



# Wild Hearts

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** ZACK's life in coastal Maine wasn't perfect, but it was ordinary. Frightfully so. That is, it was up until the day his new stepbrother rolled into town in his old Volvo station wagon, followed closely by the whispering shadows of his checkered past. Zack knows more about him than he cares to let on just yet. Join forces with Zack as he is catapulted into a mind-bending, world-splitting adventure that has him questioning the very nature of his reality...

TODD's life had been a perpetual nightmare. A sinister shadow had been his constant companion since his earliest memory. It dogged his every step, threatening to subsume him. When he and his malevolent daemon washed up on the shores of Maine, he knew it was finally time to confront the specters of his past once and for all...

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Todd grimaced.

He had hated bridges for as long as he could remember—and the steel and concrete monstrosity looming before him now disappeared ominously into the foreboding fog ahead. Todd shivered as it drew nearer. The bridge arced above a deep river, spanning the short distance between New Hampshire and Maine. It wasn't one he'd been intending to cross so soon, and he'd successfully avoided doing so until his most recent misfortunes had forced him into it.

Todd's latest unpaid internship ended abruptly last week with an offer to be a dog nanny instead of a position in his intended career as an investigative journalist. He'd not-so-politely declined the insulting offer. His credit cards had long ago reached their meager limit, and a dog nanny's wages weren't going to go very far in resolving his financial problems. Worse still, his only affordable accommodation option was to either remain in Boston, living with his ex, Denver, or move in with his father. He'd chosen the latter evil.

For the third time that day, Todd carefully brushed the pile of unsettling thoughts from his mind, focusing instead on the upcoming crossing. The bridge was narrow, perilously high above the water, and cars whizzed by on either side of him. Todd's nerves flared as the roadway transitioned from the surety of concrete to the unnerving whine of metal grate, causing his entire car to vibrate unsettlingly.

Todd caught himself in the dingy rearview mirror and wasn't surprised to see that his ringlets of reddish-bronze hair were a total and utter mess. He stifled a grin at how disheveled he looked. At this point, the mop nearly covered his eyes. He brushed it aside with a clammy hand, the car behind him honking impatiently as he urged his

old Volvo onward. His unruly hair brought an unwanted memory into focus...

Todd was sitting in a wooden chair while Danver clumsily clipped away at his curls. Snow had begun to fall outside, glimmering as it caught the light spilling out into the dark January night. A Christmas tree, far past its due date, sat dead in one corner of the apartment they had shared together on Newbury Street. It still cast multicolored sparkles across the walls, dancing across their bare torsos. They were laughing together easily in blithe unison about how badly that haircut was coming out...

Todd couldn't help but recollect that they'd fucked that entire afternoon. They hadn't even waited to vacuum up Todd's hair first. And by the end of things, his red strands were stuck sweatily across the both of them. Their fornicating had scattered the debris to the far corners of the apartment. Todd had stumbled across them for months. He couldn't have known back then that that would be the last haircut Danver ever gave him. He tousled his hair nervously now, flicking his mirror back toward the traffic behind him, actively avoiding the reflections his own visage beckoned.

If only Mom were here, Todd thought glumly, missing her reassurance more every year since she'd vanished...

But Todd didn't want to think about that, either.

He sighed, eager to be off the bridge and back on solid ground, praying he might eventually outrun his own thoughts. He knew better than to expect his dad actually to be in Maine when he arrived. The man had proven equally good at running away from his duties as a father. Todd struggled to form a mental picture of his dad that wasn't steeped in shadows and fog. His father had broken many promises and reassurances over his lifetime, resulting in numerous canceled dinners and precisely zero apologies to date.

Todd had neared the midpoint of the river now and was white-knuckling the steering

wheel in the bumper-to-bumper traffic. His Volvo had sputtered to almost twenty below the speed limit, rattling as it struggled to keep going. There was a lot of honking. Too much honking. Todd panicked—and even with the pedal now fully jammed against the floor, he couldn't get the old machine moving any faster than it wanted to. There was a reason the car had always been lovingly referred to as “Snail.” He desperately urged her onward, guiltily knowing all the while that she was doing her best.

Right then, a white, Massachusetts-plated Mercedes G-Wagon swerved out from behind Todd—lights flashing, horn blaring. It aggressively brake-checked him, causing him to nearly lose control of his car. Todd screamed, lurching within inches of the other vehicle's bumper before he was thankfully able to regain control. A fresh chorus of chiding honks erupted from all around him. His heart was pounding, his hands shaking, as a deluge of road filth sprayed in through his open window. The Mercedes roared off, but not before the driver leaned out and flipped him off, grinning at him wildly.

There was something uncannily familiar about the man, and Todd briefly had the odd notion that he'd seen him before, but he couldn't quite place the memory or the face. The recollection was ancient and buried, and he was left with little more than a deepening unease as he watched the Mercedes speed off into the fog.

“Fllllluck!” Todd spluttered through his tightly pursed mouth. Slime and grime were everywhere—on his lips, in his hair, and splattered across the entire back half of the car. It was a mess. He was a mess—inside and out. Todd was gritting his teeth so hard his jaw hurt, but he had somehow managed to hold the lane. He ran a hand through his crusty hair, feeling the dirt and road sand smear into his scalp.

Disgusting, he thought bitterly.

He wiped the mess onto his pant leg, inadvertently spreading the filth and adding a

new stain to his growing collection. Off to Todd's right, just visible at the periphery of the fog, a road sign cheerily saluted him in whimsical font:

“Welcome to Maine, Vacationland.”

He let out a single, sharp laugh.

At least he had finally gotten across that fucking bridge.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

The last forty-five minutes of the drive were equal parts shitty and wet. But they were thankfully bridgeless. Todd had driven north along the coastline, desperately looking forward to a shower. The April air was still quite chilly, and even with the heat blasting on full tilt, Todd had begun to shiver a bit as he signaled to turn off the freeway. His flared nerves had never fully settled out after the incident with the Mercedes.

Todd hadn't spent much time imagining his dad's new life—those sorts of daydreams had departed him many years ago. He'd done a lot to not think about those things very pointedly, in fact. Each time Todd reconnected with his father he was living some new, even more fanciful version of himself: Connecticut insurance broker. Divorce. Texas beef rancher. Divorce. Hawaiian Kettle Chip maker. Divorce. Vegan recycled fishing net hammock maker...Currently still married.

Todd and Snail turned onto a residential street lined by impressive homes. The splendor of the neighborhood immediately felt hostile and foreign to him, and he knew he appeared out of place. From the look of it, this most current version of Todd's father was doing pretty well for himself. Todd's iPhone bleared out from the center console, alerting him that he'd arrived at his father's newest home. It was enormous.

Todd turned Snail off and sat momentarily, fumbling numbly around the center console for the small keychain his dad had mailed: a sterling silver carrot attached to an old-timey-looking key. He held it up and stared at it curiously. It twinkled as Todd turned it over in his hands. He slowly turned from it to the lavish stone-faced manor, letting out a gulp as he took it in. It commanded the landscape, set impressively against the backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean. He was shivering constantly now.

Am I really going to leave Snail in this ridiculous driveway?

He fought the urge to fire the car back up, kick it into reverse, and get them both out of there right then. Snail let out a rusty creak as if offering solace for his thoughts. He affectionately patted the dashboard with a pale, frigid hand.

“My thoughts exactly.” Todd muttered. “But we don’t have much of a choice. Here goes nothing.”

And with that, he grabbed his travel bag—an old leather duffel that contained the clothes he’d grabbed in the hurry of the breakup—and made his way up to the front of the elaborate home. Todd felt distinctly out of place as he approached the large oak doors. They were set back into an elaborately carved edifice. Above, a lifelike gargoyle loomed menacingly out over the doorway. It sneered down at him with a cocked head, smiling a too-wide smile that was disturbingly lifelike for something made entirely of granite. Its monstrously muscular form menaced him from above, its claws gripping at the house like it was about to pounce. Todd trembled, averting his gaze for some reason. He felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck, anticipating at any moment the creature dropping down and reaching out with those taloned hands... but it didn’t.

Because, of course, it didn’t.

“Get a fucking grip.” Todd scolded himself.

He took a deep breath. A part of him was perfectly willing to admit it was a beautiful home—gargoyles excluded. But it felt more like a country club than a house, and he knew then that he’d never feel comfortable here. A close-trimmed lawn wrapped around the mansion on either side, skirting its bountiful beds filled with hydrangeas and low fir trees. Everything had a natural, polished look. The smell of lilac was omnipresent, as was the thundering roar of the Atlantic. It was impressive, albeit a

little gaudy.

This place does have a kind of magic, Todd allowed, smiling to himself bitterly in spite of the cold: Rich-people magic.

He leaned against the wall for a moment, and then, after minutes of trepidation, Todd finally attempted to use the key on the front door. To his disappointment, he found it didn't fit the lock. It didn't work on the side door, either. Or the garage door. The carrot key didn't even really look like a house key as he turned it around in his hands, fighting back tears of frustration. Todd's fingers were numb at this point. The rain dampened his already dismal spirits, and he shook as he fumbled with the keychain.

“Fucking stupid piece of shit carrot FUCK!” Todd screamed.

He bit his tongue in his rage, the sharp pain causing him to drop the key and taste blood. Todd felt a blaze of anger flare as he regarded the little thing on the ground with newfound contempt. He grabbed it, shoved it into his pocket, and began to search around the side of the house for some other means of ingress. To his dismay, a series of increasingly hostile-feeling gargoyles appeared as Todd explored. Each leered at him with a toothy little mouth, each affixed with a set of glittering onyx eyes. Todd hated them. He hated all of this. He felt his face flush brutal scarlet under the collective weight of their dark stares. By now his heart was thundering in his chest, and a familiar dread oozed out from deep within him: powerlessness. He clenched his fists, squeezed his eyes tightly, and fought back a renewed surge of searing tears.

He decided to hop the fence and see if there was a way inside somewhere out back. Todd wasn't tall by any means, but he'd managed to stay fit and lean through college. The practice had been sheer force of habit rather than natural inclination. Sports had never been his thing, exactly. Denver—always creeping into his thoughts—had taught him a lot about both lifting and nutrition; it had been one of the few hobbies



they'd learned to share. Todd had appreciated the guidance Danver had given him when mentoring him in the gym. That had been before the patience had dried up, along with the merriment. Before all the other things, too...

Enough of that, Todd scolded himself. You have enough to worry about.

He was frigid and soaked to the bone—but his T-shirt clung to his proud chest, and the outline of his well-developed pecs bulged against the wet fabric. Todd braced, then hoisted himself up and over the black iron fence. Todd rarely had occasion to put his athleticism to the test, and he was pleasantly surprised with how easily he could vault the fence...

...and even as he began to smile at his accomplishment, he fell in a clumsy heap on the other side, losing his balance and not sticking the landing like he'd meant to. The fall only added to his mounting collection of filth. A grass stain streaked down the front of his shirt, joined by a pair of scrapes on his knee and elbow that seared with fresh, hot pain.

Todd muttered angrily to himself and wondered how long it was going to be before the police showed up and arrested the now mud-spattered ginger with the crappy old car for breaking and entering. He rose unsteadily to his feet, looked sheepishly around to ensure no one had witnessed his blunder, and then set off down a winding stone path he'd spotted. It meandered through a series of tall, ornate hedges shaped into various animals before opening up to an enormous pool.

Todd heard splashing...

There was someone in the water: a lanky figure taking broad, powerful strokes as he swam lap after lap. Todd grew rigid. His father hadn't mentioned a pool, but why would he? He certainly hadn't mentioned another house guest. That part was strange. But when it came to his father, communication had never been a strong suit.

Todd tried and failed to get a clear glimpse of the swimmer's face. He could tell the man was tall, and his swimming was more graceful and athletic than anything Todd had ever managed on land or in water. Todd was surprised to find himself somewhat in awe of how he moved so easily. He made it look casual. Effortless. The motion was hypnotic. Rhythmic. Todd was transfixed, no longer caring about the cold. Eventually, the splashing came to a halt, and the swimmer hoisted himself out of the water, sending riotous steam plumes upward into the cold spring air.

Todd reckoned he hadn't been noticed yet and felt totally awkward imposing himself on whoever this was. But the swimmer had his wide, powerful back to him, and try as he might to say something in the way of greeting, his words were lodged in his throat.

And what a back. Todd gulped involuntarily as the man bent over to grab a towel off a nearby pool chair. The outline of his muscular ass bulged through the swim briefs. It was like they had been painted on. Even from across the pool, Todd could clearly make out the deep grooves and definition of someone who made a daily practice of some form of exercise. Generous shoulders and lats tapered down to an impossibly thin waist. Steam continued to rise off of him as the cold rain gently plodded against lightly tanned, hairless skin.

And that ass... Todd found himself going back to it over and over—to the way the fabric of the swimsuit was basically glued to it. The way it clung to the heavy meat of the swimmer's glutes and carved a deep valley between them...

Nope, nope, nope, don't do that, Todd thought frantically, feeling a surge of pressure in his own shorts. He distracted himself with the ground, the house, the ocean, back to ass, sky, ass, ocean, house, ass, ass, ass. Todd felt his face flushing wildly and willed himself desperately to be chill for once in his life—largely to no avail. And then Todd felt his heart start to quicken, the heat in his face searing to an uncomfortable new brilliance as the man turned around and saw him for the first time. The swimmer was handsome. His face was chiseled, and his beard was closely

trimmed. The man smiled at him from across the pool, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Oh, hey! I didn’t see you there. I’m Zack! You must be Todd!” He waved. I’m your stepbrother, I guess?” He chuckled. Your dad told me to expect you. Sorry, I thought you were coming next week or something.”

Zack had finished toweling and walked toward Todd, tracing along the poolside with a casual saunter. He possessed the easy swagger of someone who didn’t spend much time second-guessing themselves and never had. Todd did not walk like that.

“Yo, are you cold? You look like... why are you all muddy?” With a thick forefinger, he flicked some of the road grime off Todd’s cheek. Ew,” he concluded, wiping his finger on his swimsuit. “What is that?”

“Long story.” Todd offered. “And yeah, I’m Todd. Hey, look, I’m sorry I didn’t realize I wouldn’t be here alone. I’m sorry to crash your summer like this.” He apologized, unable to maintain eye contact with Zack without feeling his face sear with heat.

“Ah, no worries. It’s a big place. Besides, we’re family now, right?” the swimmer chuckled. “Your dad is an odd guy. No offense.”

“None taken.” Todd assured.

Zack had slung the towel on his waist so low that Todd had difficulty remembering there was a swimsuit beneath it. An awkward silence stretched out between them as Todd looked everywhere but at Zack.

“How was your drive up here? Did you find the place okay?” Zack.

“It’s kind of hard to miss.” Todd laughed.

“Hey, look, I get it. This place is, like, a lot. Don’t worry, it’s not as...” He gestured broadly, “You know...bullshit or whatever as it might seem from out here. Come on, let’s get you and your stuff inside.” Zack chuckled.

He took Todd’s bag from him with one hand while ushering him toward a side door with the other. Up close, Todd could smell the chlorine and feel the warmth from Zack’s body, which was still steaming in the icy rain. The difference in their height felt even more pronounced now, and Todd was surprised to find himself slightly intimidated by Zack on some subconscious level. Maybe it was the ease and athleticism with which he moved that huge body. Or maybe it was something more primal. He felt the heavy warmth of Zack’s hand at his back as they moved toward the door. It was huge—like a giant weight that spanned almost the entire distance between his shoulder blades. And it guided him with a familiar comfort and pressure that was equal parts reassuring and directive. Todd would have felt relaxed if his head would stop spinning.

“Here we are. Home sweet home.” Zack said cheerily from behind him.

The tall man reached past him and opened the door, slinging his small bag behind his back. The motion revealed the crease of his armpit. Todd stared at the dark hair nestled there, shadowed by deeply muscled lines. The change in stance had caused a distracting bulge to appear along Zack’s massive bicep, and Todd traced a thick vein up the length of his powerful arm, winding its way from wrist to shoulder. Todd looked away. He looked down. He looked at the ceiling. The door. He desperately hoped that the dimmer lighting indoors might hide his blushing face. Or maybe the mud would obscure the incriminating pigment...

Or maybe I’m just an awkward freak creeping on his stepbrother within five seconds of meeting him, Todd despaired.

But Zack hadn’t appeared to notice any of it. Todd snapped out of his head enough to

notice that the room they'd entered was a washroom of sorts. It probably had some fancy French name he'd never be able to pronounce. He couldn't believe his dad lived here, not when he'd grown up in one-bedroom apartments, sleeping on a couch most nights. The room had moody, arched ceilings and a terracotta floor that probably cost more than a year at college. A lavish crystal chandelier was suspended over an ebony table in the center of the space. Todd took it in with equal measures of awe and disgust.

A pair of shorts hit him in the face.

"Sorry!" Zack barked, raising his hands in apology. I thought you were paying attention!" If a grin could be apologetic, his was. "I figured you might want some clean clothes because of all the...well, you know." He gestured at Todd's general state.

"Yeah, no I appreciate it." Todd replied awkwardly, grabbing the shorts from the floor. He was glad for the distraction. They looked a little big, but they'd do. At least they were dry. Zack closed the distance between them with a folded sweatshirt and a pair of fuzzy hiking socks in his oversized hands.

"These too," he said, presenting them more carefully. "I figured you might be cold. Don't worry, they're old but they're clean," he insisted, holding the stack out insistently.

"Thanks." Todd mumbled, unable to meet Zack's gaze.

Todd grabbed at the clothes in a blundered attempt at matching Zack's casual grace. He felt a slight resistance as he tried to pull them away, as though those huge hands meant to tease him a little. He finally managed a nervous look at Zack, who merely grinned at him. Then—just like that—the clothes released, and Todd realized he'd been pulling on them quite hard. He stumbled backward, nearly falling to the ground

had Zack not reached out and steadied him.

“Sorry.” Zack chuckled. “I couldn’t help it. I’ve never had a brother before and it was just too tempting. Hey, there’s a bathroom through there.”

He was pointing toward a dark alcove in the corner of the room. “And the kitchen is just through that way when you’re done.” He gestured over to a larger door opposite the shower. “Hey, are you hungry, by the way? I was going to make some lunch after my swim—I can make extra if you want.”

“I’m... actually starving,” Todd realized. He felt touched by the offer.

“No problem. Two lunches coming right up,” Zack said. “And hey, welcome to Kennebunkport. If I’m honest, I’m actually kind of glad for the company this summer. It’s always creeped me out to be the only one here.” Zack winked, turning to leave. He paused briefly when he reached the doorway as though he were about to say something, then shook his head and left.

Todd flinched as a deep unease tugged at him. He was struck by a flash of memory—a man in a mask appeared out of a fog of shadows, grasping and giggling, ripping his mom from him and dragging her screaming into the dark. An entire section of the bridge disappeared with her...But the memory was wrapped in a deep haze, and any time he tried to focus on it, it slipped away from him like so much smoke.

Todd closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, willing the darkness from his mind as he often had. But even as he banished it, the swimmer splashed into his thoughts in its place. He was startled by the sudden and powerful intrusiveness of the image: it was Zack’s fucking smile. Todd had felt that smile like it hurt. That smile was sparks. That smile was fireworks. That smile sizzled across the dark landscape of his soul, racing toward the shadows and lighting them up in brief eruptions of pure electric

intensity, banishing the corruption that lived within him in moments of fleeting respite. Todd imagined them erupting across him like thousands of tiny detonations. He felt as though a sun had erupted to life inside of him. He felt awake. Alive. And for the first time in so very long, he felt hopeful. And then, just like that, just as suddenly as he'd arrived in Todd's thoughts, Zack fell away. An emptiness followed in the vacuum of the next few moments. A darkness settled across him. And then it was just him there: just Todd. Alone.

But not entirely alone. Not ever. Because there was always that other thing—the shadowy one—the evil presence that he did his very best not to think about at all. The only thing he did remember about that day on the bridge was that it had found him then. And it had lived out along the wildest fringes of his mind ever since—dancing along the tattered edges of the real. And it wanted to overtake him, to become him. It was him. Except it very much wasn't.

Todd shuddered, fearing he might vomit, steadying himself against the laundry room wall. His heart was racing. Todd peered uneasily into the darkened alcove where the shower room awaited him, a childish fear of what might be lurking in the dark flittering across him.

That's right. It taunted. You should be afraid of the shadows. They're coming for you.

"Stop it." Todd whispered. "Shut up! Leave me alone." He begged.

You act like I'm your enemy. You have no idea what's coming.

"I said leave me alone." Todd fumed, loud enough he worried Zack might hear him.

As you wish. But you can't outrun fate. We're not done with each other, not by a long shot. I'll be seeing you shortly.

And then the voice, the shadow, was gone. Todd heaved, weakly making his way to the shower, doing his level best to pretend like none of that had happened.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Todd found it hard to leave the shower. It felt like a respite from reality. For the first five minutes, he just stood there, head tilted back, letting the warm water wash the grit and grime out of his hair, cascading onto his upturned face. It trickled along his eyelashes, dancing across the corners of his lips. In the dusky light of the bathroom the steam whirled and licked around his lean body, the bright shock of hair atop his head like a flame fighting to stay alight against the unending torrent. He could have stayed like that forever: warm, quiet, alone—the only sound was the gentle pitter-patter of droplets striking against the tiled floor. But as the last of the fancy soaps and creams he'd used to clean himself swirled down the drain—their exotic fragrances with them—Todd caught the distant whiff of...

Wait, was that burning?

