psh.” He paused. He would have been able to dismiss it as another Sienna-ism, but her tone hung without proper clarity. “Wait—what.”

Sienna opted to let an eyebrow raise over repeating herself. Falling straight into the spike pit but with no way not to, Varian pressed forward.

“I mean—eep...! Don’t you think it’s a little too early to assert something like that? We’ve still got a full day ahead of us before you win.”

Sienna released a low chuckle. The topic had been washed away with absolutely zero effort on her part. “Well that’s perfectly okay. Sometimes I just think it’s good to get some time alone, you know? Just simmer down and pretend there ain’t a competition.”

The ocelot’s knees were knocking. Not now, not now! “W-what the hell do you mean by *that*?”

A gentle, almost coy smile erupted upon Sienna’s features, like a rift tearing open the sky. “You’re a cute little kitten, kiddo. All crawling about at that new size of yours, and every word that comes outta your itty bitty mouth is hardly a squeak!” She poked him with a wayward finger from a hand that had somehow coiled behind him when he wasn’t looking, forcing him to stumble a couple inches closer. “And you’re just a *delight* to butt heads with. I don’t see anything wrong with us getting a little bonding time, do you?”

Oh no. Varian’s eyes flitted about, threatening to rip out from his sockets and bounce all the way home. He hoped that ‘bonding time’ meant the conversation they’d already had, and not something he’d have the displeasure of looking forward to. This kangaroo would be the death of him. How much of her could he even believe? Was she really that enamored with him? Or... was that a trick too? Some kind of sick midway point where she did like him but was being facetious with her approach? Or was she simply promiscuous by nature?

...It just wasn’t worth thinking about. Not when his face was at the boiling point.

Varian muscled up his bravery. “I don’t see anything wrong with some one-on-one, no—but that’d depend on when and how you planned on doing that.”

The kangaroo put a finger to her chin at the worlds. The act was see-through; unfortunately, such was intentional, and Varian knew it. "Oh... you don't have to go and be like that. Personally—you and me? I think we go together like ketchup and mustard. But..." The way her voice suddenly curved higher told the ocelot that this was the moment of truth. Unfortunately, it also told him that she had this wrap-up to the conversation all perfectly planned out. "That's not exactly why you're here, is it?"

The cat froze. "Umm... it's not?" he meeped.

Sienna smirked wide and far, levity brimming out from her eyes. "Good answer." She suddenly stood from her seat, jostling the table with powerful tremors that nearly sent Varian prone. "No, it's not. Not quite, anyway! Getting to know you, even a little, has been pretty cool—but I think a bit of play never hurt anybody. Least of all me!"

"Spit it out." Unimpressed, Varian crossed his arms. However, the act of bravado and salt meant nothing to the kangaroo. As told by her enthused look that dug into his very being, and tore it apart from the inside. That a single expression could have so much power gave rise to a mix of respect and terror, and yet, he hoped it was all a mere pretense ready to be waved aside.

No such luck.

Sienna whistled innocuously. "Y'know, you really are making my transitions far too easy. I'd probably ask that you step it up a little if I didn't feel so accomplished," she said, tilting her head with a cocky shrug that fluffed her hair up, then down.

Dammit. She switched demeanors so easily, so fluidly, that it was as if she never even had to try to intimidate or unnerve him. It just *happened*, and boy did she like it.

"It's just that I have a schedule to follow, and our little one-on-one's up. See, now that we've got each other so well acquainted, I think it's time you met somebody else. Just trust me: I have the best intentions!"

Varian attempted to shyly back away, but her looming mountain of a visage stared deep, unfathomably deep into his soul. Her voice echoed one more time. "Oh! And as for bonding? We'll have *that* picnic another time. I'll be looking forward to it."

A finger's pad the size of a rich plot of land swept across the floor and scooped his scurrying form onto its black, leathery surface, upon which he could see every imperfection, crease and crack of tough skin. Up and off he went, hardly an ant on the expanse of her fingertip and clinging for dear life onto the rugged, yet forgiving earth. The gusts that buffeted his tiny form were almost too much to bear as a result of his captor's skipping that thundered along the bar's floor, like the drums of a warband with prisoner in tow on their path to the compound.

And yet, it was a remarkable, almost commendable feat just how precisely she could carry him and crane him without causing harm. A result of respectable dexterity, he had to think, as well as experience

around other workers. He sure as hell was thankful for it, even if it gave her a point in her favor. And boy did every point count. If he was going to come out of today alive, he'd well have to start deciding which ones mattered enough to make it worth staying—because after this fiasco he'd have to continue contemplating passing on Sienna's bet.

The only interruption of the journey was a warm thank-you from the kangaroo's unmistakable weaving pitch. The tinkling of glass against claw sounded; the former being tapped before grasped, if he could infer based on tones. Further movement of the all-encompassing ground beneath him followed, and soon a figure on the far end of the bar came into clarity. A brown canine with a lidded gaze and several sheets laid before her on the table.

"Here you go! Break's just about to start," went the words from far above him. "Thought I'd follow up on that promise of mine. I'll join you in a couple minutes..."

The motion stopped. An upward glance following his recomposition on her thumb revealed a singular smirk along the white, pillowy clouds of Sienna's face far in the sky—then the ground fell away, ebony bricks, prying apart beneath his feet, leaving him to his befuddled and angry descent as he cried out innumerable unintelligibles.

"Sienna! Sienna, you cheeky, jaunty bastard—!" Varian began, but was interrupted by a frigid plunk into a liquid prison.

"Grain for the mice, simulated mouse-meat for me," Battery said, whistling as the course materialized in full before her. Contrary to such, however, the first taste that tickled her tongue was the bitterness of vodka as a glass rim pressed to her gentle lips. "But a fine drink can be enjoyed by everyone." The sip was quick and tasteful, though a queer gaze downward lent to her temporary suspicion of an anomaly in her drink, quickly shaken away.

She looked up. "You know I can't eat that, dummy. You know what ruined meat for me? That one book in my office, *Market of Death*. An indigenous Overflow government run by carnivores made profits off mouse meat, and sustained their little island state almost entirely off it. I don't think you even have it in your databanks."

In response, a robotic entity sprung to answer her soliloquys from atop the bar end. His mechanical, serpentine frame was comprised of false sinews, like an arm of wires tipped with a glowing, inquisitive eyeball the size of her fist. His iris whirred once before suddenly beginning to radiate a stark red, which then projected itself forth as a burst of crimson and spilled onto Battery's desk like liquid light. A mere puddle that threatened to leak onto her paperwork, the light built itself back up into a vague, see-through shape, growing more and more humanoid by the second.

As the light began to die down, the new figure's body of light grew to resemble a rabbit no taller than her index finger. Garbed in the tresses of a naval captain, his tiny frame still retained the vivid red color of the light that had borne him—even his clothes and fur.

"It's difficult to tell if you're insulting me or referring to me by name, really." The rabbit replied. "I've learned what a dummy is in my spare time. It's not something I'm very proud of."

"My apologies," Battery said airily, looking back at her meal longingly.

Dummy had noticed. "I will apologize for your vegan status," he said dismissively. "Mind you, I am only an appendage of the mainframe. I have no access to its full data sans everything pertaining to its operation. Of course I do not know what that book of yours is."

Battery shrugged. "Well, take it away and... I dunno, surprise me?"

"How about rat meat? Or is that too similar for the lady's taste? ...Though I still don't know why I am serving you anything. Is that not something you're capable of doing yourself?"

"I can't *surprise* myself," Battery said smugly. "Besides, your protocol is making sure everything in Sparklight is operating smoothly. Me being hungry is detrimental to that."

"Oh, I see. So I am your slave." The three-inch lagomorph snooted, lop ears fluttering behind his head. "Not likely. But I do this out of the goodness of my core. And the fact that using the Nutri-fabricator—sorry. Everybody calls it the Nutro." He stopped quite suddenly and seemed genuinely apologetic. "Point is that it's exceedingly easy to use, so I may as well. How about... rabbit?" he suggested.

"Oh good, you're learning irony!" Battery exclaimed. She reached with a palm to pat his head—and startling as it always was, there was a physical object beneath her hand. She nearly reared back before charmingly rubbing his ears with two fingers, raising them up, then letting them slip back down from between her knuckles. The feeling was soft, but otherwise entirely textureless—not even like fur. "Heh. So much for a hologram," Battery remarked, noting that Dummy's rabbit-body had shut its eyes in pleasure. They snapped open at her words, however.

"Flaw in programming. You'd know it better than I. The body you see," the rabbit motioned toward itself with hands tipped on crooked elbows, straightening out his arms as if to say 'all of this'. "It's only a visual. I don't actually feel it. And the reactions it has are limited to what whoever programmed me thought it might deal with."