He turned off the shower and dried off in somewhat of a hurry. As he dressed, he found the clothes Zack had lent him were slightly oversized, though not as badly as he'd expected. He initially felt a little goofy in the fuzzy wool hiking socks, but after taking them for a test drive around the bathroom, he had to admit that they felt fucking fantastic. He flexed his toes in them, enjoying the way they hugged back at his feet. Todd regarded himself briefly in the half-steamed-up bathroom mirror—black sweatshirt, black sweat shorts. Bright red fucking hair. He tucked the sweatshirt into the shorts, eyeing himself wearily, then untucked it. Then half tucked it. Then, he realized how dumb it was to think it mattered how he looked to his newly acquired step-brother, who was out of his league by a mile and likely not even gay...

Todd giggled nervously, realizing how far his thoughts were trailing off to distract him from the shadows, before heading off to join Zack.

“Yeah so...,” Zack said apologetically as Todd entered the kitchen. “I might have oversold my culinary abilities. Those were supposed to be eggs.” He absently waved a kitchen towel in the direction of a charcoal-filled pan. “Granted they probably don’t qualify as eggs anymore.” He coughed, choking on a mouthful of smoke. “But I promise you that at some point, very recently, those were very much eggs.”

Todd laughed. “Do you want some help?” He gestured toward the stove, not really sure if the situation was salvageable at this point.

“I promised you lunch, you’re getting lunch,” Zack assured him, shooing him away. “Nice look, by the way.” Zack nodded at Todd’s getup, and Todd thought he almost detected a slight blush hidden behind the olive tone of Zack’s cheeks, but the large man turned away far too quickly for Todd to get a confirming look.

“Hang on,” Zack said, taking a few long strides across the kitchen. “I actually always come prepared with a plan B.” He tossed the towel onto the counter and began shuffling loudly around in a large refrigerator, eventually emerging with a pizza box held high in his hands. “Plan B,” he said sagely, raising the box up above his head like it were a holy relic. “Poolside pizza.”

Zack had insisted they sit out by the pool while they ate the slices of cold pizza. “Sun’s out,” he’d said simply, leading the way once again. And in the time since they’d last been outside, the sun had indeed crept its way from behind the clouds. Zack dragged two of the myriad lounge chairs near one another, and the two ate in silence. Todd was enjoying the spring sunshine as he wolfed down one slice of pepperoni and then another. It felt amazing to be outside, breathing in the ocean air. New England winters were long, and after months indoors, he was glad for a change of scenery.

“It’s beautiful here.” Todd said appreciatively.

“Yeah, not the worst place to grow up.” Zack said, squinting off into the horizon.

Todd was about to reach for a third slice (not a personal record, that was five, thank you very much) when he felt a familiar buzzing in his pocket. He flinched. There weren’t many people he was necessarily looking to take a call from at this moment. Especially with Dad away. He thought about ignoring it, but then his anxiety got the better of him—as it usually did—and he whipped the phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen, hoping to god it wasn’t Denver—finding his thoughts turning yet again today toward that blond hair and those icy-blue eyes that he so desperately wanted to forget entirely.

It wasn’t.

Todd was actually surprised to find the caller was his former boss, Francine, the director of his last internship.

The one and only, Todd thought darkly.

Maybe she was going to offer him a job as a flight attendant this time... or maybe she’d forgotten how to unlock her tablet computer, again. But then... she hadn’t been that bad. Not really. He answered. “Hey, Franc?—”

“Kid, I don’t have a lot of time to chitchat.” Her raspy voice raked across him like sandpaper. She wasn’t waiting for a reply, he knew, and Todd settled back in his lounge. On the other end of the line, he heard the clink of ice cubes landing expertly in a glass. Then the plunk of a bottle opening, followed swiftly by the hearty glug of a hard pour. Finally, the plop-plop of two olives. The whole sequence played out in about four seconds. Dirty martini: her one o’clock staple. Lunch, she’d call it. It was only 12:30 p.m., but Todd had seen her call 10 a.m. “martini time,” so he was just going to grant her this one without too much in the way of judgment.

“I’ve got some freelance work for ya,” she continued as if there had been no pause in their conversation. “I know, I know, no hard feelings about the nanny gig, kid. Not everyone is cut out for that kind of work.” Todd thought about interjecting that he had, infact, turned down her offer, but then thought better of it. “Thing is,” she continued seamlessly, “I found a girl from Malaga or Manila who does reiki on the dogs so that’s sort of a double whammy for me now, anyways. Francie’s covered. Ya don’t need to worry about her or her little poopkins anymore...” She trailed off and he heard her take a sip. Then another.

Did she just take a drag from a cigarette? Todd wondered, incredulously.

She let out a wheezing sigh followed by a halfhearted gurgle. Silence. A giggle? Then a small, almost imperceptible hiccup.

Then, finally: “Anyway, how about a job? Paid!” She punctuated the last word like it was some additional incentive not normally present in a work contract. “This isssss Toddy”—another drag from that cigarette—“rigggggght?” she followed up in a breathy, impatient tone, as though exhaling the smoke at the same time.

“I, uh... sure? Yes. Yes. This is Toddy.” Fuck. “Todd,” he corrected. He glanced self-consciously at Zack, who mercifully pretended to be distracted by a seagull that had landed nearby, but Todd reddened when he noticed that the corners of his mouth curled into a smirk.

“What’s the job?” Toddy asked Francine.

“Oh, darling.” Another sip. “Francie doesn’t have”—a burp followed by some chortling—“time to go through all of the details with you! Flat rate of ten thousand dollars. Half up front. Half at job’s end.” She’d dropped the lyrical affectation—if only briefly—while mentioning the numbers, but then quickly resumed it, following up with: “I’ll send you an address, and Viktor—total doll, lovvvvve Viktor—he’ll

give you the rest of the information. He's lost something dear to him and needs someone reliable to help him track it down." Hiccup. "Sending the contract now, dearie. Toodles!" He heard her put the phone down and begin making another drink while humming a tune with no melody.

Clink. Plunk. Glug. Plop.

Unsure whether the call was truly over, Todd decided he better hang up because a part of him knew Francine might never make it around to doing so herself, and she had circled around fully now to muttering animatedly in between sips and gurgles and unenthusiastic murmurs. He ended it.

To Todd's surprise, a moments later a ding on his phone informed him that she had indeed sent both a contract and the first half of the payment she'd promised. Todd was stunned. This was enough to pay off his entire credit card debt and then some! He sat there for a moment, holding the phone dumbly in his hands, staring out at the unfamiliar view as a pair of small sailboats drifted lazily across the middle distance, the wind gently pushing them along in unison. His eyes glazed over with apprehensive relief.

"Good news?" Zack inquired, tone slightly anxious, apparently reacting uncertainly to the other boy's protracted silence.

"Yeah. I, uh... I guess I got a job? Kinda?" Todd's voice cracked on the word "job." He wasn't really sure what to call it. Or what the job even was, for that matter. But he had helped Francine do a small bit of investigative work on the side during his internship at the newspaper, so he imagined it would be something along the lines of tracking down a person who was difficult to locate or hunting down some artifact that had a poorly documented chain of custody. Something innocuous, like a spoon collection. Or an old doll. Both had been assignments during his time with Francine before. Neither had been fun to deal with. It hadn't been glamorous work. But it

hadn't been necessarily hard, either. And most importantly, it most certainly had never paid ten thousand dollars before. Todd couldn't believe how his day was turning around.

Todd looked excitedly toward Zack, before asking, "Hey, do you know where this is?" He held up his phone for him.

Zack shielded his eyes and squinted into the sun as he tried to read the screen, reaching out his other hand and taking Todd's, drawing the phone and Todd's hand toward himself. Zack's hand enveloped Todd's entirely. Zack squeezed his hand playfully around the smaller man's, the pressure causing Todd's crotch to surge uncomfortably. Then his focus fell back to the phone, and he abruptly let go.

Todd managed a breath.

"Yarmouth? Yeah, it's just north of here. A little ways. out, not too far. Why? What's in Yarmouth?" Zack asked coyly, as though all of the tension between them were merely fraternal banter. He had propped himself up on one elbow in his lounge chair, a slice of pizza dangling out of his mouth.

"My old boss needs me to go up there and interview some guy about a stolen... something? I guess she's offering it to me as some sort of freelance gig. I really could use the work, if I'm honest. Credit card debt." Todd added shamefully, glancing back at his phone:

Yarmouth. Viktor Vulg. 9 Quaking Oaks Way. 4pm. Go get 'em, Kid.

That was it. That was all Francine had sent him. Along with that five-thousand-dollar advance...which he supposed if he accepted, bound him to find whatever needed finding for this Viktor guy. Todd wondered if Snail would be up to a bit of a drive after her long morning. He hoped so.

“Do you want some company?” Zack offered, surprising Todd with his candor. “Traffic is bad this time of day. I know a back way we can take.”

“You’re not busy?” Todd queried, wondering how it was Zack had nothing better to do on a Thursday afternoon than hang out with his new stepbrother, feeling unworthy of the sudden interest and kindness he was showing him.

“Nope!” Zack said. He hopped out of his pool chair with that now-familiar energy. Todd kept waiting for a crack to appear in the surface of Zack’s demeanor: for some sort of confirmation that all of this was the setup to some inevitable disappointment. But Zack was so... steady. So even. That smile seemed to just tumble out of him. And even though Todd wanted to disprove it all somehow, he found it increasingly hard to do so.

Zack extended an enormous hand to help Todd out of his chair. Todd took it gratefully, thrilled by the rush of being pulled so easily to his feet. Todd let go of Zack’s hand as he fought to regain his sense of up and down in more ways than one. His life, all of this, it was all moving so fast. Too fast. And yet... and yet...

Todd found himself smiling, then. Really smiling.

“I gotta piss, then we can hit the road.” Zack winked.

Todd chuckled at his candor, and he found Zack smiling back at him. Todd could sense a wildfire was starting to catch in the smoldering heat erupting between them. He was having a harder and harder time believing that he just imagined it, too: he even swore he could feel the heat from it now, the warmth licking out from its hungry flames. Todd felt them ripple and blaze across parts of him he’d never known existed. And he didn’t know if he wanted to extinguish it anymore, even if he could. His entire body felt like it was on fire.

“I’ll be right there.” Todd said, awkwardly turning to face the ocean, not wanting his blush to be as obvious to Zack as he feared it was.

“Sure thing.” Zack said, leaving him.

Before turning back to the house, Todd felt compelled to give one final glance at the ocean. He noted that it had grown choppy and was streaked with white-capped waves, glowing aquamarine in the midday sun. The calls of seagulls punctuated the crash of the waves as they pounded in synchrony against the shoreline.

Farther out still, a series of coal-black clouds had begun to form. Todd froze, his mouth instantly dry at the sight of them. He’d seen those clouds before. They’d followed him his entire life. They’d stolen his mother from him. And he knew without a doubt that they meant to consume him.

Told you. It whispered. They’re coming. It laughed.

“Fuck you.” Todd muttered, turning his back on the sea and the voice.

Todd hurried inside after Zack, shivering now despite the sunshine, wanting desperately to get back to the place of warmth they’d shared so briefly. But he didn’t know if he’d be able to. Not with those clouds on the horizon. Not when he knew just what they were capable of...



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Zack had insisted on taking Snail. The moment he'd seen her in the driveway, he'd lit up like a little kid, walking around the old car like it was some rare gem, appraising her from all sides. He'd asked a lot of questions about her Todd didn't have the answers to, but when Zack had learned her name, he'd instantly taken to using it. It was cute enough to distract Todd from the clouds, at least for now.

There was something in the way Zack said the word "Snail" that assured Todd that the obviously privileged man wasn't just blowing smoke up his ass about the whole thing. His enthusiasm was authentic. Zack had even opened her door with a gentle care that Todd found almost comical, considering the back half of the interior was still absolutely covered in the excrement of road filth from his earlier encounter with the Mercedes. Nevertheless, there was a genuine enthusiasm in Zack that he didn't feel could be faked. For some bizarre reason, he seemed to think Todd's shitpile car was something special.

That makes precisely two of us; Todd thought with a smile as they set off with a clunk towards Yarmouth. He was thankful to put some distance between himself and the events of the afternoon.

"That's your turn!" Zack yelped, frantically pointing off to the left, his big hand almost smacking Todd in the face. Todd hadn't gotten used to the toll roads or the left-hand exits yet. He dodged Zack's hand inelegantly and tried desperately to get Snail where she needed to be without obliterating all of them in the process.

Snail creaked and rattled violently as she reluctantly performed his maneuver, spitting them out with finality in Yarmouth's little downtown with a defiant set of rattles Todd had never heard her make before. Todd flinched as Zack seized Todd's leg.

“Todd,” Zack started, voice low and serious, squeezing Todd’s thigh so firmly it almost hurt. “You almost killed Snail.” He said, as though a serious crime had been committed.

“Did not.” Todd protested, pushing Zack’s hand away.

A deep clunk from somewhere in Snail’s innards seemed to churn in agreement, though. Zack lit up at the comedic timing. He casually pulled his hand away like the contact hadn’t been untoward or particularly special. But it left both a warm impression where it had been on Todd’s pant leg and a hollow feeling in Todd’s throat where he found himself increasingly conflicted about all of this.

“Two against one. You’re a Snail-murderer.” Zack replied.

“Hey, it’s not my fault your roads make no sense.” Todd retorted.

“You’ll get used to them.” Zack assured.

But Todd didn’t know how long he expected to be here or how long it would take him to get used to this.

The town rolled by, and Todd felt uncharacteristically charmed by it all: the white colonial houses, the cobbled streets, the fanciful shapes of coastal trees that looked windswept even on a windless day like today. Even the cemeteries had a certain whimsy—the white-marbled headstones that studded their green lawns shone brilliantly in the sun. A raven. An urn. A unicorn. He realized then that this place wasn’t so entirely different from where he’d grown up, This whole day—no, the whole year—had felt like one big left exit. Yet here he was, confronted with an odd sense of familiarity.

Zack had fallen quiet and was absently toying with the ancient, complicated

mechanism of Snail's heating vent with a contented smile on his face. He seemed to find its over-engineered complexity fascinating. And Todd very much found that fascinating. From time to time, Todd could still detect faint wafts of chlorine coming from him. And he had the odd notion of wondering then if he'd ever be able to smell a pool again without thinking of Zack's ass—of the way he had looked gliding through that azure water.

He feared it wasn't likely.

His iPhone chirped an alert, ripping Todd back to the present with the A.I. assistant's disaffected voice: "Destination in... four... miles." There was a pause, then, "Cascadia Omni-Core Kinematics."

Zack barked a laugh next to him as the assistant spoke.

"What?" Todd asked. They'd been quiet for some time.

"Nothing." Zack said innocently.

Todd looked at him quizzically but then focused back on the road, not wanting to miss his turn. He looked around, expecting to see more than...trees. But that was it—pine trees—for as far as he could see in every direction. The drive had taken them inland, and it hadn't taken long for the quaint little coastal town to fade to rural suburbs, which in turn had given way to the current seemingly endless pine barren.

"Destination on your left in...one thousand feet," his phone warned, wrongly assuming Todd had any idea what a thousand feet would feel like at fifty-five miles per hour. He didn't. But even as he scanned to the left, he saw, clearly, something that mortified him to the core of his person: a huge stone sign dominated the roadway up ahead. What it said was unmistakable:

C.O.C.K.

Todd blinked. Yep:

C.O.C.K.

Still there.

Zack was dying next to him, doubled over in his seat, giggling like this was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

“Great name.” Todd said flatly, embarrassed he hadn’t worked out the acronym sooner.

Zack had been riding with his arm casually wrapped around Todd’s headrest. He playfully ruffled his hair, tossing the red curls this way and that. More touch. More sparks. Todd’s heart thumped. He realized that he’d stomped down briefly on the accelerator the moment Zack’s hand made contact. Snail lurched forward, and he worried that Zack could surely hear his pulse pounding.

“Someone’s excited,” Zack teased playfully as they rounded a final bend in the road.

Ahead, a clearing was dominated by a massive concrete structure that the pines had completely hidden until now. Until it was right in front of them: Cascadia Omni-Core Kinematics. Zack still had his hand on the back of Todd’s head and squeezed tightly as he leaned forward, taking in the view. It was as though he’d forgotten that he was cradling the back of his step-brother’s head in his huge hand, his fingers laced through Todd’s hair. Todd almost imagined he could feel Zack playing with his curls faintly, running them between two of his fingers. But surely he wasn’t...

“Weird place,” Zack interrupted his thoughts in a low voice.

“Very.” Todd agreed.

Extremelythe voice thirded.

The ginger had leaned forward in his own seat now as though to put distance between himself and the voice in his head. Zack’s hand fell away for the second time that day. He was disappointed when he eventually leaned back, and it didn’t return. The enormous building had a single glass door tucked in one corner.

“So am I coming or what?” Zack asked as Todd turned Snail off.

Todd looked wearily at the odd structure before saying, “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

He hoped his imposter syndrome wasn’t too obvious. But then he looked down at himself, realizing he was still wearing Zack’s borrowed clothes, and couldn’t help but laugh at how unkempt he looked.

No wonder you can’t get a job. The voice seared.

“Let’s trade,” Zack offered simply. And before Todd could reply, the other man had unbuckled his seatbelt and whipped off the undersized white T-shirt he had been bulging out of moments before, revealing his muscular torso once more. Todd had difficulty looking away from his body, even as Zack presented the shirt with a boyish grin. But Zack withdrew it abruptly, even as Todd had almost grasped it, looking deadly serious for a moment, like they’d almost made a terrible mistake. Then he took a long, dramatic sniff of the armpit, his eyes teasing but still maintaining his faux-serious face. He sighed with mock relief before finally handing the shirt back to Todd with bolstered assurance.

“It’s totally fine.” Zack said. “Maybe a little pool-y, though. It’s probably a better vibe than the hoody.”

Todd hesitated, then clumsily started taking off the sweatshirt he'd borrowed, still dumbly holding on to Zack's shirt. He had been trying so hard not to look at Zack sitting there, shirtless, that he hadn't even unbuckled his own seatbelt first. The sweatshirt got all tangled up and he found himself swimming in it, fumbling around like an idiot trying to find the buckle release while continuing haplessly to free himself from the confines of the hoody's sleeves.

"Allow me." Zack said.

Todd heard a click and then felt a huge hand plant itself on his chest, pushing him backward into his seat while another grasped the back of his shirt, gently tugging it up over his head, markedly careful to pull the hood open so it didn't catch on Todd's ears. Zack even ran a hand up along the back to keep the curls of Todd's hair from snagging. The contrast of the force of the gesture coupled with the tenderness of the execution shocked Todd. Heat rushed to his face—and other places.

"Someone's been hitting the gym!" Zack beamed as Todd emerged from the labyrinth of the hoody. Zack pinched at Todd's exposed nipple playfully, and the sensation sent a painful throb of longing along the length of Todd's cock. Zack gave him an approving pat along the thick of his pectorals as though the handsome jock had just been giving a friend a harmless compliment at the gym.

"That shirt will look good on you, too," Zack assured him with a wink, pulling the black sweatshirt he'd removed from Todd over his own head. It looked good on him.

Everything looks good on him, Todd swooned. I'd look good on him. And there Todd went again: like a moth to flame. Helpless. The sparks were all around him now, roaring and thundering in his ears like so much noise. He felt himself getting swept up—sweptaway. And Todd was increasingly unable to resist the momentum of his feelings. He felt himself growing dizzy from the rhythm. From the motion. The current tossing him around and around. It was like watching Zack back in that pool,

and Todd was enraptured once more: captive. Buoyant. A growing tightness in the borrowed shorts caused him hazard enough to redirect his errant thoughts, pulling him back to the job. From one cock to another.

Disgusting to get all boned-up for your step-brother. It's just like you to lose focus like this...the voice chided.

"I'm going to owe you an entire wardrobe after this," Todd teased, ignoring it, trying to match Zack's casual tone.

The T-shirt fit better than the sweatshirt, but Todd still felt self-conscious. The voice had made him clammy with sweat, and he felt underdressed still. The smell of chlorine burned his nose once more, mixed now with what he guessed was Zack's deodorant. Todd inhaled the woodsy scent, which conjured the tall trees that stood sentinel here.

Fine. Ignore me all you want. The voice groaned.

"Let's go." Todd urged, wanting to keep things moving.

"Oh, okay." Zack said. "And we have no idea what we're doing here, right?"

"None at all." Todd replied, setting off towards the doors.

The large building somehow became more inscrutable as the pair approached it. Its exterior was adorned by matte-gray cement walls and little else other than thin, modern LED light posts and a basic sidewalk. Only one other car was parked in the large lot, which seemed rather eerie to Todd, considering the scale of whatever this appeared to be.

Zack had managed to get in front of him, opening a sleek glass door laser-etched with

the word “COCK.” He bowed theatrically as Todd passed by.

“Welcome to COCK, good sir,” Zack said with a flourish of his hand, following Todd inside and allowing the door to swing shut behind them. Automated lights clicked on after a short delay, revealing an old reception desk as the only furniture in the small lobby. Behind it, a massive steel door stood resolutely closed. Above that, a tiny security camera had turned slightly as they entered, centering its little lens on them, a red light blinking to confirm a presence at the other end. Todd elbowed Zack, granting a nod toward the camera.

“Yep. Weird place.” Zack whispered.

“Do you think we knock...or?” Todd asked uncertainly.

But then there was a harsh electric bzzz and the wallpanel next to the steel door flicked from red to green. A voice crackled out of a speaker from somewhere nearby.

“Through the door you go. Now. Now. Now.” The distorted man’s voice urged. Todd couldn’t place the thick accent, which smeared his words even further into nonsense.

Todd looked uncertainly to Zack, who just shrugged

“You heard the man.” Zack said, reaching for the door and pushing it open.