"Apparently massages were a very expected response to your little avatar," Battery teased. "Sienna's dad really thought of everything. Guess that's what happens when you're the head of a private industry though." The coyote put a palm to her cheek, propping her head with an elbow as she eyed the grumping bunny.

Dummy, the sociable extension of Sparklight's mainframe, smart as he was, was but a young calculator. He was designed to gather information in a manner the rest of the computer could not—by conversation. Intrinsic logical receptors allowed for the prime and pretty of his myriad functions; in only the month's span he'd had to live thus far, he'd learned a lifetime of speech, words, grammatical functions, and even picked up social cues. Yet for such a mighty claim, he'd had the misfortune of being named by Sienna while he stirred in the throes of mechanical birth, spurred to consciousness by the flick of a key.

Dummy was, in all cases, the result of father-daughter ingenuity. Sienna herself had even offered a piece of her own psyche to be scanned and translated for use as the basis for Dummy's personality. A stark difference between the two arose naturally over time; and Battery found it infinitely fascinating.

The rabbit of red snooted, stiff expression refusing to waver. His face wasn't quite full; like it had a single layer, stiff yet inviting. It reminded the coyote of a stuffed doll. "I do so hate this place; having to resort to a hollow body for communication is simply trying. Open roofs make things so difficult."

"You can leave if you want; I'm not making you stay," Battery replied.

"After I decide what to make the miss for her meal, I shall. The ceiling is my home. Many wires up there, lots of electrical currents. It feels nicer than you'd expect. So inconvenient to holo up this body only to tear it down moments later, though."

The coyote shrugged as she tossed a casual glance his way. "Besides, you're kinda cute that way. I bet Sienna gives you all kinds of hell."

The rabbit shook his head, pastel eyes gleaming as they looked into her own. "She doesn't outside of the occasional snuggle. She, in her words, 'doesn't think machines are quite as cute as the real thing.'"

"Heh. She has no shame, either. If she did think you were as cute as Varian, she wouldn't think twice about displaying it right in front of me."

"Yes. Great. In any case, I'll get on doing what you asked. Because I'm considerate like that." He bowed, enjoyed one more charming pat on the head from his fleshy counterpart's furred fingers, then faded out of existence. The serpentine mesh of wires and conduits hooked firmly into the bar whirled to life and slunk behind the counter.

Heh. He was right; the Nutro wasn't hard to use, but goodness if she didn't deserve to be lazy every now and then. Tap the core nutrients like proteins and fiber, choose what taste to emulate and one was practically good to go. It wasn't an exclusivity to Sparklight however; no, every SS possessed them in regular quantities. Otherwise the life of a modern carnivore would be stale and starving. Shrugging, she eyed the vodka in her hand; the glass scintillated longingly.

Indeed, the coyote had found alcohol to be her be-all more often than not. She was just as often thankful that she had developed some kind of resistance to its more adverse effects and could unwind

as often as she needed to. At the very least she no longer sported quite the same level of irritability as a mere half hour ago—and boy if that wasn't nice. The soft breeze spun by a perpetually ear-ringing lack of a ceiling may have only been relaxing after spending a good five minutes in acclimation, but to the coyote it was more than worth it. Rays belonging to the open sun rode in through the steely sheets of metal above her, disappearing at a moment's notice and at the whim of the clouds.

This was her *break*. It was something Battery could do every day, and the best part? She *earned* it. She did not receive a single thing hand-delivered to her in fancy boxing and covered with roses. She worked hard, put her all into everything and anything that was asked of her—sometimes more—and came out of the settling dust with everything to show of her efforts. Nothing to show of her abasement.

It was nothing like the city life, or so she assured herself. That was a life many had grown too comfortable with... too soft. While there was nothing wrong with that, and she had no qualms with the direction society took of its own accord, the coyote personally strove for more. For toil, something for her hands to do, the feeling of satisfaction garnered by a job well done.

She was *this* close to having it. But her position walled away the prospect of physical labor, leaving her with only the trudge work... not that she necessarily wanted to expose herself to ionast. Still, she certainly would if it meant doing what she was good at.

Funny, she couldn't help thinking, that the primary use for a groundbreaking chemical compound, what should be a leap in several scientific fields, was currently a simple quality-of-life improvement. "That's basically all it is," she muttered. She recalled some legal and ethical discussion regarding ionast a few days after its conception, but eventually that fell into a simple bout of deliberating on just how *valuable* it could be in a modern era.

The answer was that it hardly was at all. The compound only seemed to affect sentient beings and had various strange properties that limited its use to environments with still air and somewhat higher temperatures—not even criminals would find a use for it in something like smuggling. That aside, the strangest discovery was the one involving its property to be completely inactive outside of an SS; it was utterly ineffectual without those stringent stilts supporting its use.

In fact, the general consensus was that it was damn near useless. So, indeed, coming to claim high quantities of it for business use was hardly a monetary roadblock.

But the Sparklight Nomad was more than just a place to work, more than a piece *of* work. It was a home; the home of higher-ups such as herself and Sienna. It was a brilliant amalgam of technologies made possible by several walks of life. A mouse's intuition, a coyote's sense of integrity, mounds of steel pieced together with the engineering flair of a raccoon... and that was just the beginning

The end result was a floating vessel that circled the globe to provide a healthy and technically outdoor alternative to life inside the Synchronization Servers. The coyote could peer through a window at damn near any time of day and see those grey domes dotting the landscape like salmon rushing upstream to find their place, to make their name before disappearing.

And, most importantly, they had been successful.

The world was so different now than it was before her time... it was almost surprising to step outside. To regain dozens of feet in height, to tower over trees and the creatures of lesser size—and then think, consider emphatically, that such was how people used to go about their daily lives. Surely some folk would have had much harder times—mice and squirrels being the most obvious examples of just what had to concern themselves with being caught underfoot, but there were yet smaller creatures than herself, or so they would be outside an SS.

After all, not every feline could claim to be of jaguar or cougar blood, nor could every canine call themselves wolves or hounds. Some were smaller still, and those could face equal danger. And then, could she, being a coyote, say she was the biggest creature to worry about in the Overflow? No, not at all. So many breeds had a good head and shoulders above her, and that meant all the more when a head and shoulder was more comparable to entire bodies in height and weight, as it was for those in the “small” category. The size discrepancy between peoples was both fascinating and a consistent needle in the side of the natural world.

But Allison had deliberated about such things before, and had come to the stark, yet undeniable conclusion: the world simply wasn't equal at its heart. So, a will to thrive and move on filled the gaps. That was what made the most sense and explained in perfect detail just why she was where she was. To that extent and that extent alone, she was thankful for the existence of the Synchronization Servers.

The coyote jotted another something onto her job review with haste before peering at her glass, which remained a stark half-empty. She wouldn't stand for it if it was on her own tab. A gift was a gift, she supposed; she couldn't ask even Sienna for more than that, sparing though it was.

That kangaroo always strove for the betterment of everybody but herself. Or perhaps it was that she was simply so easily pleased that pleasing others proved a much more suitable pastime. Pheh. The coyote had a difficult enough time just handling herself. There was something to be admired about it all... though that was no secret. But why couldn't she be the same way? Why was she troubled about things Sienna could shrug off her shoulders like air?

Battery raised her brow and took the glass into her grip, lazily swirling its clear contents with her wrist.

Varian scaled across glaciers of ice floating upon a sea of ethanol and water, shuddering and mewing. Soaked to the core, Varian remained invisible. A maelstrom of ice and sea by way of Battery's whirling wrist sent the ocelot thrown about his glass prison, him cursing further inaudibles as the coyote far above him simply hummed curiously. If something was off, it quickly became clear that she did not care to find out what. Varian's world began to angle to the side; floes of ice drifted and plowed against his tiny being as they followed the whim of the changing gravity.

Fortunately for his inability to swim, the feathery weight of his speck of a form proved too little to pierce the surface tension. As a result, the ocelot was left sprawled helplessly over an ever-changing rubbery sea, with small ripples more as tidal waves in his centimeter-high worldview. The ground seeped at his fingers and back; with every passing moment came an increased feeling of heaviness.

Responding quickly, Varian clambered onto a chunk of ice while he could retain the presence of mind to do so. Claws digging into the frozen ground left shredded particles in their wake, and he stood up and shook himself rabidly of the liquid, sputtering and putting his hands onto his knees. The ocelot's slightly burning eyes went wide with shock, both at his situation and at the size of the ice cubes; before they were glaciers, but already the one he stood on had seemingly dwindled to the size of a small building. Was the ionast coming off?

Rivers of vodka led into a gaping chasm rimmed with beastly fangs, greedily letting flow gallon upon gallon into itself. The massive coyote's initial swig ended with a stark, echoing swallow from her open maw, the muscles in the back contracting and expanding as the liquid disappeared. Those brown fuzzy lips—admittedly not the most terrifying thing among the sight to behold—clamped over the rim of the glass in the far horizon, hiding the teeth and stuffing her black snuffling nose within the diameter. Shadowing his view of the outside world was far too much coyote for him to handle.

Varian's heart began to race. Was this to be his end? At the ends of teeth or in the pit of a stomach, all because he listened to Rena, and then humored some impish kangaroo? And yet try the ocelot might to cry out his position, his throat tightened beyond the capability of speech at the very real prospect of being plunged down Battery's fleshy maw.

Sienna's words flashed before him, of how the stomach was an accommodating environment for ionast. There was no chance of him regrowing enough of his natural size to alert her in time—it just wasn't feasible, and that possibility would become a net negative if he was swallowed. A mere speck in the oceans of vodka, Varian turned full steam and attempted to swim back against the twisting rapids, but in the end his energy failed him, and he was left watching a fast-approaching chasm of darkness.

As the incline's ascent drew to a steady halt, the coyote's lips pursed to sip the contents of her glass, still unaware of its new inhabitant. And then, as the head of the flailing ocelot began to meet the awaiting lips, they briefly touched. A few moments passed before Varian realized that the inward suction has abruptly ceased—and that was when he looked up. Battery's eyes shot open.

Battery swallowed hard and unexpectedly, nearly forcing the drink down the wrong tube, as beneath her fur the coyote's embarrassment was all too prevalent; there lied a face flushed a furiously flustered fiery red. Her amber eyes fell upon the Varian-shaped fuzzy disturbance, which had now grown to around an inch thanks to his bath.

"Eh? Pteh—oh God, no way!" The coyote coughed and sputtered, shocked beyond what Varian thought was possible. "You've gotta be fucking kidding—if you don't get out of there in the next six seconds, I swear I'm drinking you with it!"

The ocelot swallowed hard as he bobbed up and down within the icy clear fluid, struggling to stay afloat. If the anxiousness of his situation wasn't enough, the chill cast by his liquid prison sure as hell would do an equally fine job of making his stutters overtake his words. "I-I swear I d-didn't mean to! T-this wasn't me!"

"Un-freaking-believable!" She wiped her lips in righteous, exaggerated disgust. "This is the first time I've ever had an employee have his job fly so far over his head that he finds himself inside my drink. I'm not gonna lie, I'm pretty pissed." The coyote swiped a silvery card from her wallet. "Can't even have a good break."

"Seriously, why the hell would I do this on purpose? Like, when a guy is sitting around in your drink it's totally because he decided it would be fun? Bullshit!"

Battery sighed. "Look... something has to go to QA and complaints for the replacement, and I sure as hell don't want it to be 'almost exchanged saliva with an employee who can't swim'." She paused and turned briefly. "Dummy, axe the lunch."

"Oh, you're embarrassed." Varian threw his arms up, flinging drops of vodka about him. Feeling the cold return he huddled up again almost immediately. "*You're* embarrassed!"

"I mean, should I not be? I nearly kissed and possibly drank the newest recruit for reasons that are still entirely nebulous... not that I think I want to know."

Varian found immense difficulty in trying not to take offense. "I'm sorry, alright? Now please get me out of here so we can have a conversation like normal people. Please?"

"It's been a long day, man, and talk is cheap." Battery shook her head admonishingly. Regardless, she seemed to agree with the suggestion, pinching her fingers and fishing the mewling ocelot by the scruff of his neck. She plopped the sopping figure on an empty spot of her desk devoid of important papers, then shook and flicked her fingers to dry them off.

"Sienna... that garbage was Sienna," Varian managed. Panting, Varian took to standing as well as he could muster. Despite half a day spent under the influence of ionast, remaining fearless while beneath the watch of a coyote easily over twenty times his size was no easy feat. Those claws and teeth of hers gleamed with vicious sharpness and a length that rivaled his entire body. The tongue that lapped at her lips to catch splotches of vodka that she'd missed in her flailing rivaled the size of city blocks, easily able to envelop everything he held dear upon its fleshy surface.

Thankfully, the coyote's unbending stiffness seemed to grow in lenience at the mention of the kangaroo. Her brow raised, and again she puffed a cloud of a sigh. "Oh." She eyed her visitor blearily. She seemed almost disappointed in her lack of surprise, as if she most definitely should have known the culprit.

"Just oh?" Varian said sharply. He immediately followed up with an apologetic, "Er, sorry."

Thankfully she hardly reacted. "...Nah, no worries. I was getting a bit accusatory when I really should have suspected as much."

"Sienna does that often?" He shook to think of it. The girl had no sense of restraint. Or she had a sense of humor so far ascended from his own that he could barely comprehend it.

"No, *that* one is a first," Battery said under her breath. It kept her on her toes at least, and admittedly that wasn't a bad thing. "Still, she knew what she was doing. She always does. Lucky that ionast washes off, aren't you? Any smaller then you are now and we'd have had more than a problem on our hands."

Varian forced a stark swallow. He didn't need any reminders as to what kind of fate would have befallen him. The idea that Sienna planned out exactly how long it would take for him to resume a noticeable size wasn't of much consolation. "Yeah, well... it'd probably be pretty exciting if I'd known I was going to come out of it alive." In hindsight, it actually was a little thrilling. Weird.

The coyote could well sense his trepidation, cocking her head. Her attempt at levity fell on splayed ears. "Ah, sorry." She quickly changed the subject—or rather, ended it. "Do you have anywhere to be?"

Varian reared back at the suggestion. "Do I look like I do?" Apparently the coyote was a good chunk less silver-tongued than Sienna. Her tone spoke blunt rudeness and sounded more like a request for him to leave, but the intent in her eyes told it was a genuine question.

Much to the ocelot's surprise, Battery simply let her head hang for a second, and moments of silence went by in examination of her words. "Sorry. Again. Just having a bit of a rough day, I didn't mean it like that." She reached a massive fingertip forward as if to pat him, but hesitated, then retracted her hand. "Well, guess you can stick around before break. No point in setting you up with anything to work on with just ten minutes 'til."

Apparently having forgotten about her lunch, Battery swept the back of her hand across her desk, gently pushing all but a single sheet—and Varian—to the sidelines. Her amber eyes dipped away from the conversation as her scribbling resumed as if not a thing had just happened; the employee standing cluelessly on her desk became little more than a peripheral thought.

She could go on and on in her head about how little she cared about any individual worker, given how well they tended to treat her. The canine was no fan of being forced into contact with one, especially during her own break period. Further still, the next patrol shift was hers—that meant there would be no more time to herself, while the remainder wasted away in the presence of unexpected company. Ugh. Maybe it would do her some good to get some air outside her dinky office, but still...

On top of that, she was very well aware that the blame for this meeting could be pinned squarely on Sienna. She had her suspicions, no doubt... but perhaps she'd humor her. He seemed amiable enough last time they talked. What would the harm be? With that thought, she eyed the miniscule creature from the edge of her vision. About an inch high now; before, he was a fraction of a centimeter. His

splotched tail curled around his calf uneasily as he grabbed his other elbow, ears flicking at every new sound, including that of her voice.

“Before anything else happens I have to get some quick redactions on consumer status.” The pen in her fingers made graceful ice skater marks in the page, crossing out names and replacing them with case-by-case state updates. *Fixed. Unpaid. In no need of repair why did they even send this here.* The scribbling was accompanied by quick flicks of her eyes to Varian as if to make sure he hadn’t left.

“This is my main job, really,” she started again as if to pass the time. “Sienna’s the one you’ll see most out there. Meanwhile I keep tabs on who paid for what, what they sent in, and when to contact them back. It’s not hard and someone’s gotta do it. ”

“Yeah, I see.” Varian eyed her penmanship, graceful yet blocky, as her hand did its work. Those thin, delicate muscles just beneath the skin tensed, manifesting as small shifts in her knuckles as she scribbled.

It was clear that Battery would prefer her time alone and in silence, but, noting that she now had company, she knew she couldn’t keep quiet for as long as she’d like. Varian’s own silence wasn’t doing much to assist the thick, tangible awkwardness in the air.

“So?” Battery asked. Her voice began with some reluctance, but quickly grew a level of curiosity. “How’s the first day on the job?”

The ocelot seemed happy to have a new topic. “So far, new. If I could say it went at all.” His tone was flat, but not uninterested. “Kinda scary, really. I’m not used to being so... er, this,” he motioned up and down his tiny body.

The coyote nodded. Poor guy had been thrust into the motions so suddenly. It was a wonder he’d acclimated as well as he did. “I can imagine. How often do you frequent the Overflow?”

“Enough that I know what it’s like to have to avoid stepping on mice. It’s hard not to just freeze up until your number comes up sometimes. I think I have some new respect for Sienna,” he muttered offhandedly. Having to peel every one of his senses like a potato wasn’t something he particularly enjoyed in the Overflow, and Sienna had to do so all the time. “Reading body language is also almost impossible; it’s a lot easier to read eyes than it is to read gestures half the time. Like, if you were to wave at me while I’m in front of you, I don’t think I’d even be able to see it.”