What they discovered on the other side was some type of inextricable manufacturing facility. The aesthetic was definitely going hard on the future-dystopian-robot-factory thing. The equipment was all glossy white, plastered in huge, futuristic flat-screen panels, and all of it powered down. Sleek metal walkways hung suspended from the ceiling, skirting industrial vats and tanks laced with a series of conveyor belts and tubes that blurred into madness the longer Todd looked at them. There was also an inscrutable smell in the air, like burning plastic. None of it was operational. The huge



space was totally silent, not a trace of what was actually produced here anywhere to be seen.

“Quite the place.” Zack marveled.

“Do you think we’re about to get jumped by robots or something?” Todd wondered nervously.

“Oh, definitely. It’s that or zombies.” Zack said glibly.

The voice from before echoed out across the vast space, no longer distorted by the electronics but still...distorted. Todd finally located the speaker: a shortish man with a splotchy face standing outside of the only “office” Todd could make out amongst all the equipment.

The man had emerged from an enormous glass cube in the center of the industrial room. It glowed from within with a harsh, sterile light. Inside, Todd could make out a series of pedestals, alongside a small desk with an ancient, 1990s-style computer. There was little else beyond an old-school office chair and something Todd imagined was a printer or a fax machine haphazardly strewn on the floor, all of it in stark contrast to the futuristic vision of the cube.

“Come, come. I cannot afford to waste much time on you. Come.” The odd man gestured aggressively, waving them toward him.

Was that a cape? Todd squinted.

It was.

But even as Todd noticed it, he found himself eyeing those eerie pedestals in the big glass room with renewed curiosity, all the while unwittingly obeying the little man’s

command and crossing the large factory floor toward him in spite of his better judgments. Todd counted nine plinths in total, and atop eight of them sat a glass case. The cases hid their contents behind opaque black glass that glittered and shimmered in the brilliant lighting. Upon the ninth plinth, there was the marked absence of a case. Instead, long black shards of material lay broken along the floor at the base of the pylon, whatever the mysterious container had previously housed conspicuously missing.

Well, that's likely a start, Todd thought with relief, having been undecided about whether they'd ended up where they'd meant to until now.

Todd guessed the case had been about a foot tall—if not a little more, based on the size of the largest pieces—and about two-thirds as wide. He couldn't determine what was in those other cases, either, and he was curious why someone would store anything impractically.

Did they require being...broken...to get at the contents inside? he puzzled.

“Yes. Yes,” the man said, raising a hand once to indicate the glass cube-office-thing. “Here we are, gentlemen. C.O.C.K.” He said with a visible surge of pride, rising up onto his tippy-toes as he spoke.

“And here”—he looked at Todd, face dropping visibly as he took in the hiking socks and the sweat shorts—“you are.”

He looked to Zack.

“At least this one is tall,” he fired off with a dismissive gesture. He hadn't bothered with eye contact or manners.

“Viktor Vulg. Founder.” The last word was said like an abracadabra.

“And here is our mystery,” he continued. At some point, a black cane had appeared in his hands, likely from behind his floor-length velour cloak. Todd had been too busy staring at the snow leopard–patterned shoes to track its appearance.

“Missing!” Viktor rumbled, as though it weren’t obvious. “Stolen!” he continued with a crescendo, wagging the cane with increasing drama, eyes wide as the cape swirled behind him in apparent agreement.

His snow leopard shoes clinked against the glass floor as he click-clacked toward the shattered container. He sashayed wildly from side to side with each rapid step, the little cane dangling furiously in front of him like a pendulum.

“Come,” he urged, clacking the cane’s tip firmly against the floor. He hadn’t slowed down enough for them to catch up to his staccato pace, let alone orient themselves in his apparent insanity.

Viktor didn’t stop until he was standing before the ninth pillar, where he spun back around and looked at them with profound grief painted across his face.

“My magnum opus,” he wailed, voice quivering, one hand limply gesturing at the ruin.

He wiped an eye that didn’t need wiping with a corner of his cape before stepping aside. Zack and Todd—who had reluctantly followed him into the glass-walled room, stared at the ruins. Todd was beginning to understand how Viktor and Francine might be friends.

“So what exactly... was it?” Todd asked quizzically, bending down to look at a shard of the black crystal that stood out against the glowing white floors.

“Why, it was my opus,” Viktor retorted with a bit of an angry waggle, taking a step

back as if betrayed that someone wouldn't know better than to ask such an offensive question. He looked at Todd skeptically as though seeing him again through new eyes, finding himself even more disappointed than he had been at first pass.

"It was a perfect replica of Harry Adams!" Viktor continued, apparently aghast, as though they were supposed to know who that was.

"The porn star?" Zack offered bluntly.

"Exactly! See! See! The tall one isn't so bad. Like I said. Like I said," Viktor clucked excitedly. "The greatest prototype Cascadia Omni-Core Kinematics has ever produced! A perfect cock! A perfect replica! Molded from the man himself in his prime!" He raised up his arm, looking at it as though it were to scale somehow. "In his prime!" he repeated, still staring at his arm with adoration, rising onto his toes again, voice shrill.

"... and we kept it here, at C.O.C.K.—in secret—for thirty whole years, waiting to unveil this pleasure. This wonder. This miracle..." Viktor babbled on. His eyes glittered fanatically. "Waiting for laaaaaaunch!" He screamed the last word with such a guttural fervor that the cape trembled, and little flecks of spit flew out of his mouth in the direction of the boys. His eyes looked like they might bulge straight out of his head.

Zack sidestepped a bit of spittle, looking at Todd with a single raised eyebrow and clearly stifling laughter. Viktor continued to prattle on about the various innovations in synthetic skin that had been required to simulate Harry's enormous member. Todd looked back to the case and wondered what someone could possibly want with the prototype and why they hadn't just waited for a production model.

"So... any idea who stole it?" he redirected, forcing himself to reengage Viktor, who had briefly stopped his diatribe to catch his breath.

“Boy!” The cane poked and prodded blindly in Todd’s direction. “If I knew who took my opus they’d be in one of these vats by now.” His voice dripped with contempt. The cane jabbed at a few of the large industrial vats outside the glass cube. “There’s no substitute for real skin, oh no,” he assured them with a wink. “But we do our best. Oh we do...” He trailed off, as though he’d said too much.

“Right...” Todd tried to think of a better way to frame his question, avoiding the darker implications of what Viktor had just said. “But surely you have an idea of who might have a motive? A rival manufacturer? Any disgruntled employees?” He was reaching deep, trying to think of the possible motives. Todd felt a bit of sweat start to bead along his forehead, his hair feeling like it was pressing down against his face, and the bright lights of the cube felt hot as they bathed him with unwanted intensity and scrutiny.

A gargoyle appeared in the back of his mindblack eyes glittering; mouth twisted into a hungry smile...

Todd shook the dread from his thoughts, forcing his focus to remain in reality.

“No,” Viktor snapped as though the very question had insulted him. “For all I know,” he said, “you stole it.” He gave Todd a vicious side-eye as though he might actually have begun suspecting him. “This factory is almost one hundred percent fully automated,” he continued. “Most days, I am its sole employee. I spent a vast fortune on automation so that I’d be able to fire everyone!” he said with delight. “There are no obvious suspects, or I wouldn’t have needed to bother with the likes of... you.” His voice contained unabashed contempt now. “Now, find my prototype!” He spat.

“Um,” Zack’s voice rumbled from somewhere to Todd’s left, distracting him from the errant accusation. “Is this anything?”

He was crouched near the pylon, holding a small white foam keychain with “New Maine World Order” written across it in fanciful pink writing. A single pink gem dotted the “i.” If a key had been attached to it at some point, it was missing now.

Viktor adjusted his hand-in-face pose slightly to allow a peek at whatever Zack had found amongst the shards of glass. Todd watched the odd man closely, looking for some semblance of recognition at the sight of the keychain, but found none.

“Never seen it,” Viktor said raptly, returning to his prior pose but continuing to peek out from behind his fingers to keep track of them, hemming and hawing lest they lose track of his impatience or importance. Todd was already on his phone, though, ignoring Viktor’s performance while trying to run a search for the “New Maine World Order,” but his phone refused to comply.

No service.

Perfect, Todd thought. Just fucking perfect.

But surely that keychain was something. Todd asked Zack if he could see it and, to his dismay, found there was no additional information on the little foam float. No phone number. No address. Nothing. He could feel the rest of the reward slipping away from him in a whoosh... along with any prospect of impressing Zack with his apparently unimpressive skillset as a detective.

Todd was growing desperate and decided to stall for time with a lie, “Viktor, I think this clue is what we need to recover the prototype!”

Viktor’s face reappeared partially once again from behind a pudgy digit, a wide eye peering from between knobby fingers.

“Can we get back to you tomorrow afternoon once we’ve had a chance to follow up

on this?" Todd did his best to engage the founder as if he weren't from another species. He was thankful Zack had managed to keep his laughter up until now, but he didn't want to tempt fate by protracting this encounter any longer than necessary.

"Five p.m. at the latest," Viktor snapped, clearly wanting resolution but unwilling to offer any optimism or gratitude for their efforts. "That prototype was meant to go to production today! We have over five hundred thousand units on pre-order! Look around! Are we making cocks here? Do you see a single cock?! No!" he squealed, punctuating each word with a clack from the cane.

Zack had turned to face the glass wall, clearly losing the battle to contain his laughter. The founder had flounced back to the cube's entrance.

"You, tall one." Jab, jab. "Don't let this ginger out of your sight." His eyes flicked briefly to Todd, contempt collecting on the word "ginger" and then dripping. "I know trouble when I see it."

With that, he departed back into the depths of his factory, leaving Todd to wonder what on earth he had done to earn the strange little man's ire.

Must have been the socks, Todd thought numbly, looking down at the shin-high hiking socks Zack had lent him.

"Five p.m. at the latest," Todd repeated, feeling like no part of that had gone exactly as he'd hoped. He worried that silly little man had seen him for what he was: a phony.

"Five p.m. Short one," Zack replied. "Come on, let's get outta here," he said, twirling slightly in a feigned imitation of Viktor, who had long ago disappeared amongst the vats with an ever-distant click-clack of snow leopard on the factory floor.

All of this would have been better in a cape; Todd thought absently as they returned to Snail. Everything would be better in a cape...

Outside, the sunlight had finally started to dim, and Todd discovered himself dimming along with it as the weight of the day dragged him toward an inevitable destination: exhaustion. He clambered into the old car, fired her up, and headed home.

But then... where was home? Todd hardly felt he knew anymore. With a hint of shame, he realized he'd have to ask Zack for directions yet again.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

The drive back to Kennebunkport—to the coast—was quiet. Todd spent most of it wondering if he would ever be able to scrape himself out of debt, feeling completely horrible about the entire experience they'd had with Viktor. Snail's dim headlights quested endlessly amongst the pines, searching onward toward that seemingly ephemeral destination: home. And by the end of the drive, Todd was gripping Snail's wheel so hard that his fingers carried a dull ache deep within them. This had been a long day in the car, he realized, but then... it had been a long day period.

Beside him, Zack was humming quietly to himself, and Todd listened, content for the passive company of his baritone melody. The song was nothing he recognized—maybe not even really a song at all—but Todd zoned out to the deep bass of it, a meandering, haunting lyric that felt eerily familiar rising and falling like so many rumbling waves as the pair wound and weaved betwixt the dark trees.

By the time they arrived back in the enormous driveway, the last sliver of sun had just slipped beneath the horizon. Snail clinked and blustered her way to a ratchety stop, likely glad to be done for the day. A silence expanded between Zack and Todd as the clicks and ticks of the engine falling to sleep provided them with a tinny, sporadic sort of concert.

“Hey.” Todd found his voice a little more timorous than he'd hoped, a little weaker than he'd intended—like he couldn't quite get words out all of a sudden.

He swallowed, before continuing, “Thanks for helping me out today.” Todd paused a moment before reaching for his door, half wanting to glance at the man who had spent his entire day helping him for no reason other than because he seemingly wanted to, but suddenly feeling very clumsy in his own skin.

“I...” Todd let out an exhausted breath, searching for the perfect words—for any words—to describe his feelings. He rambled on, “It’s been a long week or... well, more than that, really.” A lot fucking more. “And I know you don’t owe me anything, so... yeah,” he mumbled, more to himself than to Zack. “Thanks.”

Todd flushed as he finally glanced at Zack, who was staring intensely back at him. He struggled to return the intensity of the other man’s gaze, which had focused on him unwaveringly when he’d begun to speak. Zack listened in total silence, and he maintained that gentle quiet even now.

Smooth, moron. The voice chimed in. Todd swatted it away.

Hot tears had begun to well in the corner of his eyes for the third time that day, as though the inability to thank Zack properly was one failure too many.

“Whoa, whoa. Heyyyy...” Two of those big fingers had gently found his chin, tilting Todd’s face upwards as Zack looked concernedly at him. “What’s all this?” He asked, his voice gentle.

“Nothing.” Todd whispered tearfully.

Todd instinctively attempted to recoil again, to withdraw into himself, wanting more than anything to stop staring into Zack’s prying eyes—to stop being stared into by them. Todd worried senselessly that if he didn’t break away he would lose himself. And Todd truly didn’t know what sort of ugliness might spill out of him if he really let himself go...if he really allowed himself to feel what he needed to.

“I’m just...a bit of a mess.” He giggled, sputtering on his tears a bit.

But even as he began to pull away, Todd realized Zack was unbuckling his seatbelt and was leaning toward Todd across the car’s center console. Zack reached his hand

around the back of Todd's head, lacing his fingers through his hair once more, and pulled his head in close.

Todd couldn't pull away if he wanted to now. But Zack hesitated, then leaned a little closer; Todd smelled that chlorine again, fainter now. But this time, he also smelled the hot warmth of Zack's breath against his face. He smelled the notes of pine wafting up alongside the heat of him—the musk of him...

Todd was swimming in Zack now. They were face to face, so close that Todd felt like he had lost all orientation. It was as though up had become down and everything was happening sideways and everywhere and all at once. He was sliding diagonally across the dimensions he normally oriented himself with. Surely, this was about to be the moment Zack let him down. Surely, this would be the second he found out what a cruel joke all of this had been the entire time—that he had been the joke. Hell, maybe Todd's entire family was about to jump out from behind the garage and start snapping photos of his almost stepbrother-porn moment. His anxious thoughts were racing even faster than his heart, and Todd could feel nothing but heat in his face.

“Is this not okay?” Zack asked, concerned. He'd drawn back abruptly when Todd had grown still, his eyes tender and worried. “I thought we'd been flirting all afternoon...” Zack looked at him intently, searching desperately for a sign that they hadn't just crossed some inexcusable boundary, hadn't ruined the whole day they'd built together. “I'm so sorry. I feel terrible.”

But yet... even as Todd opened his mouth to reply, they were face to face again. Mouth to mouth. And Todd wasn't sure who had started what or when but he knew that they were both in it completely now.

And oh fuck they were in it.

Todd felt Zack's nose press so hard against his own it hurt. The taller man's face was

tilted downward, his lusty breath and dark stubble tickling and scratching across Todd's lips, raking his chin and neck as he savaged him—hunting out places where Todd had never felt the brush of someone's touch before, licking and biting, sucking and whispering. In the moments their lips met, Todd faintly tasted peppermint, the coolness of it a respite from the waves of molten eruptions that coursed through him.

Zack's large hands were commanding, too, and before long, he had removed both of their shirts in a few deft movements. Todd stared openly at Zack's exposed torso, his massive pecs rising and falling with each breath. In the fading light, Todd could still trace the maze of veins that wound up Zack's forearms, snaking over bulging biceps up towards his powerful shoulders.

"You're so fucking hot." Todd gasped.

"Get over here." Zack implored as he forced him up against the driver's side window. "All I've wanted all day is to do this."

His long, muscular torso smashed against Todd's smaller, leaner body. Zack had a hand at Todd's throat, holding his neck gently but firmly in one hand—he was using his size advantage to force the smaller man's back against the window, the cool of the glass searing against him. Todd was rock-hard. His boner was pressing furiously, aching, against the sweat shorts that imprisoned it.

Zack pulled his shorts down in a swift motion, freeing Todd, and his cock throbbed wildly, desperately, against Zack's rippling torso as it pressed back into him. Even as he felt the warmth of that contact, Zack began to slowly slide up and down, his huge abdominal muscles rubbing along the length of Todd's cock in a slow, rhythmic motion.

Bump.

Bump.

Bump.

Todd felt them each in succession, rubbing over his pulsing member, the friction and fantasy of all of this causing him to moan uncontrollably.

“Ohhhh....” Todd groaned, totally helpless now.

Zack clasped Todd’s hands above his head. Zack was kissing him—devouring him—moving along his neck from one ear to the other, nipping at his earlobes as he repeated the transit back and forth, pausing at times to force his tongue between Todd’s lips or to bite at one of his nipples before tracing it absently with his big tongue, grasping at his hair while he grunted. All the while Zack was rubbing against him. Up and down. Todd’s cock was vibrating at the overwhelming stimulation, a steady stream of precum oozing from him now as he fought back the urge to orgasm.

Zack worked his way around every inch of Todd’s neck, making each inch of Todd’s pale flesh come alight with crackling flames as he brushed his ample lips against its opaline surface. Licking. Teasing. Starting fires everywhere he went. Up and down and up and down. The massive, muscular torso pressed against Todd. Heavy. Solid. Huge.

The friction was... the rubbing was...

Todd breathed heavily, frantically, his head arcing against the glass so hard it hurt. The cool pressed back cruelly.

It’s like he knows exactly what he’s doing to me. Todd’s thoughts frenzied as he bucked and groaned against the rippling expanse of Zack.

Bump.

Bump.

Bump.

Somewhere down by Todd's thigh, he could feel the weight of Zack's cock, straining obscenely against his joggers. It surged and throbbed with a heat that was equal parts exciting and terrifying.

Bump.

Bump.

Bump.

And then, all at once, Todd was seeing stars. He made a sound he had never made before, consumed entirely by the near-volcanic fury of his orgasm. His moan erupted violently—involuntarily—from a body he felt totally divorced from for a blinding moment.

Todd came uncontrollably. It went on and on and on spurting hotly against Zack's chiseled torso. Todd shuddered violently as the last of it spurted from him. Zack had freed himself now, too, and was using Todd's cum to jerk of his enormous cock in a frenzied rush, bucking into his huge hand as he, too, came all over himself.

Todd watched dumbstruck as his enormous dick heaved, spewing rope after rope of cum across his impossibly muscled torso.

"That was hot," Zack growled into Todd's ear before crashing back into the passenger seat and wiping the cum off of himself with a balled-up t-shirt.

“Fuck,” was all Todd could say.

An enormous hand tussled his hair. “Next time,” Zack teased.

Todd slid into his seat, stupified all of this.

Zack was pulling his joggers back on, and Todd looked at him in the moonlight, comfortable for once with his nakedness in a way he’d never been with Danver.

“You don’t think this is going to make things...I dunno, weird, do you?” Todd asked after a while.

“I mean, your dad’s been married what? 5 times? I think they’d be able to handle it. Frankly, I doubt my mom would even notice. She’s been checked out since before I can remember.” Zack said.

“And besides,” he added, “ who cares what they think, anyway?” He clambered out of the car, the soiled shirt in his hand.

But Todd found he did care, and it was getting harder to pretend he didn’t. And he certainly didn’t want to overcomplicate things with Zack. After today, he rather liked him. All of this had happened so suddenly...

Todd’s head was spinning as he got out of the car.

Ew. The voice burned. Jockboy, eh? You have terrible taste. It scathed.

“Jesus just leave me alone!” Todd whispered.

“Did you say something?” Zack asked from the front door of the mansion.

“No!” Todd said quickly, “Just talking to myself!” The gargoyle glowered at him as he made to follow Zack inside, the hair on his neck once again prickling as the sensation of being watched crept over him.

There you go. You feel it, don’t you? They’re coming...the voice whispered from the shadows.

Todd hurried inside, darting a single, furtive glance into the dark behind him before slamming the oak door shut and locking it behind himself, convincing himself that he’d left all of his woes on the other side.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Zack asked.

“Totally.” Todd lied.

He was knew he was anything but.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

The next morning, the sun spilled in across the sheets, and he could hear the twitter of songbirds outside as they went about their dawn routines. Todd yawned, stirring in the bed Zack had shown him the night before before leaving for his own.

Fucking birds, Todd thought darkly as one broke out into a particularly twittery song.

To say the bedroom was the nicest he'd ever stayed in would be the understatement of a lifetime. Todd kept noticing new details, new dimensions to the complexity of this level of... what was it... He struggled to find the right term, one that wasn't too heavily wrapped in his own judgments.

Nobody should need this much, though, he thought, looking at all the markings of lavishness that made it so unfamiliar.

He hoped that thought wasn't just disguised jealousy, but struggled to see how it could be anything else. The massive four-poster bed had come complete with more pillows than Todd had ever seen in one place, and it had indeed done its job dutifully, lulling him into a far better sleep than he'd been expecting on his first night in the new house. It certainly beat the couch he'd spent most of his younger years on.

He lay there staring out at the waves for what felt like forever before forcing himself to rise. The windows, gridded with their leaded-glass panes, gave everything outside a bejeweled, fantastical augmentation that he found almost dizzying: it was as though time was being warped just by looking through them. As Todd made to rise, he was seized by the dark realization that the clouds—the stormy, inky clouds that he'd noted collecting far offshore the day prior—had grown in scale. They had drawn nearer. Darker. And although there was some distance yet between him and them, Todd

knew with grim and mounting certainty that those clouds were coming for him.

Bingo. The voice quipped.

“Oh come on, give it a rest.” Todd moaned.

You should really hear me out...The voice began. But Todd was having none of it.