Battery nodded again. “I think you’ll get used to it.”

Her faith was somewhat surprising. “Thanks. Hopefully I don’t run into any of those guys that Sienna said were giving you crap,” he added.

“Yeah... Evan. Screw that guy. He’s a prime-rib douche I’ve been trying to peel off the grill ever since he got here. My friends call me Battery as a nickname, but he uses it as an insult. Allison Arter. Double A.

Battery.” She swigged close to the entirety of her drink, ignoring the muted tinge of leftover ionast. “Pretty clever, right?”

“Tch. And that’s referring to...?”

Battery only nodded. “That one gave me a bunch of others, too. I mean fucking...seriously? These are the people I work with? I don’t mind Battery, but A-Cups is downright rude. There’s nothing I hate more than being vilified for doing my job well.”

The ocelot’s glowing eyes dipped slightly lower. Battery realized she was being inspected, and not in the places she’d rather have been. However, having understood his intent via the snapping of his gaze back to face level at breakneck speed, she decided to allow it—though not without a quick mix of growl and grumble to signify her resentment in doing so.

“You’re, um...—calling you Battery, it’s...” he stumbled over his words quite faithfully, as Battery attempted to examine what would come next. Mocking? Or was it just an excuse for voyeurism? She couldn’t tell. But with the accusing way in which her eyes shot straight through him accompanying his actions and beginning of a statement, he had no choice but to finish the answer.

Suddenly, he blurted a rather graceless, “It’s...inaccurate.” He shut his hands over his mouth and averted his gaze as his ears splayed. Her bra size definitely... wasn’t A—damn it what was he thinking?

Battery’s trepidation seemed to ebb. “Oh, is that so?” Her ears perked ever so slightly; pleased, excited, entertained, or any mix of the three. Even she wasn’t rightly sure. All she knew was that something about his demeanor, forward but shy, was difficult to remain impatient with. And he was genuinely trying to cheer her up.

The coyote’s face bore satisfied confidence as she gathered her individual sheets, then aligned them together and clapped their bottoms against the desk to even them out. Then she set them down again. “Smooth as a bar of soap, Mr. Varian.” All she needed was a pair of half-lens librarian spectacles, the ocelot mused.

Through flushed cheeks, Varian jabbed, “Smoother than asking me if I have anywhere to be.”

“Oh—listen to you!” Battery said with mirth, lips for once having curled back. It was a sight Varian might call refreshing, especially upon recalling Sienna’s earlier concern for the coyote. “You’re sharper than I took you for. Ain’t that somethin’.”

The ocelot threw his hands outward with a mewing scoff. “Bah. I think that damn pouch-belly’s starting to rub off on me.”

Battery poked him with a free finger, one part teasing and two parts reassurance. A glance far upward revealed a playful shrug of her shoulders as she changed the subject. “Heh. Maybe she is. And heck, maybe that’s not a bad thing,” she finished coyly.

“Wait, are you saying—”

Before Varian could retort, she added, “As for Evan, I try not to take everything he says to heart. You shouldn’t either. Remember that if he ever catches you in a dark alley.”

The tiny ocelot huffed, very much for want of an end to her statement. Ideas of him and Sienna being an item swam through his head like a school of mad fish, but he promptly perished the thought as it polarized just how he felt about the marsupial when he was far from ready to think about that.

“Yeah,” he said simply. “You’re bound to get some people like that though—that’s just what a work environment is like, as much as it sucks. Which it totally does. Like, there was this one guy at the bakery I used to work at who said he had a doctor’s appointment every other week, and made the first sucker he laid eyes on take over for him. It was absolute shite.”

“Hah!” The coyote’s muzzle rumbled with a snorting giggle. “Oh that’s terrible. I love how people still pull stuff like that in an SS environment, which is just so much easier than living anywhere else.”

Varian’s eyes lit up all of a sudden. “Anywhere else?” People lived in places other than an SS? He’d heard of people staking out in the Overflow for days at a time, but that was the extent. After enough time they would all cave, request a ticket with the server, and head back in.

The tenacity of the common man was not the most legendary, and famously so.

“Oh my, you’re from the city, right?” Varian nodded. “Aha, that explains a bit. Guess I kinda forgot. There is a whole world outside your precious SS, if a dwindling one.” Battery coozied her tush on her chair as best she could, crossing one of her legs and planting the sole of her paw against her thigh. “But I guess I don’t really need to go on a tangent. I know I will if I get started,” she joked.

“My precious SS’? It’s not like you don’t live in one,” Varian said, crossing his arms.

Her brow tensed. “Only technically. Don’t associate me with them.” She huffed in a way he would describe as oddly proud, and he could only wonder as to why. “Synchronization Servers are the best example of the fickle nature of our future. In Sparklight, we only use one—we only need one, really. But I’ve been one of the few to have worked with world-server coding, as it’s called, and... it’s very strange.”

The ocelot tilted his head and mewed curiously. Synchronization Servers... they were the media players of this day and age; there was not a soul in the world he could name who didn’t know about them given their penchant for showing up at any region at any time, like the last party guest nobody invited. His ignorance to their nature, origin, and hell, everything else he could ask about was starting to bug him more than it should have.

“World-server coding. Can you tell me more about that?”

Battery shrugged as if to spring the weight of a prompt decision off her shoulders. “Mhm. I probably shouldn’t say too much about it, but... eh, to hell with it. I trust you. Entering the portal doesn’t transport you anywhere new; that much is super easy to figure. You go where you need to go and happen to pass through a big screen. No biggie, right? Doing so leaves you partially digitized, so to speak—the SS then recognizes who you are, and can play a big role on how your body interacts with the world. In other words, whatever the SS covers up is integrated into cyberspace. It’s a full-on integration of the real world with one that is not so real.”

The feline had heard the terminology thrown about here and there during his classes, but apparently even his professors weren’t experts on the subject. It was a prospect for only the most esteemed and talented of engineers; that, he already knew he was not. Even wary of his prior lack of knowledge, his head was reeling from just how little he truly knew. It made him feel smaller in a way—and hell, he’d had enough of that today.

But that didn’t mean he wasn’t curious. Did that mean where he was right now was... both real and virtual at the same time? It hardly made sense. The tired ocelot took to laying upright upon the slanted plastic base of the nearby lamp, which he noted was the size of a small hill.

“For instance,” Battery continued upon seeing his thoughtful complexion. “The SS for bigger cities use multiple servers for the sake of capacity—ignore the namesake and just call it an SS, by the way. The term applies to the system, not any one individual server. But... that’s just a colloquialism.” The coyote waved her hand about. “In reality the creators wanted to press the term ‘Cyber Dome’. Didn’t exactly catch on and I’ll give you ten guesses why.”

Varian shook his head. It figured. The ocelot took a moment to glance about the room; nobody in the Break Quad was the wiser about the nature of their conversation. Their snug corner had directed attention toward anywhere but them, and the noise of activity prevalent elsewhere in the quad drowned out any important details.

“Anyway. Like you know, those server conglomerates are easily able to store thousands of people in the same location. But it’s *not* the same location for everybody. You can have two people enter at the same time and they may not end up with each other; it’s like... a different ‘file’ of the same place. When somebody new enters the SS, it records them and assigns them a file of the city for whenever they exit or return, so they always come back to the same place.”

Battery paused and took a deep breath, watching the ocelot’s reaction, which consisted of confused irises shifting about in their prisons and brow trying to come to a conclusive height to settle with. “It’s fascinating to think of the minor differences between every version of a city, how they’ve evolved, when in reality they are all the same few bits of data and code using the real world as a skeletal base.”

“It’s... like a game, almost,” Varian muttered, eyes skittering as if to dig through the back of his mind. “It’s an artificial representation of the real world, but it’s still real.”

“Very correct,” Battery said with a nod, uncrossing one of her arms to gesticulate with a free hand. “And that all brings me to one thing: ionast. It doesn’t make all the sense in the world, really—but that’s just not the right way to approach it. Not scientifically speaking. You need an open mind; anything is possible. But get this: ionast doesn’t work in the Overflow. Even fewer of the few who know that it exists know that aspect about it.” She allowed her lips a single ginger sip of vodka, swirling the glass by its rim with the same free hand.

“So... what are you getting at, then? That’s a fact, sure enough, but....” Varian simply found himself trailing off. Fortunately, the question was close enough to completion for Battery to pick up.

“The fact that it only works in the SS is what leads me to believe that it’s a substance that alters the world-server coding in a very specific way. A glitch, if you will, but one that’s very material and tangible. Think: shrinking happens very reliably and wears off when the substance is removed from the body, and is super finicky about when it works. It needs heat and a lack of air, for instance.” She looked him dead in the eyes with the fire of discovery lighting them up. “It’s nothing more than an error, a bug, a fritz. It’s perfectly replicable, and that fact is something we abuse every single day.”