“La-la-la!” He sang, putting his fingers in his ears and babbling to himself to drown it out.

Fine. Have it your way. Asshole.

And then the silence returned.

Todd had more pressing things eating away at his thoughts this morning than the all-too-familiar voice. Late the night before, in an obscure forum he’d found after endless scrolling the web, he’d finally found a lead on “The New Maine World Order.” It was a vague link to an odd property registered to an LLC with the same name.

Apparently, they owned a small compound on an island just north of Portland, not even a day’s drive from here. Todd’s thoughts circled the mysterious post uneasily now. Those pages had also made vague references to some sort of cult. He’d glossed over most of it, not one for superstitious nonsense, but a few of the reports had sounded genuinely disturbing. Todd had decided to ignore the lot of it—focusing instead on his query: the island.

Zack winked at Todd chummily as he wandered into the kitchen. Zack was shirtless again, wearing nothing but soccer shorts. He sat on the counter sipping coffee and flipping through some local newspaper. Todd was surprised to find it didn’t have a

punchy name like Mainely News. A box of maple bars was half-eaten on the counter next to him. He blew him a comical kiss when he entered.

“I made you coffee,” Zack nudged an elbow toward a mug opposite him. “I tried to make you eggs, but... well...you know my dirty little secret now.” He laughed lightly. Todd took note of the smell of recent burning and was puzzled once more that someone seemingly so competent couldn’t do something as simple as cook a couple of eggs without starting a small house fire.

“Thanks for the attempt,” Todd said, raising the mug of coffee. “And this,” he added, arcing a ginger brow at the plethora of pink kittens playfully dancing and running across the surface of his mug. “And who are these?” Todd asked, spinning the mug around, taking in all the different types of kittens splayed out in dumb poses.

Weirdo! Todd thought amusedly, constantly surprised by how not a bro Zack actually was.

“Cute mug for a cute mug,” Zack replied breezily, dangling his long legs as he sipped coffee.

Todd forced himself to focus on the job at hand, and the ten thousand dollars he sorely needed. He’d think about Zack later. The money glittered through his thoughts, tantalizing him with the freedom it could provide. And they only had eight hours before they needed to return the prototype to Viktor. They had work to do. And fast.

“This kitten,” Todd said after a bit, taking a seat across from Zack and helping himself to half of a maple bar, “was up late doing some research. I think I know where we’re going, but...” Todd took a bite and continued with a full mouth, “Do you have a kayak, by any chance?” He chewed.

“I don’t have a kayak.” Zack said with dismay, his face falling into a theatric frown.

But then he grinned and added, “I do, however, have a jet ski. You’re going to love this.”

He hopped to the ground and made off towards the home’s garage, with Todd in tow.

When Todd saw the black Wrangler parked in the garage, he knew without asking that it was Zack’s. Todd had never been in a car without a roof—let alone without doors—and the open air racing through his hair as they drove along Coastal Route 1 was exhilarating, like so much of this had been. He had felt slightly treacherous leaving Snail behind, but then she didn’t have a tow hitch to pull the monstrosity of a jet ski Zack owned: Bitchin’.

Bitchin’ was a bright pink 1989 two-stroke two-seater with her name written in atrocious yellow letters across her back. Zack was obsessed with her and had been since he’d picked her up from an estate sale almost a decade ago. Todd was unconvinced of her appeal, personally, but had to admit she was fucking hilarious. Zack hadn’t stopped laughing the entire time he’d been attaching Bitchin’ to the Jeep, constantly pausing to make sure Todd had really gotten a good look at her.

Zack had introduced her regally, arms outstretched in imperial welcome: “My queen.” He’d bellowed. Todd had been unable to stop himself from joining in with the huge jock’s laughter then, as he was now. It was infectious.

“It’s pretty out here, right?” Zack said, indicating the seaside as they cruised along. They still had the sun with them, in spite of the storm clouds that now dominated the offshore horizon, blackening the periphery of the sky with a massive volume of coal-black foreboding.

“Very,” Todd agreed, reaching for a pair of black Rayban sunglasses Zack had left on his dashboard. He was trying to ignore the clouds still and was thankful when the polarized glasses made them harder to notice.

“Hey, want some gas station lobster rolls? They’re num-num,” Zack said eagerly, making a stupid claw motion with his hand. A sign ahead indicated that, like every gas station they had ever passed together in Maine, this one had:

“FRESH LOBSTER ROLLS!”

“I’ve never wanted anything more from a gas station,” Todd said. And it wasn’t fully a lie. “But we have like zero time for that.” He made a claw motion back at Zack. “Next time.”

“Saaaaaad lobster,” Zack said in a lobstery voice, his big hand-claw unhappily snipping at Todd’s as they blew by the gas station.

Zack kept on driving—dutifully—occasionally entertaining Todd and occasionally letting the scenery do the entertaining for him until they reached their destination. The rocky coastline streaked past them as they traveled. From time to time, Zack’s big hand would find its way to Todd’s thigh, and he would gently rub Todd’s leg. The contact was a gentle reassurance that Todd hadn’t known he’d needed.

And all the while, Zack filled the quiet with the bass of his rhythmic humming, carrying them both forward.

“Muscongus Bay. ARRIVED!” the nav announced.

Muscongus, Todd thought judgmentally. Nothing in Maine was straightforward. The name hideous, much like the smell of the clam flats they’d arrived at.

But the weather held, surprisingly, and as they backed the jet ski into the boat launch, Todd noted the way the shoreline of the bay curved and twisted in either direction, the deep rivers and estuaries ringing the enormous waterway all fingering out toward the blue of the Atlantic. The shield islands that dotted Maine’s coastline were visible

in a scattered panorama as Todd took in the expansive view. One such island, Quiet's Island, was directly across from them now. It sat low and irresolute against the backdrop of the broader Atlantic and a wall of foreboding clouds.

And that is where we are going, Todd thought darkly. It did look quiet, although the menace of the coming storm looming beyond it was impossible to miss.

"You think we have time to make it there and back before the storm hits?" Zack asked uncertainly, squinting at the clouds.

"I guess we'll find out." Todd said simply, not willing to let the money escape him now.

"Your call." Zack shrugged. "I'll get the jetski ready." He hopped from the car.

Todd found he wasn't much help getting the jet ski into the water. Or doing anything much regarding the jet ski, for that matter. Bitchin' wasn't exactly his speed. And he felt like maybe they weren't off to the best start, as far as inanimate objects went.

She's no Snail, he judged.

But he did enjoy the opportunity to straddle Zack as the two set out across the bay, his arms wrapped around the swimmer's sturdy torso, his legs pinching against Zack's wet quads, feeling the bulge of their outline against his, their calves rubbing against each other wetly as they skipped along the waves. Todd wished he could sit even closer so that he might press his half-hardness into the deep groove between the giant plates of Zack's glutes, but Bitchin's seating setup didn't allow for his shenanigans.

Cockblocked, Todd thought. I knew I couldn't trust her. But his hormones and his jokes weren't enough to distract from the growing disquiet he was beginning to feel

as the island drew nearer.

Zack proved to be a good driver, or pilot... boatist... whatever... and despite Bitchin's middling age, she ripped through the water like she had been born for it. They each let out a whoop as they managed to catch a little air gunning into the next series of waves—the pink jetski shot through them one after another like a neon dart. Todd realized all at once that he hadn't stopped smiling since the moment they'd kicked off. His mouth had grown tired from the effort. He held on tight, burying his face into Zack's back, gripping him as they crossed the final mile between shore and island. Hoping against hope that this was all going to work out.

It won't. The voice yelled over the roar of the jetski. But Todd pretended he couldn't hear it.

“I think we need to head toward that point!” Todd yelled, cupping a hand around the other Zack's ear, hoping he could hear him over the whip of the wind.

Todd enjoyed the way Zack's hair smelled slightly of the woods, the way the short dark strands felt both soft and scratchy against the side of his cheek when he pressed his face into Zack's.

“Roger that,” Zack saluted, adjusting their course slightly, cutting a line straight toward a gray beach set below a low, stony bluff. From what Todd could see, that was the high point of the densely forested island. When he had looked at a map previously, he'd noted that only the southern half of the miles-long island was occupied, and while this northern half was largely a state park, there was some sort of...something up on that bluff. On Google Earth it had been blurry and out of focus. Whatever was up there, Todd knew, was part of whatever culty bullshit made up the New Maine World Order.

And it wasn't going to stand between him and his reward.

When they finally made landfall the beach wasn't sandy like Todd had expected, but rather a bed of stones that scraped and scratched at Bitchin' as she threw herself majestically onto the shore.

"Lovely beaches in this part of the world." Todd remarked.

"Hey, be nice to Maine. What has it ever done to you?" Zack teased back.

"Nothing, yet." Todd replied uneasily, looking beyond the bluff at the looming storm.

He winced at the sound of gravel grinding against the jet ski's underbelly. Zack was dragging the old thing up the beach, securing it from the incoming tide.

"Are you expecting that to change in the near future?" Zack asked apprehensively, huffing with strain.

"Not at all. Let's just get this done," Todd reassured. He felt edgy as he glanced at the treeline, briefly imagining that he'd seen the flicker of movement between the trees.

"Your wish is my command." Zack said, joining him now as he scanned the forest for some sort of signage.

But there was nothing. The tree line ran right down to the shore, the pines as tall and indifferent here as they had been everywhere else in the state. He didn't like the idea of bushwhacking, either, but Todd thought he generally knew the direction they needed to head and the island wasn't that big. Besides, they didn't really have time to spend debating things.

Ten thousand dollars.

"Let's head up that way." He said finally, pointing up a steep rise in the bluff.



The hill they'd begun to climb was largely sandy, rocky terrain, and the pines did a good job keeping most of the underbrush to a minimum, so the traverse went relatively smoothly. After some time, the pair crested the third of a series of rises. The trees here had finally begun to thin into increasingly expansive swaths of coastal meadowland.

"Whew." Zack whistled as they crested.

But as Todd made to reply he halted, hearing the faint and distant sound of a chorus of voices. It was quiet at first, halting, but each time he felt certain he'd merely imagined it, it would begin again, the interval and frequency becoming more and more frenzied until it was clearly undeniable: voices.

Zack heard them now, too—the sound reaching them both in a rising crescendo. The chanting seemed to come from just over the next small set of hills, not even a hundred yards beyond them, just past a jagged spine of rimrock. From the sound of it, there must have been at least a few dozen or so different male speakers, each chanting in turn, followed by a collective "HOO-AH!"

Ready to listen to me now? The voice asked, angrier than usual.

"No!" Todd yelled.

"No what?" Zack asked, eyeing him skeptically now. "Todd what have you gotten us into? What is all this?"

The chant erupted again, louder than ever: "Hoo-Ah!"

"Todd!?!?" Zack implored. But to his horror, Todd found he couldn't speak, let alone move. He was locked away somehow in his own mind, staring out helplessly from within.

Allow me. The cruel voice taunted. The voice had been with him ever since he'd lost his mother, ever since the bridge. It had appeared the very first time he'd seen the shadows, all those years before. At times, he had felt gripped by it, as though a second version of him yearned to take command of him, to supplant his own personhood. And now it finally had. Todd screamed, but no noise escaped him.

Zack was shaking him violently now, but Todd was helpless to react. He wasn't himself anymore—not really. And Todd watched on, horrified, as the part of him he tried to keep bottled up and locked away took over, speaking on his behalf.

“Let go of me.” Todd said flatly.

“Okay...?” Zack replied unsteadily, seemingly taken aback by Todd's sudden change in tone and voice.

Todd felt himself begin to walk toward the sound of the chanting.

“Hey, Todd! What are you doing! Come back!” Zack yelled, following him to the edge of the rimrock.

Todd screamed from within the prison of his mind. But his legs kept him moving forward. Todd could distantly feel Zack grab him from behind, but whatever had taken command of him simply shrugged him off and continued on.

“Wait here.” Todd heard himself command.

But Zack raced after him anyway, clearing the hill beside him but stopping dead in his tracks as they were finally confronted with the source of the chanting.

Todd beat furiously against the walls of his consciousness as his body forced him to look on at the terrible vignette in the clearing below.

This is what I've been trying to warn you about. The voice whispered to him.

“Hoo-AH!”

Todd screamed, but no one could hear him.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

The cultists were dancing around an enormous wicker construct, naked except for the vicious masks they wore. Each was a different monster, vaguely animal in appearance. There were teeth and horns, talons and scales, and the sight of it all made Todd want to run—to flee. But he was helpless, a prisoner in his own mind. And he could only reel as his body forced him to continue down the hillside toward the horrible spectacle.

“Hoo-Ah!” the cultists chanted in unison.

What the fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck. Todd’s thoughts raced.

Let’s not be so profane. The voice interjected. Allow me to introduce myself: Toddy, meet Shadow Todd. I’m like you, but better. Now if you kindly shut the fuck up, I need to get us out of this mess; we have far bigger issues than these freaks and we’ve already wasted too much time...

Todd fell silent. The voice had never addressed him so directly, usually restricting itself to the occasional jab or taunt. He watched in bewildered awe as his body moved on its own accord.

Shadow Todd kept his pace steady, his breathing measured as he picked his way down the rest of the rocky hillside toward the ring of men in no big hurry. They fell silent as he approached, finally taking notice of him. Todd worried for a moment he might be shoved inside the wicker tower and lit on fire, or worse, as his eyes darted to a flaming torch at its base.

“You’re not supposed to be here yet.” A man called out, his face a deformed horse

with jagged teeth and wild eyes.

“Not until later!” Another agreed, stomping at the ground.

“Halt!” Said a third, stepping forward aggressively and trying to bar his path.

But Shadow Todd ignored them all, and Todd watched, confused, as he watched himself grab at the torch that was lit in front of the giant wicker pyre. The spacing of the cultists—equally distributed about it—had allowed for Shadow Todd to walk right up to it, and he swung it at the nearest few, causing them to back off.

Uh-oh, Todd thought, realizing with a growing dread what was about to happen.

And before even one of the cultists could move to close the space Shadow Todd was using to hold them all hostage, the flaming torch dropped to tickle at the base of the pyre.

“You wouldn’t dare!” A man called.

“He’ll ruin the incantation!” A second screamed, taking a hesitant step toward him.

“Stop! All of you.” A tired voice coughed, and Todd felt it sounded vaguely familiar. The source was a man wearing a horrible pig mask, toothless and grinning wildly through beady little eyes. He removed the mask, revealing himself to be none other than the driver of the white Mercedes from back on the bridge, the one who’d flipped him off and almost caused him to crash.

“Good to see you again.” The man greeted, his voice lyrical and soothing.

The storm had finally reached them. Rain began to fall, and Todd realized then that the shadows had found him at last.

I told you, I'm not the enemy. Shadow Todd said.

"I think you have something of mine," Todd heard himself saying. It was a stolen prototype. I'm not sure what that has to do with any of this, but whatever. Who am I to judge? Just give it back, and I'll kindly be on my way." Shadow Todd waved his torch dismissively at the old pig before lowering it perilously close to the wicker tower.

"You wouldn't dare!" the old man squealed.

"Oh, I would," Todd corrected disinterestedly, waving the torch titillatingly close to the pyre now. "Just watch." He winked.

While the real Todd wasn't driving at the moment, he could see Zack beyond up on the hill, peering out from behind the rock white as a ghost. He was looking at him like they had never met before, like he had no idea who he was looking at. Todd realized with despair that, in a way, that was probably exactly how he should feel.

"You sure you don't want to hand it over?" Shadow Todd demanded.

"I'm certain, now come here. We might as well get your part in this out of the way now..." The man continued, nodding to two of the other animals to seize him. "Bring me the blade" He called out to a fourth.

"Fuck you." Shadow Todd spat, burying the torch into the pyre and lighting it ablaze as the first of the men lunged for him.

Todd ran. First in a long, arcing line, dodging and diving amongst the cultists as they screamed and grasped for him, and then in a zigzag that took him between the crackling wicker and the old pig man. Todd laughed maniacally as he veered and whirled. Why the fuck did he agree that this was somehow funny? But it was!

Todd felt alive. And he watched in awe as the strange erection the cultists had constructed here ripped and roared into a furious bonfire. Todd hadn't even found the prototype, he realized with a cringe, looking on wildly as a man threw himself at him only to miss, crashing into the ground with an oomph. Shadow Todd kicked him for good measure before running on.

Todd could feel the heat of the flames on his skin. They had erupted with an intensity he hadn't expected, and the fire was burning hot and fierce, glittering across the sweaty strands of his red hair, which were beginning to stick and cling to him every which way....

And then there was a terrible moment—just as Todd rounded the flaming tower a third time, outrunning a pair of shoeless wolf men as they stumbled after him—where he made eye contact with another familiar face. Another masked animal, another pig, was standing in front of him. Its eyes were an unmistakable blue: Denver.

“You weren't supposed to leave before I delivered you to them.” Denver pleaded. “Don't make this harder than it has to be...” He went on.

How in the fucking world—? Todd began to puzzle...but then the too-familiar pig was charging at him, running full bore, its head tucked in for a charge.

Nope, no time for that now! Todd thought with a shriek as he watched himself bolt out of the way.

Todd was running again.

And oh how he ran. Todd sprinted to the hillside, tripping over a rock, regaining his balance before scrambling on up the rocky slope. He was hopping from boulder to boulder far more fearlessly than he would have if he'd been in control, retracing his steps until he reached the rocks he desperately hoped Zack was still waiting for him

behind.

The cultists were in hot pursuit, albeit muddled by their apprehension about whether to try and rescue the enormous, flaming pyre in some way. The fire had spread farther now, dancing up the thick of the shaft, smoking ominously as thunder boomed overhead, letting loose a torrent of rain that caused it to steam and crackle. Todd crested the hill and vaulted himself behind the rock where Zack stood sheet-faced. And then, in a pffff, Shadow Todd was gone, and Todd was himself once more. It took everything in him to hold it together just then.

“What the fuck are you doing!” Zack screamed, grabbing Todd by the shoulders and shaking him violently. “Run!” Zack implored, pushing Todd onward down the hill.

It appeared the men below had agreed to abandon the flaming tower, which was all for the best as the inexplicable wicker creation was engulfed in riotous flames. Todd stumbled down yet another set of rocks and it fell from view. In his panic, he was unsure if he could retrace his steps as he had hoped he might, looking around now uncertainly as to exactly where to head next. Zack was close behind him, pausing at times to listen for the footsteps of pursuing as Todd attempted to regain their path.

“Zack, I don’t know if we’re on the trail anymore,” Todd whispered frantically, pushing a balsam fir bough out of his way and whacking Zack in the face with it as it zinged back into place.

“Mmmmf,” Zack replied, withholding the yelp of pain he likely wanted to express in a tightly pursed mouth.

“Just keep going!” He pleaded.

“This way,” Todd said, seeing a series of rocks he thought might be familiar and making his way generally downhill. It was an island, after all. For better or worse, his



thoughts reverted to the strange men. What the absolute fuck had all that been?

“We’ve got a little space,” Zack assured him in a low voice. His head had been perpetually twisted over his shoulder, and he was obviously petrified of whatever they had just come into contact with.

Ahead of them, at long last, a road appeared in a clearing amongst the trees. But then...

Fuck.

They hadn’t seen a road before. They were lost.

“Bitchin’,” Zack said ironically, noting the road to now as he emerged from the woods behind Todd. He had miraculously not lost his patience with Todd. Not yet, at least. But Todd had fucked up. He knew that. He could hear the distant sound of their pursuers crashing through the woods once more and he looked pleadingly at Zack.

“We gotta just keep running.” Zack said, taking off down the road. Todd wasn’t certain anymore that he should be the one calling the shots, and so he took off after him. After all, it was his fault they were here in the first place.

Luckily, the road proved to be fairly level, and they were able to move along it fairly quickly, keeping to the brush along its edges. After they had surely run almost a mile at a full-on sprint—one in which Todd was certain Zack had loped behind him intentionally, protectively—a small cabin appeared in a clearing up ahead. In the driveway was the white G-Wagon from before, and Todd knew then without a doubt that Shadow Todd had been right about all of this.

Do you really think your mom just went “poof” on that bridge, that you could witness what you did and life could just return to normal? You really are dense, Todd.

Shadow Todd hissed. Look around. You're in the middle of something way bigger than yourself.

But Todd didn't want to see it. He knew something wrong. Something had always been a little off in his life, a little off-kilter. There had always been too many coincidences, too many unsettling synchronicities that lined up all too easily...

Todd had fallen out of his sprint at the sight of the car, slowing first to a jog, then to a walk, and eventually just standing, staring at it. Dumbfounded, he looked to the cabin and then back to the car. Could this be a coincidence? But then nothing ever was. And as he looked back to the cabin, he saw it: a small banner with the same familiar pink scrawl: "New Maine World Order"

"Oh hell no. Todd, just no." Zack pleaded.

But Todd—the real Todd—felt compelled to approach the structure.

When he reached it, Todd found that the cabin's front door was unlocked. And even as Todd turned the large knob, letting himself in against Zack's halfhearted pleadings, they saw the first of the cultists finally rounding the corner out of the woods and onto the dirt road behind them. They didn't have much time.

"Fast!" Zack barked, launching Todd through the doorway with a shove.

There—right there—on a glass table in the entryway—was the opus. Todd laughed nervously as he looked at it. It was absurd. The veiny instrument curved obscenely, snaking its thickness across the table's surface, eclipsing much of the area with its profound wrongness. Zack had grabbed it in a flash before Todd could shake himself from his stupor, his large hands easily eclipsing the blunt instrument. Zack was using it to flag him along now like he was directing an airplane, his grin wild and frenzied at the absurdity of their current circumstances.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here!” Zack said, charging out the back door of the cabin and off across the field behind it.