Proud and fascinated, and yet apparently challenging him to understand, she crooked an elbow on the table and waved her hand, sending tremors vibrating through the ground. He’d nearly forgotten how small he still was. He looked up to the dizzying heights of her chin, unable to see features of note beyond her straits of brown hair and gleaming dark eyes.

“When you look at it like that... wow.” Varian flumped his back against the telephone pole of a lamp haft. “That’s insane. The SS must have more power than people even realize.”

“And that’s why I’m ending my research right there,” Battery said flatly. “It’s nothing that should be dabbled with on purpose, and so most people don’t. That’s the way it should be.” The coyote had indeed given it oft periods of immense thought; if there were more ways to manipulate the code like that, it wouldn’t be a stretch of the imagination to say that a person would have great power in gaming the system just so. No, more than that; in today’s society, someone could become a near-god if they figured them out.

However, despite the expansive checklist of things she couldn’t know about it, there was one thing she knew far too clearly, and that was that *nobody* would. To consider the sheer scale of the SS would be far too complicated and would easily require multiple lifetimes of dedication, figuring out what could trigger what; consistently so, even without error on a whim. The programmer’s ultimate nightmare on a terrestrial level. It was the theorycrafting that was simply enticing.

Aloud, she said, “Just let our understanding go at its own pace—that’s the best case scenario for the strange, wibbly-wobbly peak science is sitting on.”

“Yeah—” Hold on. Did she just... call it that? The wibbly-wobbly peak? Varian rubbed his eyes, blinked, and looked into hers.

Those amber eyes perched on the sharp face of the coyote shone with cunning and a fierce wisdom... he hated to think of himself as unoriginal for falling for the eyes, but that was to not mention a more traditional aspect of her beauty, he thought as his gaze fell to just barely skim the boundaries of its privilege. Not a single contour line of her shape escaped his ogling; something about her tone, her obvious but unobtrusive strength....

Varian swallowed. He replayed her words through his head again like a broken cassette; they funneled through his spiked ears and into his brain and imbued the rest of his nervous system like a drug, sending the message for his miniscule body to blink and shake unremittingly as if he'd come down with the nastiest and subtlest of colds.

She was the one. Damn it all, she was the one. Rena would be having a field day.

Battery suddenly waved a hand and rested her cheek on a palm, propped by an elbow. "Lord. Look at that, I went on and rambled anyway—not even the thing I was worried about going on about, but still."

Varian started. "It was anything but boring," he assured. However, he continued casually. "Say, what did you mean by the peak of science?" She was right of course, but if there was one thing that he'd found in his studies and peer review, it was that everybody had a different definition of the future.

"The latest in A.I. inhibition technology is a blue screen of death," Battery said flatly. "Everybody's too scared to see what will happen if our own computers get smarter, so almost all progress there is frozen. That's the thing. People fear the future; people fear advancement. So, what do they do?" She swatted a wayward lock of hair. "They settle with what they've got. This has happened before... and that ice age was broken by the creation of the SS."

He nodded, trying to understand where she was going. It proved difficult. "So, what you're saying is that eventually history will repeat itself. There'll be something just as big and just as crazy."

"And then progress will resume right where it left off, yes. But that is probably quite a time away."

Varian swallowed. "Yeah...." He wanted to say more, but there was nothing for him to draw upon. Her opinion? She'd already stated it. His own? He couldn't say he had an interesting one. Another topic? He'd already spent too much time thinking about it to transition smoothly, so there was hardly a reason to bother. Instead, he sat in trepid silence. He'd rather her have another ramble to go on than smoothly make another transition. He was fresh out.

It was late, after all. A glance upward revealed a set of numbers cast by an indigo ray of light sourced by a silver bell-like object on the bar end. Time had gone much, much quicker in reality than it had in his head, when all he thought he had done was get shrunk and sampled by his employers. There truly was an empty feeling, a shadow cast by how little had occurred and the precise degree to which he was fit for Sparklight.

But... right now, he didn't get that feeling. Around this coyote who he'd barely known for a few hours, he felt a little fraction closer to whole.

"It's really stupid," Battery said suddenly, now looking straight down. Her mind was apparently on the conversation they were evidently still having. Her gaze matched his, and when it did, she looked away again. "Just how much we need the SS, or at least how much everybody thinks we do. I swear, our very *lives* are practically half-machine."

The coyote's thinking aloud hooked Varian's ears. Her conceited demeanor when regarding city-goers and the SS as a whole... if he were to be honest, it was starting to bother him a little. His eyes glowed as he regarded her again, but, holding his tongue, he merely inhaled thoughts through his lungs and breathed out a proper phrasing.

"You've mentioned that. So... why do you hate the SS so much?" Varian asked. His conviction jittered as he realized the sudden nature of his question, but while he reeled, he took back none of his words. It was clear that the coyote had an answer already prepared. However, she was hesitant to word it.

"Why do I hate the SS? I'm trying not to say that's a predictable question." She shook her head. "But at least it's a good one while you're at it. I know it seems weird. I don't like the way they handle themselves as a collective body, nor do I appreciate their views. They act like the world is perfect, like because of this new technology there are no problems. And *inside* the servers, that's kinda true to an extent. That's why people are so prone to being spoiled that nuances become nuisances." The coyote's sentence hung on unfinished breath.

Varian examined her canine features, her amber eyes and wrinkling jowls and singular puffed cheek, finding a clandestine, yet clear bitterness in her lidded, thoughtful gaze. Her pupils seemed to extend the clanking gears behind them outward, sampling such unpleasanties as uncertain processes and toes waiting to be scrunched, for there was no honest way to continue without confiding the truth. A deep breath was taken in like the inverse howling of a coming storm, then a slowly released exhale from her cursed lips.

At last Varian prompted, "Yeah?"

"But in reality, there's a whole world out there, Varian. I know it's easy to forget. Hell, it seems like the SS body *wants* everyone to forget it. What lies outside, and how ugly it can be. But really, who's to say which world is uglier?"

She thought long and hard, but the tiny feline said not a word. Seconds became minutes before Battery's tail flicked from the bottom of her seat to the top of her lap, and the shuffling of uncertain paws and wayward clawtips scuffed the grated floor.

The most worrying sound, however, was the light sound she barely let cross her tongue and slip through her teeth—the line between growl and whimper was muddled and impossible to draw.

“The one out there is not a pretty one. It’s one where people can be hurt and die. One that the populace has tried to escape from for as long as history has been recorded. One where... nothing is fair at all.” She jumped to her feet and began to idly pace around her desk, flipping through sheets on her desk seemingly for no reason other than to give her something to do as she thought. He could relate. “A-and you—people like you, from the city—they don’t know anything, because that’s just the way they want it to be!”

He was visibly startled. Sighing, Battery shot him an apologetic glance, brushing her hand along the edge of the table as she made the rounds back to her seat. Once again there was the tumultuous creak of metal beneath her medial weight, amplified by many degrees to Varian’s frail ears, and she rested her hands in front of herself again. Though she would say more, she could only manage a single, “Sorry,” as she gave the both of them time to deliberate.

Putting together the pieces of the coyote’s musings was at first simple, then clouded by heavy complication, and Varian found immediate wisdom in not pursuing them too frivolously. The way the world was... the Overflow. The Overflow was just a term for the outside world, anywhere not preyed over by an SS—that was no secret. But the intrinsic knowledge of its vicious past, and why the Servers were designed to begin with; those facts, however little he knew, chilled him to the bone.

However, he nodded and patted her hand with his tail curled about his thigh, earning an earnest glance from a set of eyes far above that flickered dimly with a light layer of dampness.

“Things are... awkward now,” Varian started. He paused, then clarified, “This generation is awkward. We know what the world used to be like—or at least, we have a good idea—while the older adults actually partook of that age. And now the SS wants to pretend it never happened, but that’s just not feasible. They shove out any mention of what lies beyond the immediate Overflow zone, and events are omitted from texts. Even online they cleanly amend anything unscrupulous. You’d never know the diff.” Shaken, Varian took to sitting by the space between Battery’s thumb and forefinger, inclining his back upon the small hill sized crook of the thumb’s joint. “It’ll be a while before anything’s truly fixed.”

“It can’t be fixed,” Battery snarled solemnly. Immediately she closed the gaps of her fingers around him like a cattle fence, as though her disquieted guest could up and slip away if she were to show a sign of weakness. “The past is just that. For all the ‘new tech this’ and ‘new tech that’ this gen like to tout, I doubt time machines are liable to happen any time soon. I don’t know which world is worse. The one where killing was simply the way to get by and violence was an accepted fact... or the one that tries to hide offstage and blackmail the playwright. Rewrite the script by crossing out the dialogue in pencil.”