Todd made to follow, but hesitated briefly, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up as a presence entered the cabin behind him.

“Hello, Todd.”

Todd didn’t need to turn around to know who the speaker was, but he did anyway, looking on in horror as the old pig man stared him down from the doorway. It made no effort to advance toward him, perhaps recounting how the spritely ginger had managed to elude even the best of them back at the tower.

“I know you, boy,” the pig spat. “We know you. And now that you’ve found us... we’ve found you... Todd!” He giggled a piggy little giggle, “Run along, now,” he said, making a pair of legs out of a set of fingers and running them through the air toward Todd.

“Run along and see how far you get.” he continued. “We’re everywhere!” he squealed with delight.

And then the old pig man began oinking. So quietly at first Todd worried disjointedly that the old man might be choking or having a heart attack. But then the sound grew louder, more fervent, and it was unmistakable. His heart raced in his chest as a pair of cultists appeared beside the man.

Todd bounded out the back door, crashing into it as he stumbled out into the rain.

“You can’t outrun destiny, Todd!” The man called out behind him.

But Todd intended to do just that. He ran to save his fucking life. To find Zack. To

get all of them to safety...

He splashed out into the muddy field, desperately hoping to wake from this nightmare.

After a while, and much to Todd's relief, the brothers reconnected in a huff on a sandy trail that ran along the beach on this side of the island. Todd scanned it, relieved to spot the hot-pink speck that was Bitchin' off in the distance.

"What took you so long!" Zack asked frantically, looking Todd over quickly before hugging him tightly.

"I'm sorry I just froze." Todd admitted.

"It's fine just...help me get Bitchin' in the water. We need to leave. Now." Zack implored, sounding frustrated.

Zack was uncharacteristically quiet as they picked their way along the shore, stopping occasionally to transfer the burden of the replica from one hand to the other or to check on Todd's progress, but never speaking, not even humming to himself. Todd felt a sudden spark of self-doubt, worrying that this might ruin whatever was happening between them. Zack began dragging the jetski to the water, before pausing and looking expectantly at Todd, who had once again been lost in his thoughts.

"You gonna stand there all day?" Zack's voice cut into him. He was waving the giant dildo halfheartedly, his smile obviously forced. Even Zack's eyes had lost a bit of their twinkle. And Todd had been so lost in his own head, so lost in his own bullshit, that he hadn't even noticed while Zack had helpfully dragged the jet ski halfway into the water while he'd stood there uselessly. Todd helped him pull it the rest of the way out into the ice-cold ocean.

“Think you’re done here?” a voice boomed out from the tree line.

The voice was joined by a collective, riotous “Hoo-ah!” Along the shore, dotting the forest’s edge, a hoard of hundreds of men appeared under the pines—all of them masked, all of them naked.

Of course, Todd thought. Why the fuck not? This day had just gone from bad to worse to batshit insane.

To his instant relief, Todd felt Bitchin’ fire up beneath him as Zack prepped their getaway. “I hope you fucking freaks can swim!” Todd yelled as they rocketed into the waves.

Zack blazed them across the water. The men had begun sprinting toward them naked, arcing out across the beach, before finally reaching the boundary of the waterline.

He watched them nervously as they glared at them. There were hundreds, maybe thousands emerging now from the woods. Inland, far above on the bluff, he could make out the distant glowing flames of the pyre.

An icy wind lashed out at him as the dark storm clouds above blotted out the sun. Todd shivered, squeezing Zack tightly and wishing he were anywhere but here.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

They made it back to the Jeep in relatively good time, all things considered. A few of the cultists had attempted to swim after them, much to Todd's dismay, but as frantically as they had paddled—wearing their masks even in the icy water—they hadn't made much progress. It was a miles-long swim, and they faded from view alongside the rest of it now.

“Sorry for all of that,” Todd whispered into Zack's ear, wishing he could reach out and grab Zack's hand. He yearned to feel those big fingers laced through his, to show him how he really felt—who he really was.

A flash of cold blue eyes peering malignantly from behind a piggy mask glinted at him from the shadows...

“I-I really needed”—Todd's teeth chattered—“that... money.” He went on, forcing the shadows to abate. A deep shame overcame him at the admission. Zack remained silent, and Todd flailed uncertainly in his feelings as they drew near the shore.

And then, at last, there was a heavy squeeze on his thigh. Zack half turned, kissing Todd gently on the cheek, his lips the only warmth out on the icy water.

“You're fine, Todd.” Another squeeze, gentler. “You owe me dinner though. My pick.”

“Deal.” Todd agreed.

And then they were at the shoreline.

“Just promise me you’re not secretly one of those...whatever the fuck those guys were.” And just like that, Zack was hoisting him off the jet ski, setting him carefully on the ground. Upright. Safe.

“Not that I’m aware of.” Todd admitted candidly.

“Good.” Zack grinned.

The tall jock whipped the replica out, tossing it gently to Todd before setting to work getting the jet ski from the water to the 4x4. Far off in the bay, Todd thought he could hear one of the cultists still screaming some sort of obscenity.

It might have just been a seagull, though.

Three hours later and they were wheeling into COCK. Todd couldn’t believe they’d pulled off the job. He still felt a rush of excitement at what they’d been through, mixed with a healthy dose of fear at what they’d seen. There had been a moment on the drive back where he had been so overcome with the thrill of the adventure he’d half hoped something might happen between them, that the fire they had ignited the night prior might reignite with renewed passion.

But Zack had been broody, quiet. Occasionally, he would smile briefly at Todd, but mostly he just busied himself with a mixture of humming and driving as they wound through the coastal forest. Todd got it. The day had been insane, and he was fine with the silence.

Viktor hadn’t even bothered with contacting the pair since their initial meeting. It was apparently beneath him to follow up on their progress. They wound back along the familiar drive amongst the pines, at last emerging into the empty parking lot. And there he was, standing at the doorway of his factory: Viktor. Apparently already impatient with them.

“Didn’t think you’d show!” Viktor said as they rolled to a stop.

New cape, same attitude, Todd thought direly, regarding the deep crimson silk with inordinate jealousy despite himself.

“Opus acquired,” Todd announced proudly, popping open the Jeep’s door and stepping out to hand it to Viktor. He was still wearing Zack’s sweatshorts. Todd smiled as he held out the enormous member, feeling certain the odd little creature had looked at least twice at his outfit, much to his chagrin.

“I’d say thank you,” Viktor started hastily, “but I prepaid for this assignment. And I don’t tip. So don’t ask for one!” And with that he grasped violently at the thing, ripping it from Todd’s outstretched hands. A flourish of cape, a tap-tap of cane, and he was off, flitting back into COCK. Apparently contenting himself with an afternoon spent cloning the opus for mass distribution. Todd grimaced, imagining a bunch of people discomforting themselves with the absurd tool.

But then, to his surprise, Viktor re-emerged from the building, cane tap-tapping as he strutted back toward him. He tossed a box to Todd.

“For you, ginger. It’s more than you deserve.” With that, he turned and left. The strange little man was apparently done with them forever. Todd got back in the Jeep, holding the ginormous box in stunned silence.

“What do you suppose that is?” Zack asked, poking a huge finger at it.

“I might have an idea,” Todd mused.

“Well...” Zack implored, seemingly willing to sit and wait here in the parking lot while Todd unboxed whatever the fuck this was. A ding on Todd’s phone informed him that he’d just received the second half of his payment from Francine.



Thank. Fuck! Relief washed over him.

He grinned at Zack, looked at the box, and tore into it. To his surprise, it was the very first production replica of the absurd dildo, inscribed with a little decorative commemoration on its base. The smell of day-old hot dogs wafted up to him from the rubbery monstrosity, and Todd almost dropped it he'd begun laughing so hard.

Zack laughed heartily beside him as Todd stared at the dildo, dumbstruck by the absurdity of it. The deep baritone of his voice vibrated something far and distant and faint inside of Todd's chest. He found himself thinking at last that maybe Maine wasn't so bad after all.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Zack was gripping the wheel of the Jeep with a single, huge hand.

He had been humming to himself in an empty attempt to forget being chased by a horde of half-naked men in animal masks across Quiet Island. It wasn't helping. Every moment since he'd met Todd had been tense, strained, or downright odd. But for some reason,

His unease was compounded by the way the lampblack clouds blotted out the sky entirely—in the way shadows seemed to dart out from everywhere and anywhere all at once—as though what it was to be a shadow had somehow fundamentally changed in the past few days. Zack noted with relief that the tall, thick pines had begun to thin as the forest gave way to the open ocean, and he found himself breathing in the familiar ocean air with relief, wondering what thoughts might be blazing behind his companion's fiery eyes.

“Hey, you okay?” He asked.

“Huh? Me? Yeah. Yeah, fine.” Todd said unconvincingly, turning back to look off into the woods. Zack left him to his silence, worrying once more about the abrupt change that had overtaken Todd so inexplicably back at the pyre.

“You sure?” He pressed.

“I'm sure.” Todd said, smiling weakly at him.

Up ahead he spotted the familiar sight of a Gas Station proudly advertising:

“FRESH LOBSTER ROLLS!”

It had been a long time since they had eaten. Zack was starving, and he felt his stomach rumble now at the thought of dinner.

“Num-num.” Zack clucked at Todd, snipping at him playfully with a hand claw as he wheeled them into the station. “Food time. And someone owes me dinner.” He teased, hoping Todd wouldn’t be too averse to taking the plunge on Maine’s famous gas station lobster. It was less gross than it sounded, and it had been a while since he’d indulged in this particular craving.

The pair sat side by side on Bitchin’ with their takeout.

Zack was munching down on his first lobster roll, enjoying how the crusty bread gave way to buttery lobster.

“So good, right?” He mumbled through his latest bite.

“The best.” Todd agreed. “Gas Station Lobster Rolls must be why the cult set itself up here. They’re in irresistible attraction.” He joked.

“Definitely.” Zack agreed, chuckling.

However, Zack still didn’t know what he thought about the cult dudes. That had all been right up against the very edge of what his brain was willing to entertain as reality in any form. All he had been focused on earlier—back there on the island—had been doing anything and everything he could to get them out of there, to get Todd out of there. But then there had been that odd moment where Todd had been the one who had taken charge. Or some strange, darker version of him had. Zack was doing his level best not to think too hard about his sudden change.

“You don’t think they can find us, do you?” Todd asked, glancing around nervously.

“Nah.” Zack assured, finishing his first roll. “Viktor is the one who should be worried. Technically he’s the one who has what they want.”

“Yeah...” Todd said uneasily, trailing off.

“Right?” Zack pressed, suspicious now as he sensed Todd withholding something.

“Definitely. Although, you should probably know that the old man knew my name.”

“He what?!” Zack choked.

“It’s...I don’t think it’s a big deal.”

“I’d say that’s a pretty big deal, Todd.” Zack muttered grumpily. He grabbed his second roll and chewed away at it angrily, not enjoying it nearly as much as he had the first. Dinner had been on Todd. He’d insisted, and Zack had let him do it—conflicted with feeling instantly bad taking him up on the offer but allowing him to pay nonetheless.

“I’m sorry I should have told you sooner.” Todd mumbled, slurping his cola. An awkward silence stretched out between them.

“You think?” Zack growled. Angry now.

Todd was silent.

The dark clouds that filled the sky had just eclipsed the last glimmers of sunset, and a pink-and-blue neon sign sparked to life brilliantly over the parking lot just then, sending its electric colors jolting and racing across it, flickering and twinkling in the

shallow puddles.

“Not the worst restaurant you’ve ever been to, though, right?” Zack asked after a minute.

“Not by a mile.” Todd agreed softly.

His soft voice made Zack reach out and touch him for a long time. But once again, he felt himself fear coming on as something he didn’t intend. Needy? No. Domineering? Maybe. He couldn’t explain his doubts, not even to himself. Maybe it was just his inexperience. His unfamiliarity with these turbid and shadowy waters? He’d spent his whole life swimming, and yet he’d never had time—no, opportunity—to really take this plunge in any meaningful way. His mind was spinning.

Sure, there had been occasional flings, some lasting weeks or months, off and on, but there had never been anyone serious—nothing real. He’d never really felt much of a connection to any of the others, woman or man, other than a brief glimmer of hope drowned swiftly by a deep hurricane of disappointment. And then...there had been Todd.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as those nasty clouds found them at last. The first pitter-patters of rain began to flicker all around them—diving headfirst through the neon light, obliterating themselves against the black pavement in brilliant pink and blue explosions.

“Best get going...I don’t want my princess to get wet.” He said, flicking Todd playfully on the shoulder with a thick forefinger before finally allowing himself to reach out and ruffle Todd’s hair after all this time, after all this longing. Zack loved the way those curls felt in his fingers. The way the haphazard lace felt at once both thick and silken—like it was both real and not. It felt like little wisps of cloud somehow here for him to hold onto.

“Who are you calling princess?” Todd moaned. “Talk about internalized misogyny. It’s 2024, get with the times.”

“Oh great we’re doing this now?” Zack moaned.

“Oh yeah,” Todd teased back. There is never a wrong moment to correct a bad habit. My mom used to say that. She was a princess.” Todd laughed.

The noise had Zack’s big heart thudding in his chest, and his lips curled into a broad, easy smile. What was this feeling? This...he searched...sense of something more. Something solid. And even as he wished to grasp the strands of the thought—the idea of them—they fell through his broad digits like so many clouds. And he could not hold onto all of it. Zack floundered helplessly for a moment. But then he regained a bit of the certainty he’d always carried across his broad shoulders, a bit of that hallmark determination he’d developed all those years he’d swam competitively...

Zack dove in to Todd.

Using his athleticism, he swung himself around to straddle him, his focus darting across Todd’s whimsical freckles and down to his soft, small mouth. Zack tightened his grip on the back of Todd’s head, squeezing the cloud curls right up to the boundary of where he believed pleasure and pain to meet in ecstasy—and kissed him freely, fiercely—under the neon light as the rain wet their faces and lips.

Zack felt Todd’s mouth purse in surprise at first, the sudden contact startling him—but then quickly, so quickly, he gave way as Zack bit his lower lip playfully before sliding his big tongue into Todd’s mouth, pushing himself into him and all the while squeezing tighter and tighter. He knew the weight of him pressing down onto Todd was the cause of the ginger’s now-fervent, fevered breaths. Zack could feel Todd thrusting up against him, begging him for more, and he loved the desperation he could feel in their contact—the need. They redoubled the frenzy of their kissing, the

stubble on Zack's face scratching roughly against Todd's smooth skin as neon painted their passions in wildly glimmering colorways.

A flicker of headlights, then, as a car passed by along the roadway had whipped Zack back into the reality he'd been escaping—and he found himself half-kissing, half-laughing into Todd's face as he released the back of his head, not wanting to dismount, yet—partially do to the obscene bulge now arcing wildly against his black joggers.

“We should probably wait until we get home before...you know.” Zack winked at Todd, jumping to the ground and tucking himself into the waistband of his pants—self-conscious of how difficult it was to contain his manhood.

“Agreed.” Todd replied, hopping off too. “Besides I don't think ‘Bitchin’ likes me that much. I'd hate to make her jealous.”

“Aw come on, I'm sure you'll grow on her.” Zack chuckled, looking uneasily at the sky as thunder rumbled in the distance. “Seriously though, let's get going.”

The rain began to pour as he fired up the Jeep and set off into the dark.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Zack was usually a cautious driver—but the torrent of rain and thunder erupting all around them now caused him to abandon that habit. They rocketed home. The topless, doorless Jeep did little to protect them from the deluge that had begun as they'd left the gas station.

“I hope the lobster was worth it!” Zack screamed over the din in a failed attempt at humor, directing his voice in the general direction of Todd, who was now pressed firmly up against the 4x4's heat vents and was looking like he regretted that they had stopped...or that Maine existed.

“Y-y-y...ea-h.” Todd chattered. “Sup...er worth!” He flashed a weak thumbs-up at Zack.

“We'll be home soon!” Zack yelled. “Hang on!”

He floored the Jeep, sending splashes arcing up it on either side, drenching them both in ice-cold wet.

Zack would need to put the fabric top back on the Jeep when they got home...and the doors. It would only take a moment but he had always hated the disappointment of losing the fresh air and freedom he felt when the Jeep was able to be so much more open than Zack felt himself able to be at times. Every year, he made this same mistake—betting on his optimism that the rain and cold and dark were gone for good long before there was any truth to it. Summer never really started in Maine before July—if at all. And it had been far too early to remove the car's cladding.

At last, he turned onto the street Zack had spent so much of his life calling home. He



was just about to turn into the drive when a strobe of lightning lit up a dismal sight ahead, one that made Zack slam on his brakes rather abruptly. The two of them were thrown forward against the resistance of their seatbelts.

“Sorry!” He yelped. Zack’s eyes darted from Todd back to what he’d just seen: there—in the driveway—Snail. Todd’s ancient red Volvo station wagon—every single window smashed out. The pieces shimmered and taunted in disunity with each angry crack of lightning. The boys sat dumbly, stunned. The silence created an unctuous expanse between them.

“What the fuck, Todd?!” Zack hadn’t meant to bark it at him. He hadn’t meant to imply that any of this was Todd’s fault. But this...the cultists had already found them somehow? How!? Zack’s thoughts involuntarily sailed once more back to Quiet Island—what they’d seen when they’d sought out the prototype.

“I...I dunno. This is all new to me.” Todd said. “I just assumed the cult shit was dumb internet lore, nothing real. It seemed made up!” He protested.

“Well, it doesn’t seem very made up now, does it?” Zack demanded, gesturing to the wreckage of Snail.

“No, it doesn’t.” Todd agreed glumly.

“Sorry...I lost my temper.” Zack mumbled, releasing his foot from the brake and allowing the Jeep to roll the rest of the way along the street—abruptly stopping once they’d become even with the Volvo.

“It’s fine. This is a fucked up situation. I get it.” Todd said. “But I swear I had no idea that shit was going to get so weird. I promise.”

“I believe you.” Zack acknowledged. And it was mostly the truth. He couldn’t really

see how Todd could have known better.

Up close, it was clear that Snail had been rummaged through. Looking past her toward the massive, oaken front doors that had so impressively—impregnably—stood for Zack’s entire life, he realized in horror that the house had been broken into as well. One of the doors had been torn straight from its hinges.

Zack froze as he looked at the damage.

“Wait here. I’m going to get the car stuff out of the garage real quick for the Jeep.” Zack had turned to Todd, who was still sitting in his seat, shivering but silent...seemingly unable to move as the horror of their situation sunk in.

“Todd.” Zack shook his wet shoulder, trying to drag him from the shadows and back to the now, speaking with pressured urgency.

“Yeah...” Todd said weakly, shaking his head as though snapping back from a far-off conversation. “Yeah, okay. Got it.”

Zack squeezed again lightly. “The house was broken into; look at the doors.” Todd did, and Zack could feel him crumble slightly at the realization. “Hey, this isn’t your fault, Todd. Those guys...” Zack shook his head in disbelief, not knowing what to say. “Look, we can’t stay here tonight. We should drive up to my grandparent’s cabin. It’s a few hours inland, but we can get there quickly enough. It’ll be safe. Safer than here, at least. Sit tight. I’ll be right back.”

And with that, Zack hopped out of the Jeep and splashed up the huge granite steps to the house. He dared take only a single, fearful look back to Todd before slipping into the house, feeling the routine judgment of the Gargoyle as he passed inside.

Zack took a careful step past the threshold and then another, trying desperately to

avoid bumping his large frame into anything. He was thankful for the coordination his years of swimming provided. He moved quickly toward the garage, constantly looking over his shoulder as he did so, expecting a horde of cultists to charge out of a door at any moment and overtake him. But there were no cultists to be found.

When Zack entered the garage, he quickly flicked on the light and pressed the button to raise the door, flinching at the noise, before jogging across the space to where he always stored the Jeep's missing components along the far wall. As the big garage door opened, the sound of the rain falling violently against the driveway met Zack once more. He could see Todd again, still crumpled numbly in the 4x4. He hadn't moved. With a heave, Zack grabbed one door—then the other—holding one in each hand, and loped back toward Todd.

Getting those doors on was a simple enough task. He had them latched and fixed into place in a matter of moments before making a second trip for the fabric roof of the Jeep and snapping it into place as well. Zack knew the soaking interior would dry quickly now and allowed himself a moment's reprieve now that that was taken care of.

Zack then opened the driver's side door briefly, popping his head in, and found himself confronted with a still-silent, still-shivering Todd. Todd had at least repositioned himself to absorb the heat from the vents, no longer appearing quite so shaken.

"I'll be right back. I'm going to grab a couple more things from the house—some food, some clothes—lock the doors." Zack added. He quickly decoupled Bitchin' from his car, leaving the jet ski to sit in the street where it didn't belong. And then Zack was off—sprinting up the steps again, braver now. He heard the 'click' of Todd engaging the Jeep's locks as he did so.

Good. Zack thought with relief. Still not at all convinced they were safe.

As he gathered what he needed from the house, Zack found himself constantly distracted by each creak and groan the old structure made. He scrutinized every shadow as he traced his way through the cavernous interior: had someone moved that? Was that chair always there? What was that? And he found the once-familiar space no longer feeling familiar at all. His home no longer felt remotely safe or homelike to him in any way, and the feeling terrified him as much as all the rest of it had.

And Just as Zack was about to leave through the front door—a bag of food in one hand and a duffel of the first clothes he'd been able to hastily locate along the dark floor of his room in the other—he heard something. And it wasn't just an old house sound this time—it wasn't just a figment of his overstimulated imagination. It was real. And it was terrifying. A voice called out from the shadows.

“Hey, fucker.”

The words cut through the dark like a punch and struck Zack with the fearful blow they'd intended. He instantly reeled his head in the direction of the utterance; there—at the end of the darkened hallway—was a masked cultist.

The man was standing in the middle of the hall—about 30 feet away—breathing heavily enough that it almost sounded like he was grunting—or worse...giggling.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Zack cried out.

“Oh, you'll find that out soon enough, pretty boy.” The cultist called out. “Your whole world is about to get flipped upside down.” He chortled, throwing a lamp to the floor and laughing as it shattered. Zack flinched. “You have no idea what you're tangled up in.”

The stranger hurled a vase at him. It barely missed his head, exploding on the wall

behind him.

“It doesn’t matter; the boss man says you don’t have a role to play in any of this.” He teased, still advancing toward the still-paralyzed Zack. You’re fair game.” he sneered, “unlike Toddy.”

Zack spied a shock of grotesque blond chin hair that curled and twisted at the base of the pig’s face as the man closed the distance between them. Sharp little fangs dropped down out of the snout—managing to intimidate Zack in spite of his own formidable size and strength. The man wasn’t naked as they had been earlier, instead wearing all black now. There was a menace in his stance, and his head cocked this way and that as he grew nearer and nearer in the dark.

Suddenly, the stranger stamped his foot on the ground, causing Zack to yelp in fear.

“Thought so.” The pig chuckled, stomping again before charging suddenly at Zack, thundering down the hallway straight toward him.

Zack turned and ran, feeling like he was about to vomit. He could hear the heavy, powerful footsteps of someone of formidable athleticism bearing down on him, the rapidity of the gait giving him real cause for concern as the sound grew nearer and nearer in a frenzied stomp-stomp-stomp-stomp.

Zack threw himself through the front door, vaulting down the steps in a single giant leap. He tore ass to the car—pounding on the driver’s door as he pulled frantically at the handle.

“Oh fuck!” Todd yipped from within, spying Zack’s boorish pursuer charging out the front door. To Zack’s monumental relief, the doors clicked open.

“Lock them!” Zack yelled, flipping the 4x4 into drive and firing the ignition in a

single, panicked motion.

The pig-man had nearly reached them—running furiously toward the Jeep in a full-tilt charge and slashing a hole in the Jeep’s canvas top. Todd screamed as Zack managed to take off with a roar. The pig was grasping futilely at Zack’s door handle, banging furiously on his window.

But then Zack put the Jeep into second gear, and the man/pig fell away from them. They were screeching off to the relative safety of the cold, wet night. Zack gasped as he tried to catch his breath.

In his rearview mirror, Zack spotted his attacker standing under a streetlamp, waving at him cartoonishly as he wheeled them out of sight.

Zack ripped off towards his grandparents’ summer house, eager to distance himself from everything that had just happened.

“I’m sorry, I honestly thought it would just be another job. Usually, we hunt down someone’s lost whatever, and then we’re done with it. I never imagined we’d be cracking into Maine’s most fucked up cult.” Todd said quietly.

“I’m not blaming you.” Zack replied. “It’s just a lot to take in. Are you okay?” He asked.

“I...think?” Todd replied unconvincingly. “We’re alive, at least.”

“For now.” Zack added.

“For now.” Todd agreed.

The increasingly familiar silence pooled out between them as they journeyed on.

Zack directed the Jeep inland, hoping at some point they'd cross out of the frontier of the storm and back into dryer weather. It was nearly impossible to see out the front of the Jeep.

"You don't think we should, like...call the police or something, do you?" Todd asked after a time.

"And say what? 'Hey, officer, we uncovered a cult on Quiet Island, and now they're hunting us down and menacing us in pig masks?'" Zack replied. He'd considered calling the cops but really didn't know how to tell their story. And besides, if their parents found out about all of this, it might lead to them coming home early, cutting his summer with Todd short.

"You really don't think they'd believe us?" Todd implored.

"I...I dunno. Honestly, I really don't want to deal with family right now. I'll get the door fixed, this will all blow over soon." Zack insisted.

"Fine. It's your house." Todd relented.

"Our house." Zack corrected, not liking that he couldn't seem to make Todd feel at home.

Todd just laughed at him.

"It'll all blow over! It's just a fucking dildo, after all." Zack laughed. "Come on. How serious could any of this really be? That guy was just full of shit." But everything he'd just said was exactly what he wanted to hear...and he didn't believe a word of it.

"People have started wars for less." Todd remarked grimly.

And now it was Zack who couldn't help but chuckle.

"Welcome to Paris," Zack said with a flourish. He had finally turned the Jeep off the remote state highway they'd been traveling on and onto the winding gravel drive of his grandparents' summer cabin.

"Huh." Todd said, sounding mildly impressed, leaning forward in his seat as if he were taking in the vistas of a grand city.

"The Eiffel Tower is right over there," Zack pointed toward a particularly tall tree as they rounded a bend in the drive. The headlights revealed a two-story chalet-style cabin in a clearing that opened up around it like a storybook, beckoning warmth and reassurance with its charms.

"And the best shopping is over there," Zack nodded toward an old shed. "But you'll have to fight some grumpy raccoons if you want this season's latest fashions." He rambled. The tension was finally unwinding, and he was relieved to be here.

"Paris is exactly as I'd imagined it," Todd said weakly, feigning humor but not well enough for Zack not to take notice. Zack reached out and squeezed one of Todd's hands in his own.

"I bet." Zack said quietly.

The pair hadn't spoken very much on the drive to Paris, Maine. The few words shared between them were like these: playful. Light. The sight of the whimsical chalet made him smile. It was exactly as he'd last seen it: the property looked like a little piece of Switzerland had been scooped up and transplanted here. The cabin's sloping roofline and ornamented banisters of the deck made the whole thing appear like a life-sized cuckoo clock. And situated here—nestled amongst the dense pines—it felt like a sanctuary. He wanted to believe that nothing in the world could



touch or reach them now but doubted that was true.

After what they'd just been through, how could it be? But he found it easier than he might have imagined to pretend anyway, wanting nothing more than to light a fire in the stove and pretend the rest of the world was as normal as it had seemed not too long ago.

It had taken Zack a moment (or several) to find the house key his grandparents kept hidden. His grandmother had an affinity for lawn gnomes. And while he remembered that the key was under a lawn gnome, it took him a few tries before he guessed which lawn gnome. There had been many choices, and the process consumed more time than he would have liked in the now-predatory-feeling darkness. Each sound in the dark woods startled him. He was jumpy, on edge, and ready for bed.

"Got it." Zack finally said exhaustedly, holding the key up to Todd like he'd won a prize.

Todd had been meandering around the driveway while Zack searched, staring up at the little chalet and the surroundings with seeming satisfaction as he took it all in. Zack hoped he had been right bringing them here...that the cult couldn't track them down so quickly this far out. He had little idea what those weirdos were capable of, and he didn't want to find out.

"Heads up, the house only has a wood stove for heat...it might be a bitchilly at first. I need to go turn the water and power on, too." Zack automatically recalled the list of chores his grandparents had drilled into him when he'd finally been afforded the privilege to use the cabin on his own terms when he'd turned 18. He could recount them as though they had been recited to him just yesterday. He had many fond memories here.

"No problem." Todd replied. "I'll get this stuff inside while you do all that, if you

want.” Todd had picked up the bag of clothes and the random food Zack had grabbed in his rush out of the Kennebunk house.

“Sounds good.” Zack agreed.

And so, with that, Zack approached the door and placed the key in the lock—opening the cabin door up for them. He debated giving Todd another kiss, then...or another something...but couldn’t bring himself back into that same headspace they’d reached earlier, pre-home invasion—and frankly, he just wanted to get the lights and heat going and get to bed at this point. Todd brushed past him into the dark house without hesitation, seemingly at home in the shadows, and the door swung shut behind him with a thud.

Zack hurried around the side of the house to where the power and water hookups were, nervously glancing down the darkened driveway as he did. A part of him even dared to imagine he heard a faint, singular grunt between the crunch-crunching of his loud footsteps, but he convinced himself it was only nerves. In the distance, distant thunder still rumbled from beyond the trees.

Zack flipped on the power, and his surroundings burst to life. The floodlights lit up the little clearing and eased his doubts—at least to the periphery of those tall, dark trees. He looked around anxiously.

Todd had begun flicking on the interior lights. Zack paused to watch as they began to cast defiantly out of the previously darkened windows, beckoning him inward to Todd’s comfort and the fleeting illusion of safety. He shivered, hurrying inside.

“Some place.” Todd greeted him.

“Thanks, it’s technically my grandparents, but they’re getting a bit too old to use it like they used to.”

“It’s cozy.” Todd mused. “Much cozier than the Kennebunk place.” He laughed.

“I think we can agree on that,” Zack chuckled. Hey, I’m going to go chop some firewood. Would you mind getting some food going? I’m starving, and I think we’ve both seen my talents are best applied outside the kitchen...”

“Sure thing.” Todd laughed, hoisting some of the bags of food they’d brought up onto the kitchen counter.

And so, just like that, Zack and Todd settled into their evening, trying their best to pretend it was like any other.

Zack’s grandfather’s axe was enormous. The man had towered over even Zack—who, at 6’4, was usually taller and broader than most. And as Zack hefted it now, sizing up the mountainous woodpile that was a fixture at the camp, he recalled all the years he’d spent summers here as a child: learning to swim out in the glittering sapphire lake on the far edge of the property with his Pap-Pap—or helping him pick wild blueberries out in the woods before boiling them down into jam and baking them into pies. These were some of his fondest memories.

Zack heaved and split another piece of wood, tossing it into his growing pile.

The crack of a twig beyond the horizon of the cabin’s floodlights caused Zack to jolt. He gripped the massive axe with a single huge hand while balling his other into a tense fist.

“Who’s there?” He cried out.

But there was just silence now. And he felt a bit foolish for being so easily startled.

Zack decided that he had gathered as much fuel as he dared. He quickly stacked the

firewood beside the front door in a tidy pile, always keeping an eye on the spaces between the trees. He swore he could feel eyes pressing into him each time he turned his back on those too-dark shadows.

With a final look into the dark, Zack slid back into the cabin. Within, he was met by the gentle sizzling and clinking of someone preparing food with determined competency. He bolted and latched the door with finality.

The cabin itself had been built by Zack's grandfather in the early 1960's. It was—largely—in its factory-original condition: when entering, there was only a large, single common room with a kitchen along the far wall. A solitary bunk room was the only sleeping accommodation. Above those two features was a lofted space containing the old gym Zack's grandfather had used avidly for many years. It spanned half of the cabin's vaulted upper level—giving the entire wooden structure a cozy, intimate feel.

In the far corner, an ancient cast iron wood stove sat idle. Its only company was a vintage fuchsia-and-azure plaid sofa that, to this day, was Zack's favorite couch in the entire world. Threadbare, faded, perfection.

He went to the stove, noting Todd busily moving about the kitchen. Zack smiled as he opened the old contraption with care and arranged the logs...the smallest on the bottom and then the larger, heavier pieces up top—before striking a match along an iron-bound side of the stove and setting the entire pile of tinder he'd just made alight—blowing into it gently until the fire caught purchase. To his satisfaction, it crackled to life.

“What are we having, chef?” Zack inquired eagerly, joining Todd in the kitchen and slapping him playfully on the ass, his spirits lifting notably at the prospect of food.

“Eggs.” Todd winked. He had just finished preparing the second of two egg and

cheese omlettes. They looked perfect—the egg even and glistening, the cheese oozing out from within. Todd had even managed to crack a bit of pepper over each.

“You’re putting me to shame.” Zack laughed.

“Never!” Todd rebuffed. “Come on, it’s better hot.”

Todd handed Zack a plate, and the two plopped down on the sofa before digging in ravenously to the meal.

“So glad I taught you how to make eggs like that.” Zack joked, wiping the last of the omelet from the corner of his broad mouth.

That was fucking delicious, he admired, giving a crediting look toward Todd. The muscular guy was sitting next to him—shoulders still slouchy—working slowly through his own plate with seemingly increasing disinterest.

“Totally.” Todd agreed flatly. He was scraping at his plate absently as he pushed around the half of the omelet that Zack was still half-hungry for. He’d fallen quiet again as they’d eaten, and Zack felt uneasy watching him fall back into one of his dour moods.

Zack rested beside him—feet outstretched, arms behind his head, plate in lap—he leaned back and groaned, enjoying finally being able to relax a little after all they’d been through today.

“So…” Zack whistled.

“So…” Todd replied.

“Do you have any leads on what’s going on?” Zack asked, still mystified by the

prospect of a cult running around in this day and age.

“If I think of something, you’ll be the first to know.” Todd assured, his voice sounding dismal.

Eventually, he finished toying with his uneaten food, and Todd rose. He took Zack’s empty plate from his lap and returned it to the kitchen counter before rejoining. He sat down on the far side of the couch with a half-contented “hrmph.”

“This is a great couch.” Todd said after a while.

“Isn’t it though?” Zack asked.

The two stared into the little window on the old stove, watching as the flames within devoured the last of the logs.

Zack’s eyes grew weary, and he was drawn to lay his head in Todd’s lap after a while. Todd readily accepted him, placing his hand on Zack’s shoulder as he slowly faded off to sleep.

In his dreams, he was stalked down an endless corridor, a beast of a man chasing him on and on and on as he ran, screaming, terrified. All around him, the windows were exploding as a riotous black fog swirled inside, threatening to blind and choke him, sucking him out into the unknown...

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

“Wake up, I have to pi(ssssssss!)” Todd slapped his cheek chidingly.

Zack realized he had spent the entire night with his head in the other guy’s lap. Todd had slept sitting upright somehow, letting him rest undisturbed. Zack groaned and shook his head furiously, his nightmares still too fresh. He was disoriented for a moment before realizing where he was. With a yawn, Zack stretched out his long, well-muscled arms and legs.

Todd was lifting Zack’s head roughly off his lap dropping it back to the cushion with a plop before hurriedly jumping off the couch and running out the front door into the chilly morning air—shoeless—to take that urgent piss.

Zack was half yawning, half chuckling to himself when he was interrupted by the sound of his phone chiding him with unwanted alerts.

Ding...

Ding...

...

...

Ding.

Ding.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

Zack's huge hand shot down to his pant pocket, searching out his smartphone. The buzzing continued. One message. No, two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. He knew exactly who it was even before he flicked the phone open and confirmed his dread:

Fuck you Zack.

You fucking idiot.

Mom was a fucking noob for letting you stay at the house.

Answer me.

Idiot.

ZACK. YOU FUCKING IDIOT

CALL ME BACK NOW YOU FUCKER!

8=====D

The time stamp log showed about two seconds between each text message, and Zack groaned involuntarily at the deluge.

Fucking. Bethany. No one got under Zack's skin quite like his twin sister.

No one.

He knew that twins were supposed to be close. Everyone had always expected them to have some sort of "special" bond. They had a special bond alright...



Bethany was a nightmare creature. He did his very best to avoid direct interaction with her. Everything with her was a competition—it always had been. She really couldn't stand losing, especially not to him. And she'd always taken that singular obsession to an eleven. All of Bethany was driven by the desire to dominate, and he'd always been afraid of her.

She'd even taken up swimming to compete with him, excelling to nationals and then abandoning it once she won as though the entire endeavor had been undertaken to assert her own supremacy, not even appearing to care about the sport itself.

It was one of thousands of examples of the same relentlessly competitive behavior that drove her, as though she could only feel more when he felt less, as though the whole purpose of Zack in their dyad was to serve her ever-starving ego. The last time he'd seen her had been some years prior; he'd been completely fine with that until now.

Zack stared at those angry texts for a long, hard moment, debating whether he could delete them and pretend they hadn't been delivered. But then he realized he had his read receipts turned on. And while his mind did come up with numerous flimsy excuses, he realized this wasn't something he could put off—though he very much wanted to.

YOU HAVE YOUR READ RECEIPTS ON, IDIOT!

ANSWER ME!

He glared at the messages. What he didn't want was Bethany getting involved in what was starting to swell up between him and Todd, or worse yet, her knowing about it at all. He would never live down hooking up with his stepbrother if she were to find out. At that moment, Zack heard Todd reenter the chalet, the door clapping shut as he returned from relieving himself.

“Something up?” Todd asked, eyes glancing across Zack, who was still stretched out on the couch staring at his phone.

“Someone, yeah,” Zack mumbled, adding, “I assume your dad told you about Bethany?”

“Zack, my dad didn’t even tell me about you,” Todd said with a hint of irony in his voice, eyebrow raised.

How strange, he thought. But then Todd’s dad was strange—the strangest man he’d ever met, actually. They hadn’t struggled to get along, necessarily, but they hadn’t gotten along either. Instead, there was just a big hole punched out of the space any relationship between the pair might have occupied. Zack hadn’t really minded him until he’d come to learn about Todd.

“She’s my sister. Twin sister, actually. Though...well... you’ll see. Or maybe not, hopefully. Anyway, I need to call her back. She’s pissed about the pig dude’s mess or something. Mind a moment of privacy? There’s a gym up in the loft if you want to fuck around up there?” Zack looked at Todd earnestly, hoping he wasn’t being too off-putting for requesting a small bit of privacy to deal with what he knew would be a brief and messy conversation.

“Of course. Up there?” Todd pointed to the small ladder that led to the chalet’s upper level, right beside the door to the bunk room.

“Don’t expect 24-Hour Fitness,” Zack said to Todd’s back, the ginger already halfway up the ladder. Todd threw him a thumbs-up over his shoulder as he hefted himself up and over the edge, disappearing into the gym. Zack remained splayed out across the couch for a moment longer, floating there and unable to force himself to bring his fingers to hit “call.” Eventually, after a bit more procrastination, he managed it, closing his eyes even as he hit the button.

“Fucker.” The airy, nasal voice cut into him instantly, Bethany answering on the first ring. “You fucked up so hard. I took pictures. You fucking idiot. What the fuck did you do to the house? Is this a drug thing?” She was screaming now, and Zack hated how she sounded when she screamed, her voice whipping across him like a tornado rolling through a Midwestern town, leaving little, if any, order in its wake.

The tirade continued: “My boyfriend is here cleaning all this up. Your mess. Because he’s actually a man! Not some little boy-child who still lives at home. Oh! Danny, sweetie! Do you want to come over here and say hi to my fuck-up of a brother?” she concluded in a sing-song voice.

“Beth, what do you want?” Zack grumbled, attempting patience. He was squeezing his temples furiously with a large thumb and forefinger as attempting to hold himself together, but he could feel the temper wagging out of him in the short, clipped way the words fell out of his mouth.

“I want you to fucking come home and clean this shit up, Zack,” she retorted vehemently, her gusty voice seeming to push itself through the small phone speaker more forcefully now, into places in Zack’s mind he really didn’t want her to be able to access—like the places where he hid his feelings about anything and everything, always, for this very reason.

“And bring our step-brother with you.” She added with a giggle.

“Yeah, that’s not my mess, Bethany. I had nothing to do with it.” He lied, wanting out of this conversation as soon as possible.

“Cool, Zack, everyone knows you fucked up. I know. Mom knows. Step-daddy-dumb-fuck knows. We talked for two hours last night all about your total and complete fuckery. Now come clean up this shit, ass. Oh sorry, what’s that, Danny baby?” She turned her attention from the call, tone totally changing, continuing a

hushed and mumbled conversation with whoever Danny was, apparently covering the speaker to disallow Zack from overhearing. He caught shards of a deep, cold voice chopping through the line but could not decipher exactly what those chilly words were imploring. That voice was oddly familiar...but then she spoke again, distracting him from the notion.

“Where are you staying, little bro? Grandma and Grandpa’s, I assume?” She sounded impatient now,

“Bethany... I need to go. Yes. At Grandma and—” But the line disconnected abruptly. She’d hung up on him, apparently only interested in the potential of confirming where he was.

Zack tossed his phone on the ground, unsettled by the call. He was dismayed to hear the crack of his screen taking the brunt of the momentum as it skidded across the hardwood floor. He couldn’t help but allow frustration to flow over him, to steep himself in it, wondering for the millionth iteration how they had never managed to get along about anything.

Zack stared in a daze up at the vaulted wood-lined ceilings of the cabin, fixating on one of the two skylights that dotted the roof. The clouds he spied through it—flitting by far above him—were thin and airy, their lightness an affront to the heavy tides that roiled inside him.

Fucking. Bethany, he concluded harshly, refusing to complicate his thoughts any more than that.

And then, even as he forced her out of his mind, Zack realized he’d heard the steady clink... clink... clink of someone doing reps on the old athletic equipment up in the loft for some time now. He felt the anger he had been directing toward his sister evaporate instantly like so much hot air. In its place, Zack felt his—admittedly

sizable—dick jump at those sounds.

At times, being easily distracted isn't the worst trait.

Zack was off the couch in a flash.

When he heaved himself up to the loft, he was surprised and excited to find the normally modest Todd shirtless, doing a set of incline bench presses on Zack's grandfather's old-school equipment.

"How goes?" Zack inquired as he admired Todd's tight, well-formed pecs hungrily from across the room.

Todd was raising and lowering the Olympic bar, stacked with numerous plates, with a look of determination on his face that Zack found arousing as fuck. He made his way over into the spotter position near Todd's head while continuing to be impressed by the amount of weight Todd was moving up and down with seeming ease.

"Easy, there you go." Zack encouraged. "Breathe."

Todd pounded out a few more reps.

Zack found himself very much enjoying this closer view as Todd's pecs flexed and twitched with the strain of the movement, the ginger's tight ab muscles joining in unison and contracting tightly as the bar went up and down. Wisps of golden-amber body hair, fine as spun gold, trailed down into the deep grooves that disappeared tantalizingly into the black sweat shorts Zack had lent him a few days prior. His arms were bulging with sinewed muscle as Todd neared the end of his set.