“Two sides of the same coin,” said Varian. “But you can’t shove that coin under a rug and call it a day, huh. It’ll still be there when people start rooting around to clean up. But at the same time, that’s why the SS is a good thing, right? Because of its advent, nobody has to prey on anybody else. We have an even playing field and everybody can live normal lives.”

“There’s no way everybody will just up and forget,” Battery agreed. She cleared her throat and swayed her neck as if it were at the whim of some indecisive breeze, permitting her earthy hair to adjust itself

and fall aloft her shoulders. “Be it through hearsay or otherwise, history won’t just disappear and it’s foolish to try to make it. The ‘official’ records can say all they want about my parentage, but the fact is you can’t just claim they vanished for no reason and expect me to stay loyal.” The statement apparently shook a sudden chord somewhere in the coyote’s heart; her lids shot up, then lowered to mask the expression of her eyes yet again. “I-I... hah. I talk way too much. Pheh, that’s a bad habit of mine; sorry to bother you.”

Varian’s eyes sprung open. “N-no, what? You can’t just tell me something like that and then shrug it off! What happened?”

Silence. He wondered if he’d gone too far, but Battery made no immediate confirmation to settle him. Reluctant, he took to looking away as well, at his own feet and the spacious oak desk beneath him.

Finally, she answered. “I was friends with Sienna even then. Her family was wealthy and could afford to take another in...” Her breath hung heavy on the beginnings of an unfinished sentence before she waved a hand. “Don’t get me wrong, Varian. It’s not that I can’t go on. It’s just that to talk about it directly would be tactless, and wouldn’t do anybody involved any justice.”

She was right; Varian did understand, or at least enough. Her evasion brought clarity, as little sense as it made; it meant there was no other way to interpret it. The coyote had no family left aside from her surrogate sister—her other half—thanks to the viciousness of the outside world and all the taboo wrapped about its foundation. That much he could gather. The specifics... he wasn’t sure he wanted to know about.

“In any case, I’ve gone overlong anyway. It’s far past bedtime for the workers.” She chuckled to herself, casting her amber gaze over Varian, bathing him in an ethereal glow separate from the low-hanging fluorescent bulbs. “Hey. I’m not good at wording stuff like this, so I’ll just say it: it was nice talking about these things. I expect our time together here will be pleasant.”

The words sent Varian’s heart on a journey. Did... did she mean that? Her dry humor and brick-blunt demeanor mixed so seamlessly that it was difficult to tell at first. Outwardly, he struggled to find words for a few seconds before the bumpy reply. “Y-yeah. I’ll get out of your hair though.” Not that he knew just how he would do that without asking for a ride...

Battery nodded in understanding. “I have a bit more work to take care of before I follow suit. I imagine Sienna will come back to clean up her toys.” She looked farther out and raised her voice. “Right, Sienna?”

Much to the ocelot’s surprise, there was a response. “Huh? Oh, hold up, I just gotta take care of something *real* quick. Be there in a sec!”

Hm. So she stuck around after all. Varian brushed his left arm up and down nervously without really being sure why. He couldn’t help wondering how much of it she had caught—or why Battery referred to him as Sienna’s toy so unironically.

“Well, there you have it.” Battery stood, leaving the still-miniature Varian to gawk up at her full titanic height. Her features disappear beneath the plateau of her jaw, only to reappear as she angled her head lower to make eye contact. “See you tomorrow.”

With that she was up and off, slipping various files off the table and into the crook of her elbow. She nodded one final time, seeming to ponder saying more, then continued out through the automatic doors at the east end of the room.

Already the emptiness returned, ready to pounce. Or rather, what sappy love-at-first-conversation part of him that was filled by Battery had just departed along with her, bringing gravity down on him and his slumped form.

And yet that, too, was shattered just as quickly. “Howdy hey, what’s this? You’re still here?” Sienna asked. Varian whipped around, almost immediately regretting being forced to take in the fullness of her impossible scale. Her thighs were the part of her body most level with the edge of the desk—that left her entire torso to loom dangerously over him, eyes twinkling playfully. “I guess I can’t count on her to clean up after me all the time. Sometimes you gotta finish the job yourself,” she said wryly.

The massive kangaroo pinched the hem of her shirt and brushed something off it, then adjusted her red armband so that the symbol faced upright. Immediately afterward her gargantuan arm lowered like a fallen tree and onto the table, leaving an open hand flat upon its surface. Varian questioned whether or not complying was a good idea while her index finger curled in a ‘come hither’ motion, then sighed, clambering onto the surface of her padded palm.

One again the immense platform beneath him raised, sending his stomach into a lurch. It did not take long for his entire field of view to be blotted out by her staring eyes. “And? And and?”

“And what?” The ocelot wasn’t exactly lounging on the cloud nine that Sienna was clearly sprawled out over given where his talk with Battery had gone, even if he felt he had made a positive first impression. But telling her the specifics was just about out of the question—even if part of him wanted to see her frown for once in her life, perhaps just so he could say he’d seen it.

“The chat?” The soft, gentle rumbling of her voice was filled with barely contained excitement. “Tell me about it, won’t you?”

“Went about as well as you’d expect. Cat in drink, coyote sips drink, coyote finds cat, coyote gets upset.” He brushed off his arms and folded the hems of his cardigan sleeves along his wrist. “What did you think was gonna happen?” He refused to mention the conversation in detail, thinking it lucky that she hadn’t overheard it herself.

One of Sienna’s ears cocked upward as she put on a puzzled expression, which eased into a reflection of her dive into amused thought. Her gaze spanned the opposite end of the quad, most especially the door that Battery had just escaped through, papers in hand, to get to her office.

Sienna seemed unappeased by the fact that Battery was no longer present. “Hmph. Well if that’s the case then I don’t even have a choice. I *have* to try harder now, no ifs ands or buts about it! It was a solid attempt Casanova, but it looks like no dice this go-around. I’m sure we’ll wrangle her in next time! For now though, ‘twould be best to retreat to the cot for the night.”

Varian proceeded to do the only thing that he could, and ultimately the very thing she wanted him to do: pout. “You’re the one that dumped me in the goddamn drink! I didn’t have any say in that at all!”

“Oh, but you *did* enjoy that sweet little smooch, didn’t you? That was just the cutest thing!” Sienna gushed, cutely raising her shoulders with all the glee befitting a shipper. “I was watching that romantic buildup, so passionate and fragile and then—oh, just the most adorable itty bitty kitty kiss! You are so very welcome. It sucks that I didn’t get to hear what happened after, but hey, I got my fill!”

“Wait, so you did see that. Why’d you even ask? And excuse me. I wouldn’t call it a kiss if she reprimands me for it afterward,” Varian retorted. A wayward sleeve wiped at his mouth as if to purge them of cooties.

“Hey, it’s okay. Let’s get you all cleaned up so you can get to sleep,” Sienna insisted with a nod. “Normally Battery would do the honors, but... well, you can see how enthusiastic she’d probably be about that now.”

Varian shrugged, but cocked his head. What were the honors?

Everything was slowing down. The end of the day was always her favorite part of it. The shelves of filched books that lined the wall behind her continued to rust over in silence and dust. Not that there was anything worth reading in her modest gallery that she hadn’t already drunk to death time and time again, but it made her wonder how long it had been since she’d had a spot to relax and read. However, it was the sheet before her that had her eyes, her ears stolen away by the siren call of headphones positively blasting hard rock, so the time was less than appropriate.

Then there was a glow. The dim, blue light battered away at her half-shut eyelids, shattering the intent focus of the amber spheres just beneath. Her gaze flicked up once to affirm the light above her door, like a dying indigo star, beams of focused light stretching out in every direction as she squinted. She shuffled in her plush, tall chair, easing left to right boredly as if in indecision.

It wasn’t like this was *the* only time alone she’d had all day. No, nothing like that.

Battery stretched her fingers to the bottom and top left corners of the keyboard situated on her lap and synced to the monitor at her immediate right. A few key taps closed down every window and tab in an instant and flash of grey as they all sunk to the bar at the bottom of the screen. It was nearly time for her to hit the hay anyway; after this she would have no time for frivolities.

A heavy steel rapping. *Thunk. Thunk.* Couldn't they wait just a moment? That SPK she'd seen stalking about the corridors, notes in hand, so frigid and nosy... she would have to lay off and easy or she'd find herself outside on the cold, hard ground. That Battery swore.

Unable to stall any longer, Battery ushered the visitor inside. The slab of metal swung open with surprising speed, prompting her to look up. What surprised her wasn't the graceless clank as the door struck the inside of her office, but the figure that entered in its place: Evan.

The tiger flipped his hair, noting her cocked eyebrow. "Don't act. You know why I'm here."

Battery nodded once, actively refraining from repeating the motion.

"I'm gonna skip the formalities straightaway. You know me, I know you, and we both know what's up." Evan stopped for a long enough time that Battery figured it was to allow for a response.

"So you're saying I have no choice but to allow you in for a little heart-to-heart, so I should. Well go ahead: pour your heart out to me. I'm listening," she said sourly.

"You yourself said it. Why make things easier? Why are there so many handicaps when the world has gone on the way it has for so long?" Evan's ears drooped parallel to his straight hair. "I heard you talking to that new guy."

"Tch. You clearly didn't understand a lick of it. I think people should live with their feet on the ground and their earnings should be reciprocal to the work they put in. That doesn't mean it should be a matter of life or death, kill or be killed, watch for the people that are smaller or bigger than you." She shook her head. "This is a controlled environment. People are safe, it's not the same as outside."

"No shit it's not the same!" Evan exclaimed. He sighed then ruffled his own hair with a free hand before stuffing it into a pocket of his open jacket. "But let's be real: you're still here. You go on about how dumb the SS is, how the system isn't tweaked to just your needs. Then you hole up in Sparklight which is the same—except you have the power. Says a lot about what you really think." He spat thinly at the ground.

Battery stood up as a crack of lightning; the force sent her wheelless chair careening backwards and into the wall. "Don't you *ever* pretend to know me. The other reason you're here is because I'm letting you, and you know that. I will beat you so fast that they won't even be able to tell the difference between you and the rest of the garbage left behind in the quad."

Evan smartly backed off. "The hell is your problem?" It seemed her sudden defensiveness had caught even him off guard. "Look, I can tell you ain't all fun and games. I've known that for a while. But if you think you're suited for the position you're in, you've got another thing coming."

"You're planning something. It won't work," Battery said flatly. "Even if you get me demoted, I'll be happier that way. You think that I've got everything I want here—a high position, no work to do, and all the power over you I can get. I do more in one day than you do in a week, kid, and I still have the worst rung on the ladder."

"Taking it all for granted, too." The tiger frowned but made no other motion.

You can't give me a fucking lecture, dipshit. She barely refrained from saying as much, though what she vocalized was in no way less harsh.

"You aren't like me, Evan, so don't try and give me that spiel. You're a moron who thinks living like cavemen is the proper order of the world just because that's the way it's been for thousands of years. That's what technology is for, advancement," Battery huffed. "To *advance*. While I'm at the helm, we go *forward*, not backward. And let's get one more thing straight while we're at it: you're a goddamn *tiger*. An apex hunter. In that world, you have all your power. In this one, I have mine."

Ugh. She'd ranted enough for one day, had talked to three people too many. Turning her chair to the left to avoid eye contact, the coyote was well aware of her own exhaustion. Nearly drinking down a coworker, spilling her life story and finally getting wild accusations thrown in her face that no doubt would follow her for the weeks to come was far too much stress, even for her powerful shoulders. This needed to *end*.

Battery turned around, leg crossed at the thigh. A flick of a key dimmed the blue light, signaling the end of their meeting. "Evan, I do not want this to be a work environment devoid of feedback. Intercommunication is a highly valued resource here, and one that I personally stress on every level that I am capable of. That being said... you've done it, you've run me dry, so kudos to you for doing what you came to do. There is no more that you have to say to me today, nor I you." She watched the tiger as he stuffed his hands back into the pockets of his jacket, raising his shoulders to chin level while looking away. Eventually restlessness got the better of him and he flashed a glance to his superior. It should have made her smile, but right now it only strengthened her scowl. "Now then, there's one thing I've been wanting to say since you got here: Get. Out."

Unsurprisingly, Evan showed not a single sign of contrition. "Heh. I won't say any more than I need to. Say hi to Nadine for me."

For the second time that day, the tiger left her presence. The first was a victory and his leave was reluctant, but this time he left with straight posture and horse kept high. The coyote sighed as the door slammed shut.

A familiar arm reared up from the shadows above, bypassing one of the plain panels in the ceiling as it unhinged like a limp door, alight with wires and circuitry and whirring sounds. "A bad time, I imagine?"

"Prolly." Dummy wasn't unwelcome, as long as he didn't talk too much. Not a promising ultimatum. "What's up?"

"Not much more than what's been said," Dummy responded with ire and tire, surprising for a machine. "...As an extension of the mainframe, it is my charge to know everything relevant to the ship and its operations. Normally I wouldn't consider my duty a part of this, but I see you are... distraught. With you being the only backup captain this ship has, that is worrisome." His single false eye, perched on the apex of the cord matrix that comprised his proverbial body, swiveled before settling on the muted shape of the coyote, all a mere mix of browns and bland colors in a vaguely canine figure to him.

"Dummy," Battery chuckled. "Are you worried about me?"

"Allison—" His serpentine body fussed and twitched, then settled. The act was devoid of shyness, let alone the embarrassment she almost expected—but alas, him, a device in every sense, felt only confusion. The question was not of duty. Not his job. Not something he could answer. Instead, he posed a question of his own. "You're close. Is this where I belong?"

"Huh? The heck are you talking about?" Battery asked flatly. She watched as his iris—a vortex of illuminated geometrics paned together in a vaguely circular shape—dilated and shifted back toward the center. The window of its view saw the two brown points atop her head disappear into the blurred sea, identifying splayed ears.

"Just passing thoughts. There were two new entities today, both having entered this morning. 7:00 AM—a hybrid identity. Varian. Shortly after; 8:45 AM, another arrived. She has spoken with Sienna." Dummy withheld a pause he clearly wanted to let sit. "She said that this technology—the mainframe, our ship, myself—is, in all technicalities I presume, property of the SS Collective. A series of government conglomerates that control the Servers across this land and the many beyond."

Battery sparked to life. "Now slow down. You're not saying you belong to the SS just because Nadine says it's the loose law, are you? That's ridiculous. Your logical receptors know way better than that."

"Principally, I would agree." He buzzed. Such strange concepts; he was designed for sociability. His purpose was all that mattered. But every time he thought about it, his purpose seemed to stretch onward and outward, finding new scapegoats to explore foreign things. Most prominent among them were feelings—uncertainties that could not be answered through pattern and priority; how he usually solved shifts in protocol. "Allison, I do worry about you. If there is nothing I can do, I shall take my leave."

Silence. Battery reared back in her seat with an audible sigh; one that commanded he stay. It was a wonder a computer designed for basic social interaction and information gathering could be so inquisitive. Actually... on second thought that should have been expected. Hm.

Still, was it possible to form a companionship with an AI, or vice versa? And not just any AI, but the avatar of a computer? Blue screens and future phobias be damned; technology marched ever onward, even of its own volition.

"I'm just tired, that's all. Nothing to concern yourself with. But I want you to know that you are very valuable here. Not just as an object, but as a companion—that's what you were designed for. And if it helps you sleep at night, think of it this way: you literally could not operate outside of Sparklight because you were programmed for this exact environment. So, no, you don't belong anywhere else, in the most literal sense."

Dummy took to a bout of contented whirring. "...Very well. This makes sense. In the most direct way, no less. You know that's my favorite kind of sense."

"Of course it is."

"It doesn't answer everything, but I see now is not the time for inquiry." He seemed genuinely unsure—his intelligence and cognitive ability would be frightening if he hadn't shown himself as the most bitterly benign thing on the ship. "Slumber well, young lady."

"Can try," said Battery. Dummy's appendage retracted into the myriad wires above, disappearing into the ceiling.

She returned to thought almost immediately. What would she do? Handling Evan was an impossible task. She could throw insult after underhanded insult after not-so-subtle hint for him to get lost, but all he wanted was to piss her off. The reason alone just pissed her off more. "Dammit Sienna, I'm not joking around anymore," she muttered, eyes rolled to their sides.

Deep in thought, the coyote crossed her arms over her desk and buried her face in them, leaning deep from her chair. She firmly rooted her feet to avoid rolled away, and gently shut her eyes. The pillow of her brown, fuzzy arms was an effective tranquilizer, and within moments she was walking the entrancing thread between the falsities of her subconscious and the waking world that no longer desired her presence.

Troubled, she fell to fitful sleep. But such was the cycle...

Scarlet light ticked ten. From above, a soft tone hummed; it was quiet for a while, and to his credit that's just what Varian had wanted for a solid majority of the day. His surroundings were familiarly large, with salmon-colored tiles shingling the walls and floor in monotonous, yet effectively pleasant, rows and columns, with small discolorations littering the medial lines of plaster.

"Hey, um. Kinda out of nowhere, but how are you?"

The question was sudden, and there was no eye contact to reciprocate between the stall door; Varian's least favorite circumstances for such an inquiry. Cranking the closest faucet, a loud spray of warm water emitted from the corresponding showerhead and poured down his fur, a pool coalescing at his feet. A thin, viscous liquid followed the flow of water and took a little longer to slink through the drain. The

ocelot looked behind him to the gap between the floor and the bottom of the door, noting Sienna's own pair of paws standing at the ready.

"I'm okay."