"Urghble...!" Todd blurted on his final rep.

Zack helped him as he pushed himself to failure, raising the bar with him and securing it overhead.

“Atta-boy!” Zack boosted as Todd sat upright on the bench, leaning his back slightly into its upright position, chest fully pumped from the lift.

The bench setup was positioned under the big squat rack cage Zack had spent countless hours using during high school summers. The pull-up bar, taped and chalky, had been his favorite movement, the exercise perfectly tailored for the muscle groups he’d hyper-developed in his pursuit of swimming. Zack couldn’t help but feel a swelling in his shorts, his massive cock stirring with carnal appetites aroused at the sight of Todd using that same equipment.

He saw Todd’s eyes fixing on the mounding bulge in his joggers. From the other guy’s seated position on the weight bench, Zack’s crotch was at eye level. Zack allowed himself to swell a little more, watching Todd while Todd watched him. Then, slowly, unable and unwilling to stop himself, Zack started to inch down the waistband of the joggers with an errant thumb, pulling them first out, and then down. The fire in Todd’s eyes erupted at the sight of him.

As Zack freed himself—his enormous cock swung heftily out of his pants. The smaller man’s eyes flickered up to Zack’s, half in awe, half in sheer lust, before Zack felt what he’d been wanting to feel since that first steamy night in Snail: Todd’s small, tight mouth wrapping itself around the enormous head of his thick cock. The wetness. The warmth. The softness. He shuddered in ecstasy as Todd gagged on him.

Todd moaned into the head of his cock in reply, barely able to fit him into his tiny mouth. Zack felt himself thrusting involuntarily, frantically, stuffing Todd so ridiculously he could see his eyes bulge and water with strain and effort and wanting. But Zack couldn’t stop himself now. He didn’t want to. Todd had freed himself, too, and was furiously jerking his pale cock furiously as he tried to fit more than just half

of Zack's manhood into his mouth. Zack grasped at those cloud curls fanatically, forcing Todd to take more of him, forcing himself deeper into that tight, warm space.

Todd was worshipping Zack, running his mouth along the length of him, twisting and turning, and finding all the places Zack needed to be touched in order to get close. Sucking first one massive, smooth nut, then the other. Biting at the tender skin here and there and sending bubbles of pleasure floating across Zack's universe. Todd flicked his tongue across them while using his free hand to continue rubbing the shaft of Zack's monster, spending time along the length of it, gently and deftly inventing infinite combinations of stimulation as Zack bucked and thrust, running his hand over Todd's thick chest, loving how it felt.

Zack felt Todd return his glans to his mouth in earnest, moaning a vibrating, volcanic rumble around his shaft. Zack cried out—and in that sublime moment, he felt himself lose it, cumming explosively into Todd's mouth. The torrent of cum caused Todd to gag, his own cock spurting now as he struggled to swallow the copious load Zack had just shot into him. Todd let him fall from his mouth—not wasting a drop of him in the process—grinning up at Zack as he wiped the corner of it with the back of his hand. The fit ginger leaned back into the slightly inclined bench seat with a deep, contented look on his face, a smile edging along his mouth, eyes slightly sleepy, like his entire day could be over now, and he'd be fine with that.

“Nice set, bro,” Todd said faintly.

Zack weakly pulled the joggers back up, tucking his half-hard-on clumsily back inside them, looking around sheepishly for something to help Todd clean up with.

That had been a great fuck.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Their post-coital workout was as intense as the pre-workout session had been, both of them developing a sweat and exchanging techniques and movements that neither had been familiar with before. Zack found himself impressed by the depth of Todd's knowledge of lifting and enjoyed the way he lit up when he showed Zack this motion or that style. The mutuality of it was... somehow exactly what Zack hadn't known he wanted, what he'd needed.

Afterward, they had decided to go for a walk in the midday sun, wandering together into the thin, sun-scarred alleyways that stretched out amongst pines. Even this far inland, the storm front was unmistakable. Zack had never seen anything like it. It was a vast and neverending wall of black—as though beyond it, daylight ceased to be.

“Those clouds don't look normal to you, do they?” Zack asked, pointing them out to Todd, who seemed indifferent to their intrusion. His nerves were getting to him again.

“They just look like clouds.” Todd replied cagily. He was doing the thing he did when he was nervous: avoiding eye contact—and Zack knew there was something he wasn't telling him but couldn't seem to pry it out of him.

Really? Those don't look weird to you?” Zack pressed.

“Nope.” Todd said curtly, walking off toward the cabin without another word.

Zack trotted after him, eying his back suspiciously as he was forced to turn away from the disquieting mass of clouds. He made to speak a few times, but couldn't find the right series of words to coax a truthful answer out of Todd.



“Shit.” Todd said, startling him.

“What is it?” Zack asked from behind him on the trail. They’d finally neared the cabin. And then he saw...

“Oh, give me a break!” Zack screamed. “You pig dudes can go fuck yourselves!” he bellowed, feeling his pulse quicken as he observed the damage. Every last window on the cabin had been shattered.

“Look, I’m really sorry about all of this...if I had any money to pay for any of it I would...” Todd began.

But Zack cut him off.

“Save it Todd. Stay close. Keep your eyes peeled.”

Zack hurried back to the woodpile, where he grabbed the massive axe and slung it over one of his powerful shoulders.

“Come and get me, you bastard!” he roared. “You’re not so tough now, are you?”

He swung the axe through the air, feeling pure rage at the violation of first his home and now his grandparents, too.

“Easy.” Todd gentled from nearby. “They’re just fucking with us. Don’t let it get to you. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to do...”

But it was getting to Zack. Everything was spiraling out of control. And his grip on reality seemed to be slipping away alongside everything else.

“Come on.” Todd beckoned. “Let’s get inside. I don’t like being out here so

exposed...”

Zack couldn't agree more. The feeling of being watched had grown stronger and more distinct as the day passed. He hurried after Todd.

The cabin felt unsafe without the surety of windows, but he closed the curtains and did his best to begin cleaning up the shards of glass into a utility bucket, wondering how on earth he would explain any of this to his Pap-Pap.

The thought of leaving crossed his mind, but at this point, he didn't know where to go. He kept the axe close, not knowing whether he'd have the guts to use it if he needed to. He'd always thought of himself as brave, but his fear was threatening to consume him now, and he feared it might turn out that he'd been a coward all along. Maybe Bethany was right about him after all.

Crack...rumble.

Crack-crack-CRACK... rumble-rumble.

The power went out suddenly and without warning, casting them into darkness.

The storm had finally reached them. They'd been sitting side by side for what felt like hours, staring at the curtains as they'd billowed about in the increasing bluster. The windowless opening across from them flashed into focus as the heavens crackled overhead, the curtains flapping this way and that as the wind began to howl.

Zack squinted out into the storm—almost certain he'd seen the outline of someone just beyond the periphery of where he could see.

The next flash of light revealed the now-familiar face of the pig with the blond chin hair, his eyes twinkling with arctic menace. He was peering in through the window

and then all at once, he was climbing inside.

Todd screamed.

But something in Zack shifted as he stared into that horrible mask, and he found himself rising from the couch involuntarily, grabbing at the enormous ax before advancing toward the pig/man.

“Nice try.” the pig lanced, kicking out and striking Zack square in the chest. The force of the blow caused him to bend over double, and the pig grabbed the axe’s handle and slammed it into his face. Zack’s nose splattered with blood, and he wiped it messily with the back of his hand as he let out a roar and charged into the invader, sending them both toppling out the window.

Zack crashed into the ground, the axe skittering away from him into the dark. In his momentary daze, he hadn’t noticed the pig slip back out into the shadows. He stumbled to his feet, noticing Todd had crept out the front door and was watching him intently.

The rain poured around him, and the clouds were so thick and heavy that he could barely see more than a foot or two in any direction.

“Yo, pig dude! Come and fucking get it!” Zack screamed into the night. Zack scanned the darkness, struggling to discern even the Jeep’s vague shape or the pines’ tall vertices against the strobing lightning’s static and distortion. But he saw nothing.

Another flash of lightning. Another.

And then, almost too late, drowned out by the latest rumbling of thunder, Zack heard the telltale sign of footsteps on gravel.

Shit.

The thought struck him at the same time as his assailant. The muscular man crashed into him and was pounding his fists into his chest and his face as the two tumbled and kicked at one another, tumbling across the driveway. He felt a swift kick at his side, sending him skimming along the driveway once more. More pain: fire and ice erupting all across him.

“Hooooomph.”

The sound escaped his mouth as he tried to regain his proprioception. A rain of blows and kicks met him; still, he couldn’t orient himself well enough to strike back.

“Found you, fuckfaces!” The frosty, supercilious tone came from everywhere and nowhere all at once. “You have no idea what you’re in for—now, where’s the key?” The man hissed.

“Buddy, I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.” Zack wheezed, spitting blood from his mouth. A fist struck him across the face.

“Liar. I guess I’ll have to ask Toddy about it!” Zack braced himself for another blow, enraged at the thought of this creep going anywhere near Todd...

But then, there! For the first time, he could clearly make out the other man in the explosions of light that had just detonated above them. His attacker was holding a bladed weapon. Zack eyed it wearily.

But his window of opportunity was slim, and he charged the man without a second thought. The pig attempted to swipe at him, but Zack sidestepped the blow, grabbed his wrist, and wrenched the weapon from his hands, throwing it off into the night. He stomped on his assailant’s ankle, causing him to crumple, before driving him to the

ground and driving a knee into his throat. He ripped the mask from his face, eager to see once and for all who he was.

To his great surprise, a handsome blond guy around his age stared coolly back up at him. Just like that ugly mask, the human face possessed a shock of bright blond chin hair, and glacier-blue eyes bored into Zack's.

“Who the absolute fuck are you?” Zack demanded.

But the pig didn't need to answer because Todd had joined Zack and answered for him.

“Danver.” Todd moaned. His tone was wilting.

“Toddy.” The man greeted. Zack shifted his weight above him, suddenly feeling uncertain.

“Look, I really do feel bad about this, but you have no idea what they can offer you if you'd just give them a chance to explain...” Danver went on.

“Shut the fuck up!” Zack yelled, shaking the man.

He looked at Todd pleadingly.

“You two... know each other?” Zack asked.

“Worse,” Todd confirmed. “We used to date.”

Zack felt his hands slacken as the words washed over him. The man/pig raced to grab his mask off the ground, kicking Zack off as he scrambled to his feet.

“I’m telling you, you’re better off just coming with me. The old man might offer you some deal. I can talk to him for you.” Denver urged, backing away into the shadows.

“You think we’d trust you after this?!” Zack yelled. “Get out of here. I’m calling the cops!”

“Good luck with that.” Denver sneered, slipping off into the shadows. “We’re everywhere. This is so much bigger than you!” Denver hollered. “It’s bigger than any of us!” He screamed.

Zack was frantically pulling his iPhone from his pocket, his hand shaking as he dialed 911, blood spattering on his screen from the cuts on his face.

Todd wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and the two were blanketed in rain. In all of Zack’s life, a night had never felt as dark as this.

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“So you’re telling me some sort of pig slash man attacked you?” The man asked again, not looking up from his notepad.

“But before all that, he broke into not one, but two of your homes. And you’re only just now reporting any of this?” The officer rubbed his bushy mustache thoughtfully, as though really wanting to get the details of this particular part jotted down correctly.

“That’s right,” Zack said impatiently. Look, you’ve asked these same questions a hundred times. Are you going to go find this guy and arrest him or what?”

The cop looked at him quizically, as though totally clueless as to why he might be feeling impatient.

“Well, it’s really just your word against his at this point. This Danver, you didn’t happen to attack him, did you? Are you sure you didn’t provoke all of this in some way?” He asked. “It’s important to understand both sides of the story, obviously.”

Zack sighed. They’d been going around in circles like this for the better part of half an hour.

“Hey, are you going to help us or not?” Todd interjected, surprising Zack with the abruptness of his uncharacteristic anger.

“Am I not helping you to your satisfaction, young man?” The cop asked, closing his notepad abruptly.

“You’ve literally done nothing but contradict us and flip our words around since you

got here.” Todd challenged. “What’s your name? Are you even a real cop?”

“My name?” The man asked, startled as though he hadn’t expected to be the one answering questions. His mouth opened and closed a few times before he blurted: “Captain...McGee.”

It sounded made up. And Zack fought the urge to ask to see a badge or a business card or some sort of credentialing. But the guy had shown up in a state cruiser, and he was wearing the uniform...

“Anyway, thanks for your call. We’ll be sure to look into this as soon as the storm passes,” McGee said bluntly.

“That’s it? That’s all you’re going to do about all of this?” Todd implored, waving around at all the shards of broken glass and specks of blood.

“Son, for all I know, you got into a fight with your brother here. It sounds like you two have a pretty complicated relationship. If I were you, I’d keep stories like this one to yourselves from now on.” He tipped his hat to them, making to leave.

“Oh, and if you do make it to the other side, I really hope you learn some fucking manners.”

Zack looked at Todd in horror, wishing desperately he could rewind time and take them down a path that led them anywhere but here.

“Still think it’s going to be okay?” Todd asked.

“No.” Zack answered truthfully. “I think we’d better head home. It’s time to call Mom and Dad.”



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

It was dawn when they finally packed up and backed the Jeep out of the driveway—or at least it should have been. Daylight hadn't come. Those clouds were everywhere now, and as far as Zack could see in every direction the sky was an endless monochrome.

“So...” Zack said as they turned onto the highway. “It sure is a nice day.”

“You’re telling me.” Todd agreed emptily. “Feels just like summer.”

Zack couldn't help but laugh.

“Any idea about... you know...all of this?” Zack was gesturing his free hand around at the darkness swirling outside the confines of the Jeep's dim interior. He still wasn't sure if this was just some strange weather phenomenon, but even as he tried to convince himself that was the case, he knew very, very much that it wasn't.

“Like I've said before, I wish I knew what to tell you—but it's all a mystery to me, too.”

“But...” Zack continued, glancing at Todd and trying to interpret his silence. He didn't want to press. He didn't want to do this right now, but he knew they had to. It was time.

“I um...I heard your dad talking once about the bridge, about the shadows you described as a boy...are these them?” Zack asked, finally putting into words the terrible truth that had begun to flesh itself out over the past few days.

“What?” Todd shot a paranoid look at him. “Why would you say that?!” His eyes had grown watery at the mention of the bridge, and Zack trod gingerly, knowing the memory contained the mysterious loss of his mother.

“I’m sorry, it’s just...I heard your dad telling my mom about it. What he describes you talking about sounds like this.” Zack was waving at the coal-black sky. There was nothing natural about it.

“You’d think I was crazy if I told you.” Todd started.

“Try me.” Zack challenged. It was hard to see out the front of the car, and he tried his best to keep them on the road.

“I...I can’t remember it clearly,” Todd began. “She was driving me to school, and we were on a bridge when suddenly she screamed out. I was playing a game and didn’t even notice whatever she’d seen. She’d warned me about the shadows my whole life, and when they appeared in front of us on that bridge, I immediately knew what they were.” Todd was crying now.

“The shadows ripped her away from me. There was a man, and then it all went dark...” Todd drifted off.

“And it looked like this?” Zack asked, terrified.

“This is a thousand times worse.” Todd said helplessly. He’d pulled a peculiar trinket out of his pocket, something Zack hadn’t noticed him with before...it was familiar...and then he recognized it.

“Hey, where’d you get that!” He snatched it away from Todd, looking at the familiar old key and questioning how his family’s heirloom had come into Todd’s possession.

The rain was picking up as they drew nearer to the coast, and he couldn't drive as fast as he normally would have.

"My dad mailed it to me. Why? I thought it was supposed to be the house key but...it didn't work." Todd shrugged, seemingly disinterested in the item.

"House key? We have normal-ass keys, Todd. And this...this isn't your dad's." Zack was clenching the carrot key in his fist.

"Okay...?" Todd seemed to imagine there would be more to the story.

There wasn't.

At least not as far as Zack had been informed. The key had always been something his family mentioned in passing, an oddity that had become a possession when they'd first moved into the home all those years before. He'd been young then, and one of Zack's earliest, most vivid memories from that time had been the day they'd bought that grand home. He had run straight through those oaken double doors and out onto the back patio, jumping gleefully into the swimming pool with all his clothes and both shoes still on even though it was mid-winter. His mother had forced him back inside to help unpack, and even as he'd made his way soddently through the kitchen that very first time, he'd seen it: the carrot key. It was the only thing left behind from the prior owners, and his entire family had spent long hours musing over what it might lead to—what treasure chest it might open.

But they'd never found any treasure. He and Bethany had spent many hours attempting to locate the door it was meant to work on, but to no avail. And so, over time, they'd largely stopped mentioning the key altogether. In fact, Zack couldn't recall clearly the last time he'd seen it—and that it was appearing now, right now, seemed important.

The ground beneath them shook terribly, sending the Jeep nearly tumbling from the roadway. There was a loud, terrible thunderclap, and then, all at once, the sky began to crackle with scintillating energy.

He stuffed the key in his pocket, grabbing the wheel and flooring it toward Kennebunkport.

The shadows were here.

It was happening.

The neighborhood wasn't at all how they'd left it. The street was pitch black and lined by dozens, no hundreds of cars. They were parked bumper to bumper as far as Zack could see up and down the block—all empty. And when the Jeep finally returned to the stone manor's driveway, they were both dismayed to see that Snail was nowhere to be found.

"Someone's having an end-of-the-world party," Todd said darkly. A distant sound, not unlike music, reached their ears. It vaulted over the house, grasping out to them from either side of its imperious walls, beckoning them to investigate.

And so they did. Todd and Zack picked their way quietly around the side of the house. Zack led them to the wrought-iron gate, and the two slid into the backyard.

"Are you sure about this?" Zack asked.

"What choice do we have?" Todd said.

HOO-AH!

CLAP!

The call erupted in singular unity, thousands of voices joining in simultaneously as it thundered around them. Zack heard a series of car alarms go off, and the distant boom of an explosion as the ground shook with renewed violence. Huge waves splashed up into the yard.

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Todd said, pulling at Zack’s arm frantically, snapping him out of his terror fugue.

“What’s going on!?” Zack shrieked, finally too terrified to hold it in any longer.

But Todd was directing Zack’s face away from the unseen origin of the sounds and out toward where the ocean should have been, hidden by the endless darkness. But then...

Flames.

Thousands of smoldering orbs had erupted across the heavens, slowly falling all around them, crashing into homes across the neighborhood and setting them ablaze.

The men ran, clambering out onto the back patio, only to come to a halt, stunned by the crowd assembled there. An enormous bonfire had been erected in the center of the patio. The crowd fell immediately silent as the pair emerged from the path, all turning in singular focus toward the two boys with a quiet hush settling across them. The music halted with a screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech.

Zack’s heart was pounding as he scanned the crowd for a familiar face, someone to beg for help. But he found no one he recognized amongst the sea of faces. Explosions were rocketing out from the darkness all around them, distant screams curdling into the night as great winged beasts flapped overhead, and the heinous roar of some infernal monster lanced out from the shadows, causing him to tremble in fear.

Zack stared incredulously at the crowd; none of them were reacting. If anything, they seemed perfectly happy with whatever was going on, toasting one another before donning...animal masks.

Zack almost fainted as the ground trembled raucously. The crowd applauded, all howling and catcalling, oinking and yelping up at the sky as an enormous fireball smashed into the neighbor's Cape, blowing it to smithereens.

HOO-AH! They chanted.

"There you are." Bethany called out. She'd pushed her way out from between the wall of partygoers.

"Bethany, what is all this!?" Zack shrieked in terror.

Fighter jets tore through the sky overhead, followed by the roar of something colossal flapping after them. There was an explosion as whatever it was caught one of them, and Zack ducked instinctively as debris splashed out in the ocean.

Bethany was giggling.

"You know, when he first appeared to me, I thought about telling you." She began.

"But then I realized you'd never make the deal I took. You were always a goody-goody." Bethany quipped, drawing nearer and menacing him with a snarl. She donned a mask—a wicked-looking hyena—before continuing.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to our brother?" She toyed.

Zack flinched, glancing nervously at Todd, who remained silent.

“I assume one of you has the key?” She demanded. “Hand it over, and I promise I’ll make him go easy on you. Apparently, there are worse things there than death.”

Zack gaped at her. She’d always been harsh but never cruel.

“Are you for fucking real Bethany?” He spat. His thoughts went nervously to the key in his pocket.

“Oh, I’m for real, little brother. I made a deal with the devil and don’t plan to let him down with my side of the bargain.” Bethany purred.

Danver had appeared at her side. Shirtless and rippling. He wrapped an arm around Bethany.

“I assume you’ve met Danny by now?” She said.

Zack felt like his head might explode. The ground was really about to open up and swallow him whole, finally. He was about to be sundered completely by it.

“Don’t worry. You weren’t ever part of the plan.” Bethany continued airily.

“Him on the other hand...” She nodded at Todd. “Grab him!” She screamed.

The crowd had closed behind them like an ocean reconsolidating itself after a miracle, and the silence was the most menacing quiet Zack had ever imagined.

Bethany raised a hand up near her head and snapped her fingers in a swift, artful command. The crowd erupted as one:

HOO-AH!

CLAP!

“Power, Zack. It’s what I’ve always wanted. And now it’s mine. Now fuck off and die.” She said.

“Come with me.” Todd said beside him, calmer than Zack would have imagined him to be; his voice sounded different somehow, colder. But he was grabbing Zack now and tugging him along, dragging him away from the approaching crowd and toward the dubious safety of the laundry room.

“Where are we going?” Zack mumbled, totally disoriented by everything going on around them.

“You’re going to need to trust me now,” Todd said, still not sounding very familiar.