A sigh, but not from him. "Good. I mean, you didn't almost, like... drown or anything, did you?" There was uncomfortable silence. Varian could swear the showerhead wasn't below his neck just a moment ago, but he shook the feeling. The shuffling of white paws was the only sound that mattered, and one Varian caught so readily. "I mean, I should've given dunking you a bit more thought. Was kinda reckless."

"A little?" Another inch upwards. The ionast was fading. "I'm surprised you admit it."

"I like having my fun!" the disembodied voice assured. "Let's not get around that. But... I've said it to you once before, and I wasn't kidding—well, not entirely—the last thing I want to do is hurt anybody for real."

The 'stage 1' sponge swept across the ocelot's arm as he looked up pensively. He scrubbed hard, watching the ionast drip away and reveal its true nature. "Right." One ear fell flat. "That's your prerogative. Your choice. You don't have to mess around that much if it makes you worry." As he shot up another foot, he hung up the first sponge and reached for a larger one on a higher rack, labeled stage 2. A third hung another few feet higher, seemingly more for good measure than necessity.

"Yeah." Silence, ever so brief. "It's a bit more complicated than that, I'm sorry to say. I think you understand though. Just want you to be safe, and I mean that."

Sienna's magnanimity was startling.

She continued. "Talkin' to you right now, I'm just making sure. I was totally sure I didn't hurt you, nothing like that—I wouldn't have done it at all otherwise. I did the *maths*. Battery likes to take her time with her drinks; she was bound to feel you." She chuckled a little. "But there is an actual reason I'm making sure. I wanna get this out of the way while nobody's around; I'm..." she paused again. Varian could swear he heard the faintest of thumping in her chest; a sobering thought. "Squeamish. I'd never want to cause anybody any real harm, and I made a few decisions in the spirit of failsafes."

He twisted the handle and the shower stopped abruptly. He had already known how relaxed and amiable she could be when she wasn't busy giving him a hard time—that much was not new. But the fact that she was so willing to confide such things to him spoke volumes about how she viewed him. As a rival, certainly. As a friend... well, now it was obvious she hadn't lied about that.

It was quite clear that she didn't go around telling everybody just how she felt—part of her probably still wanted to keep it to herself even from Varian, if only so she could keep him on edge for that much longer.

"I was practically on my hands and knees begging to be a part-time nurse." She giggled at retrospective musings, then returned to a half-serious demeanor. "Y'know... just in case something *did* happen. On the side, I made it a priority to become adept at handling smaller things. It takes a lot of awareness. Working with machinery with five to six feet of your height cut off is a dangerous routine, you feel? Or it can at the very least lead to dangerous situations. So I got good at dealing with the smaller folk—like you!"

Varian hesitated. "Doesn't mean you plunking me was any less scary. That part of your bet, too? Some duress thrown in just to be sure?" He didn't really feel affronted or pressured, but the jab was some level of cathartic.

"Aw heck no. I mean, if I'm being too much, you're absolutely free to leave," she said airily, lips pursed and just barely evading a stark grin. Just as he predicted, she took a nonexistent degree of offense. He wondered if offending her was even possible.

Her answer was a yes for convenience, no for intent. A happy coincidence. Though if he happened to hang up the towel as a result of her games, he honestly wasn't sure what her reaction would be. Sighing, he triple-checked his body for any signs of remaining chemicals, then shook himself vigorously.

"Besides, you're having just as much fun as I am. You can't hide that," she said snidely.

"We'll talk about this tomorrow." Varian spoke hastily, cheeks padded with a sharp heat. Amusingly enough, a disagreement did not escape him. "It's getting late. Could you show me to the cot, please?" he mewed.

"I just want to say one more thing so we're on the same page before you come out," Sienna said, now much more clearly than before. The top of her nodding head was visible above the stall door. "Like I said, it's complicated. Don't think that just because I want you to be safe, I'll go out of my way to make sure you stay out of the way of me and my patrol routes. You've become pretty well acquainted with my better half—the lower one, silly—and if you ain't careful, well, I'm not exactly gonna make any promises regarding where you'll end up. My paws *are* pretty big, ya know!"

Varian understood, as much as she wanted to play the tyrant role, even if facetiously. Being playful was in her nature, but it conflicted with her duties, her mindset—and possibly her fears. She worked hard to find that middle ground, and for it, he couldn't help seeing a side of the kangaroo he admired.

Varian shyly opened the door, tail flicking erratically.

The kangaroo still loomed a good two heads higher, just as he was used to. And on that head of hers, the eyes thereof dipped lower ever so slightly, twinkling, as Varian fumed and followed her gaze while sporting raging redness in his cheeks. In one of her powerful arms was cradled a bundle of plain white clothes, which were not the ones he wore. *Those* were still being washed separately. In the only way he could word his realization, he was stark naked.

“These are the ‘honors’,” Sienna said with a knowing giggle. She offered the bundle of white cloth in a single hand. “Thanks for humoring me.”

“D-don’t expect me to do it again anytime soon,” he bit back defensively.

“I wouldn’t,” Sienna sang bawdily as she started to walk away. Varian struggled mightily to slip into the loose white one-size-fits-all that draped down like a hospital gown, hem nearly touching the floor. “Though I might be hard pressed to maybe encourage you a little more. Nice junk, by the way.”

Varian chewed his lip to the tune of his knocking knees. “Where’s the dorm? Or rooms, or whatever.” This time he made no mention of her giving him an escort; not that he didn’t necessarily want it. It irked him that he could still be put off by her teasing even after hearing her confess her vulnerabilities but moments ago.

Sienna crossed her arms and turned to her side, chin parallel to her shoulders. Varian found the pose rather imposing. “Glad you asked. Take the corridor out of the workroom to the right, then keep going until the second big automatic door on your left. Take any cot that’s open.”

The ocelot-rabbit cross nodded his head curtly and turned, but felt a large and heavy hand on his shoulder before he was able to leave. He swallowed literally as well as figuratively any questions, unsure of what else there was to discuss.

“Oh, and Varian.” For some reason, the uniformly confident lilt of her first three words brought to mind a sense of nostalgia—or perhaps wistfulness. Something had been set in stone and there was no turning back, of that much he was now certain.

Promptly eying the clasping white fingers with the thickness of leaden pipes, he turned to face her—or rather was turned by them. He barely met the upper portion of her chest. Shaking the thought away he looked up to into the chiseled, womanly features of the kangaroo, which were half-bathed in the ephemeral darkness of dimmed fluorescent bulbs hanging high above like perched bats, soon to be shut off completely. She never seemed anything but amused by his height, which was vastly inferior even without the influence of ionast. But he assumed that was true for almost everybody that wasn’t her.

“I hope you’ve made peace with your ends and any of that reluctance you first wandered in with, because we’re leaving tomorrow.”

“Wait—already?”

Sienna nodded. “Maybe I should’ve told you sooner. We only land to restock food and drink, and gather a new employee or two while letting our last batch leave if they like—mind guessing who that happened to be?”

Varian wouldn’t have minded the knowledge at all—and indeed, his conviction rang true even now. However, the thought that he would be unable to return for at least a month pounded dents into his

fragile skull. Would Rena be okay? Hell, how would he fare here for so long? ...It was the first time since he'd arrived that he'd had his sureness called into question so blatantly.

But that was just it: he had gone through such worries before. When he stood on the grass in behold of the behemoth structure; when he had taken those first careful steps up the cold metal ramp. He knew better than to quit—he was better than that.

"I get what you're saying. This is my last chance to call it." Varian shrugged. "I'll pass. I've made it this close, haven't I?"

Sienna seemed quite pleased with the answer, and she nodded once again, this time more out of politeness than affirmation. She reached into a pocket of her shorts, prompting Varian to follow her hand, and rummaged for a time before plucking out a small, compact object. A single thumb flipped the upper half like a clam shell; a small section of its screen glowed a pastel yellow envelope and the number three, signifying an appropriate number of missed calls.

"Normally these are off limits, but you, my friend, get a free pass. Just don't go overboard during the day and the management won't notice a thing. I'll cover any extra charges, 'kay?" She shot him a practiced wink. "Not to be trite or cliché, but I'll say it anyway: it'll our little secret. This phone thing, not the butt-dials. There are a lot of those."

Varian checked his contact list to find who had called him, but a new number caught his attention first and foremost. "*Hoobie Doobie Roo <3*" was a nickname he didn't remember giving to any of his friends. He shot a glance back up to an expectant Sienna.

"It's been a long and eventful first day, Mr. Cadenza. And yet for all that it's worth, I don't think you've been properly inducted." The fact that such was not entirely true caught his attention. "There aren't very many formalities here. You walk in or you walk out. We've had a lovely time together so far—with that, I'd like to say this: Welcome to Sparklight, the nomadic workshop."

Sienna's demeanor remained pleasant and floral, with her lips curling up into a smile; not tricky, but warm; vim, but at nobody's expense. "You win the bet."