“Todd what’s with your voice...” Zack asked, looking around as though he couldn’t trust anyone or anything anymore.

“Look, jockboy, just shut the fuck up and follow me.” Todd said, dropping any kindness he’d been faking previously.

Zack decided that this was his best option, and he followed Todd as he passed out into the house and sprinted off down one of the hallways.

“It’s around here somewhere...” He muttered. “Here!”

Todd was flipping the cushion of one of the window seats over and smashing through the wooden plywood below with his leg.

“Hey!” Zack protested stupidly, more out of habit than anything else. He’d just watched his neighbor’s house get blown to bits by a smoldering asteroid but



somehow still recoiled at the idea of damaging the old house.

“Not now, idiot.” Todd hissed. Come.” He signaled. Zack peered into the opening he’d created, and to his shock and dismay, he saw a narrow stone passageway extending deep underneath the house. It was vertical, with a primitive ladder built into one side.

He heard the partygoers smashing through one of the windows behind them, screaming for Todd to join them.

“Look, give me that fucking key and get your ass in the tunnel.” Todd said. For whatever reason, Zack did as he was told, handing him the key before hurrying onto the rickety ladder and lowering himself down into the tunnel.

It was mank, and every so often, the ground still shook. Todd had clambered in above him, and the two were rapidly descending now as the echo of voices spilled in from above.

“Hurry!” Todd hissed.

“Where are we even going?!” Zack cried.

“The only place left to go.” Todd said cryptically. “Now keep going! They’re coming!” He urged.

Zack continued on, climbing down and down and down until he thought his arms would fail him. But then, at long last, he reached the surety of the ground.

Zack stepped back from the ladder, pulled out his iPhone, and used the light from the device to gain his bearings: They were in a chamber, maybe twenty yards across. In its center, an enormous glittering archway filled the room.

“Oh, great, Todd! It’s an underground prison cell. Not the escape I was hoping for,” Zack said defeatedly, unable to control his temper or spare Todd from it anymore.

“Look, I’m doing the best I can.” Todd said absently, searching around the base of the stone archway. “Bring me that light.”

“There,” Todd gasped. Zack squinted, noticing a small inset in the arch where Todd was inserting the carrot key even now. He twisted it ever so gently, a faint click echoing about the still of the chamber. But then...

“Do you fucks know how hard it is to climb a ladder in heels?” Bethany blustered.

Click... click... click...

Zack and Todd turned in unison to face Bethany and Danver again, the pair moving to confront them under the apex of that huge stone archway.

The ground was vibrating now in a constant rumble.

Dust and pebbles fell down in whirls from far above, a horrible noise echoing around the stone-walled space growing louder all the while.

“What the fuck is this?!” Zack tried to yell above the din.

“Later!” Todd commanded.

“You have no idea what you fucks are getting yourselves into,” Bethany boomed, taking a single click forward. “Don’t you dare use that archway. This is my fucking world, do you hear me!? I’ve worked my ass off for this. Now give me the fucking key!” She shrieked, reaching out toward the archway only to be knocked off her feet as the rumbling intensified.

Zack stared bewildered as a strange, flickering light appeared along the edges of the stones, neon pink and electric blue whirling and whizzing out of them like tiny motes of vaporwave magic. A beautiful noise began to drown out the ugly one now. It ramped up, resounding louder and faster as the ethereal lights intensified in number and brightness. Zack noted that for all her precocity, even Bethany looked around in wild-eyed wonder at the color and light erupting back into the world in this strange, subterranean space.

The light grew brighter, the sound louder, and Zack's fear reached a zenith he hadn't believed possible. He reached out for Todd, grasping for a hand that was willingly given.

The light became blinding, the sound all-consuming, and then there was nothing.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Zack was surprised. He blinked his eyes open in stunned, dazzled confusion. At first, he couldn't move—like he had forgotten how to do so or what the purpose of doing so might be—but then, slowly, he regained himself. The brilliant light above was hard to fight against, and it took him a moment to realize that he was lying in a... field.

How?

He could smell the grass. He could feel its soft blades against the exposed skin of his arms, and along the small patches of the ankle the joggers didn't manage to conceal from it. As his vision came into focus, he realized that he wasn't alone—he was still holding onto Todd's hand. The warmth pulsed out from it, warmer now than it had ever been in the before. Zack squeezed involuntarily, needfully, unable to move or make any sound just yet. In that moment, the touch of Todd's hand was a lifeline, a reassurance that he wasn't lost in this strange place.

And then, to his relief, it squeezed back.

Zack breathed in, inhaling a deep volume of the freshest air he'd ever tasted. It smelled... green...alive. He took another breath. And another. Feasting on the pure air until at long last he found the strength that had departed him when they'd...when they'd...

He really wasn't sure exactly. It was all a blur.

Todd sat up wearily, dragging Zack's big hand forward and pulling him up to a seated position as well. As the two got their bearings, Zack found they were in the near

center of an enormous meadow, brilliant gemstone-colored flowers erupting like explosions of pure joy from its tender green blanket, the sky far above bluer than any he'd ever known.

The field was vaguely circular in shape, maybe a mile across, and ringing it in a singular, unbroken wall were the tall pines Zack associated so much nostalgia with. Out on the horizon, an enormous glittering tower reached up out of the mountainous landscape. For as far as the eye could see there was nothing but an endless verdant dream, unbroken and untarnished. Zack marveled at it. And the most unexplainable thing of all was that nearby, some short distance from the pair, a red Volvo station wagon sat quietly amongst the wildflowers, the only proof besides them that people existed at all.

Zack and Todd sat there, holding hands, their hearts pounding with a mix of amazement and anticipation. They knew that wherever they'd been spirited to—however—their adventure was only just getting started. The unknown lay before them, a vast canvas waiting to be explored, and they were ready to dive in, eager to uncover the mysteries of this surreal world.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

PLEASE ENJOY A FREE PREVIEW OF FUTURE LOVE AFFAIR:Auren hauled ass through the trench, screaming warnings to the others that they were about to be overrun. His voice was hoarse from the effort. He wasn't even supposed to be here. He was a chef, not a soldier. But they'd all been forced through basic training when conscripted to their roles a year ago. The accelerator rifle slung over his shoulder was an unwanted reminder of that.

"They're coming!" Auren shrieked.

A group of men huddled around a holo game in the dirt nearby, oblivious to what was coming their way.

"What did you say, private?" one of the soldiers muttered in annoyance. He gave Auren a scolding look as though he was insufferable for screaming at them, and then he returned to his game.

"Fucking idiot." The man muttered. He gave Auren the finger and motioned for him to shoo along. Auren merely stared at him, his eyes wide with fear, far too passive to do anything else.

A distant boom, followed by first one and then innumerable screams, commanded the older man's attention in a way Auren hadn't been able to. Auren didn't wait for an apology. He was terrified. He sprinted off without a second glance, still warning anyone he came across of the coming danger when he could find his voice. The sound of battle had grown to a rumbling thunder that was impossible to ignore. His warnings quickly became huffed and futile as he sprinted desperately onward, unable to bellow loud enough to be heard. He eventually abandoned issuing them altogether,

focusing instead on maintaining his cadence—on trying to survive.

At last, Auren crashed into the wall of the support module where he had worked for the past months. He doubled over and tried desperately to catch his breath. He was still gasping, and his hand shook as he entered the keycode for the unit's door. On his third attempt, a chime confirmed he'd finally gotten it right—and the door slid open. Behind him, the sound of armageddon raged on. The horror of the screaming was endless now as the human position on this far-flung world was pounced on and trampled by their alien foe.

“What is it?! What's going on out there?!” Hien demanded as Auren stumbled into the inside of the module. The woman was one of his fellow chefs and a far more committed soldier than he. She looked him up and down and then scowled.

“Give me that,” She said sharply, ripping the gun from his shoulder and making to leave the module.

“Hey, Hien stop! It's dangerous out there!” Auren warned.

“That's the point, Auren. How dare you run.” Hien shamed, flinging her apron to the ground and hurrying out to join the other soldiers.

She'd always struck him as brave, and his face burned at her words. He watched her go, and the shame struck him like a bullet. But he pushed past it. For what it was worth, Auren had always expected to discover in himself when push came to shove. A boyish part of him had always believed he'd rise to an occasion like this and prove himself a hero. But as it turned out, he wasn't far from it. He'd picked flight, not fight. It had been instinctive—animal, even. It was what he did. It's what he'd always done. And it was the only reason he was still alive now.

Auren looked frantically around the module for a weapon or something he could

defend himself with when they finally reached him. He found nothing. His heart thudded in his chest as a cold sweat trickled down his back. The sound of something, or someone, crashing against the side of the module caused him to nearly piss himself.

No one had ever seen the invaders and lived. Sure, news agencies and intelligence units had recorded the grizzly, blood-smeared aftermath of battlefields across the settled systems. But that was always long after they'd departed. And the analysis was bleak each time: The enemy had weapons even humanity wasn't cruel enough to dream of, and they were coming for us—they were winning.

"Fuck fuck fuck!" Auren muttered.

He banged open supply cabinet after supply cabinet and found nothing but cooking pots, pans, and pre-wrapped food. A fresh series of explosions caused the entire module to lift slightly and then slam to the ground. He crashed to the floor. The clattering of silverware and plates did its part to unnerve him further as he rose unsteadily to his feet. Overhead, a chorus of sonic booms informed him that the fighter craft from their flagship in orbit had just entered the atmosphere, hopefully buying him some precious time with their cover fire.

Auren gave up on his search for a weapon—a weapon hadn't been his plan A, anyway. He gripped the keycard in his pocket with a clammy hand. He'd made the impromptu decision to steal it just minutes ago when delivering lunch to the fortified command bunker on the front lines. The top brass had been informed of the enemy fleet's incursion in-system as he served them their synthetic ham and cheese sandwiches. The keycard had been right there, and so he'd taken it.

He couldn't make any excuses for himself. When he'd seen the opportunity to get himself out of here lying there, all the pieces of a plan fell into place instantly and automatically. His brain, hypervigilant from trauma, had recorded all the details



necessary for him to preserve himself without him even being aware it was doing it.

Auren was many things, but he wasn't a soldier. Conscription had brought him here, and he had no loyalty to their cause. What he was was a survivor—and when those primitive instincts to carry on kicked in, he found there was nothing he wouldn't do to keep himself safe. Growing up in the underworld of Obila had forced him to learn the endurance sport of self-perseverance.

Auren clutched the card in his hand and sprinted from the kitchen module. He crossed briefly outside, ducking low as human fighters screamed overhead—unloading payloads of lethal retribution. A naive part of him imagined they might turn the tide of the battle...But then, a series of explosions denuded him of that possibility.

The screaming had abated somewhat, and a part of him knew that it was because there were few people left to scream already. The battalion had numbered in the tens of thousands...

A cold, detached calm settled over him as he swiped the general's keycard and entered the medical lab. He'd never been in here before. It was sleek. And empty. Evidently, he was the biggest coward on Vesperion. In the universe, maybe. But he couldn't bring himself to care. He searched the space for what he had heard the brass talking about over a series of lunch meetings the past few weeks. They hadn't even noticed him listening.

There.

He'd spotted it: the neural uplink relay. The tech looked odd to him, and its design seemed almost inhuman. Auren hesitated, then crawled into the device's bed. His entire body shook with nerves as he put on an odd headset, unsure what to expect from the experimental technology. From the little he'd understood of his eavesdropping, the tech could allegedly upload and transmit consciousness. It was

being field-tested for wide-scale deployment on many fronts, and had been in secret for some time. In theory, it would allow for casualty-free evacuations. For now, it was supposed to be reserved for guys like the general, but that wouldn't stop Auren from doing what he was about to do. Anything was better than dying.

He flipped the tech on and clicked through a series of warning screens and disclaimers.

Proceed?

“Yes!” He yelped.

A series of holes blasted apart on one end of the module, shearing it clean apart and exposing it to the outside.

“GO!” He yelled.

The tube began to hum around him. He grew sleepy as a series of mechanical arms probed and jabbed at him. The last thing he remembered was a dull pressure against his skull, as a saw began to cut him open. And then he slipped into the shadows.

The machine went instantly to work sedating him and carving his brain into neat little slices, uploading a map of him into a data stream and transmitting the binary code that was now Auren off-world.

He was dead. But he'd also survived.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

“Here he is!”

Whack.

“Welcome back to reality, soldier. Here’s an update: it’s still terrible here.”

Whack.

Auren felt the whiplash across his back once, twice. The room he was in was dark. Cold. The pain was real.

He was alive. Again.

Auren flooded with dread as his final memories raced back. He tried to struggle against his restraints as blow after blow continued to fall, but to his bewilderment, he found he couldn’t move. He couldn’t speak. But mystifyingly, he could see and feel.

His back ached with white-hot pain. He sat in a darkened room onboard what felt like a starship, chained to a metal stool. There was a slight vibration underneath him, as though they were under thrust. The air was sour and stale.

Whack.

Auren wanted to scream out but found all he could do was sit there, frozen, suffering blow after helpless blow as the shadows kept raining pain upon him. This went on for days, and after some time, he wished he would grow tired and sleep or simply black out. But to his disappointment, he found that whatever ability he’d once had for such

things had been as altered as the rest of him. Each time his captor opened a lash across his body, it would just as soon begin to stitch itself together. The torture was endless, mind-numbing, and after a while, he began to wish he'd remained behind back on Vesperion to be overtaken by the enemy with the others. Anything would be better than this. He couldn't even cry.

The only bright spot was that his captor wasn't tireless like he was. They sometimes left him for what felt like days only to inevitably return and dole out more punishment, never providing so much as a word of explanation as to what his crime had been, other than using the device in the first place. And perhaps that had been crime enough.

Auren waited in agony, unable to move as had been the case for however long he'd been here. He tried desperately to immerse himself in a memory of being a boy back on Obila...

He and Fengári were camped out under an overpass awaiting the upcoming holorace. They'd been homeless for the past few years, and the monthly races were one of the only entertainments Tartarus afforded them during their childhood. They'd stayed up late into the night watching as the legends of the race battled for fame and victory. And for a moment, he'd been happy...

The sound of footsteps behind him snapped him back to reality. The memory departed him, and he found he didn't even have the will to cling to it as he braced himself for more pain.

"Boss says we ain't gettin' payment for ya. Shame. I was having fun getting acquainted. Oh well. Up ya go. Out the airlock. You really were a pretty little thing, weren't ya?"

Auren's heart began to race as his captor approached.

Shit. I didn't want to have to introduce myself like this.

The words cut into his mind clear as day. The voice, nor the thoughts, were his own.

I'm sorry. I should have introduced myself sooner. Forgive me for allowing you to suffer; I had to be certain I could trust you.

Auren tried to reply but was still frozen, just as he had been. His jailor was roughly unbinding his feet and legs now.

Just think, and I can hear you. I'm broadcasting from within the ship's data relay. I was like you once. Something like whatever happened to you forced me here, too. I uploaded a backup of myself before the launched me out the airlock. The disembodied voice continued. The words were formed with a faint accent.

Auren's mind spun, and he wondered feveredly if he was going mad. His jailer lifted him over one shoulder and started to carry him out of his cell.

Look, you should know that if he throws you out the airlock, you won't die. Do you hear me? You'll float forever. I can help you if you'll let me. But I'm going to need something in return...

Who are you? Auren inquired frantically. The presence replied almost instantaneously.

My name is Lupo. The stranger said.

And who are they? Auren replied.

The pirate suddenly dropped him to the ground and kicked him a few times before scooping him back up and flinging him over his shoulder. He slapped his ass with a

coarse, bare hand.

“Ooooh you are a tempting little thing, aren’t ya? Haven’t seen many as handsome as you. I’d have bought you myself if I’d had the credits.” The pirate whispered in his ear.

They’re pirates, Auren. Rapists and thieves and murderers. They intercept uploads, decant the body contained in the data, and then merc out bounties from the nearest human outpost for their hostages. They’re monsters. And if they don’t secure a bounty within a month of decant they’ll flush you straight out an airlock. If you were the general you were supposed to be, they’d make a pretty penny off you. I imagine they realized you’re far too young to be a general.”

So I’m not human anymore, am I? Am I even me? Is any of this even real? Auren began to panic as the hideous man who had spent the last month torturing him began to stuff him into an airlock.

He wanted to scream at him. To tell him to stop. To resist. But this time, he couldn’t even run from fate. The man looked up and down the hallway, then crammed himself into the airlock with Auren, pressing his ill-formed body up against him and grabbing him by the crotch. Auren had been nude this whole time. And the sensation of being violated caused him to wish he was already out there floating in space or dead back on Vesperion.

“Fuck it.” The man groaned.

He’d never hated anyone before in his life. But he hated this pirate. He hated him with every fiber of his humanity.

Help me, Lupo. Auren pleaded, not knowing what a disembodied consciousness could do for him.

The jailor was licking his neck and grunting at him.

“Mmmf, you are a tasty little snack.” He whispered. “I’m gonna just have to take a bite and see how your taste.”

The pirate looked Auren square in the face and then made like he was going to bite his nose. And had he been allowed to, Auren truly believed he would have.

Instead, Auren felt something happen that he hadn’t experienced since he’d died on Vesperion: movement. Except he wasn’t in control of himself. It was like he was viewing his body through a lens—watching in helpless horror as his hands and arms did things he would have never made them do himself.

Auren watched on powerless as his hands shot out and struck his molester square in the chest. The force of his strike launched the man straight out of the airlock, and he crashed into the hallway with a thud. His pants were around his ankles, and his eyes bulged at the sight of Auren crossing over to him.

“Your motor functions are supposed to be disabled!” He protested. “Power down! Help!”

Auren knelt beside him and snapped the man’s neck.

Are you doing this?! Stop! Please stop!Auren begged.

I’m doing what needs to be done.Lupo replied.

Auren’s hijacked body took off down the hallway.

A pair of pirates rounded the corner ahead.

Fuck. Lupo thought to him.

You don't have to kill them!Auren pleaded.

But the pirates had seen him.

“Hey, you're not supposed to be out here!” One of them cried. He withdrew an energy pistol from its holster at his side and looked uneasily at him.

Auren watched helplessly, aghast, as his body took off at a full sprint towards them. His inhuman momentum propelled his frame fast enough in the diminished gravity of the ship that he began to run alongside the curved wall as he gained velocity. He kicked off at the last moment and propelled himself like a missile into the man with the gun. There was an audible crunch as his ribcage cracked on impact. And then they were tumbling. Auren ripped the weapon from the pirate's hand and fired it at him without hesitation. Gore arced out across the ship's wall, but his hijacker didn't react to it. He merely spun and ruthlessly fired another volley into the remaining pirate. They were dead. And Auren's naked body was covered in their blood.

You don't have to kill everyone!Auren cried.

Yes, I do.The voice disagreed. They're murderers. Every. Last. One. I've been here for years. I've seen what they are. We're getting out of here. But first, you're going to do me a favor...

Two more pirates appeared and disappeared as Auren watched himself fire two shots squarely into each. Their corpses fell, charred holes smelling of rank meat where the plasma bolts had cored them.

Auren stepped over them and took off down a side hall, weaving his way expertly past a series of checkpoints that miraculously opened up for them as they continued.



I've had some time to figure out their security systems. The voice chuckled.

Look I'm sorry about this. But one shot in the right place and we're fucked. You can trust me, I promise. It assured.

Auren didn't know what to think. But he wanted to believe the man. He wanted to survive.

They'd crossed into a section of the ship resembling a laboratory. Lupo deployed stealth during this portion of their journey, and Auren was relieved that he let several crew go as he snuck by them. A sign ahead read 'neural uplink relay,' and Auren felt himself begin to panic at the sight of it.

Oh no, no, no, I'm not uploading myself again... Auren begged as they approached.

You don't have to. However, the decant tank requires manual override. I need you, Auren. Please. Help set me free.

To Auren's inexplicable relief, he was in control of his own body at last. He flexed his hands, feeling much like he had when he'd been flesh and bone. But his reflexes felt far quicker than he remembered, and as he reached out, he found he had much greater agility, too. The sensory feedback was convincingly lifelike. He even felt a slight chill as the cool artificial air of the ship blew gently across him. The voice in his head went on.

The vessel's consciousness upload repository and decanting tanks are inside the next room. You'll need to search for the name 'Lupo' Aria on the holo. Order it to decant me and I'll get you out of here. I'm transmitting myself inside now.

Auren hesitated, then turned the manual handle to the resurrection bay before him. Within, a vast server room was filled with stacks of computing equipment. In the

center of the space, a colossal acrylic tube rested. Numerous mechanical arms were idle. They each held various tools and instruments. A large holographic data terminal twinkled before the machine, beckoning him towards it. In Lupo's sudden absence, Auren suddenly felt every bit as naked and alone as he was.

He hurried to the terminal and entered the name he'd been given. Relief washed over him as the man's data popped up on the screen. He clicked through a series of screens and then selected "fabricate."

The tube lit up brighter now, and a mechanical frame emerged from the floor. The tools and implements within began to stitch and sew tissue and flesh across it more rapidly than he could track. A humanoid form began to take shape almost instantly, growing more intricate and fleshed out with each pass of the tools.

Voices from the doorway behind him caused Auren's artificial stomach to drop. Four pirates had just crept into the server room and were eyeing him uneasily, apparently uncertain how to wrangle the naked android.

"Freeze! Step away from the device." One of the men said tentatively. He murmured something into his headset.

"I just want to get off this ship," Auren yelled across the space at him. "Just let me go! Please!"

He threw up his hands and felt hot tears splatter down his cheeks at the thought of being taken down.

The team was fanning out, spreading his attention across a wider distance as they slunk towards him. He glanced over his shoulder at the tube where Lupo was only half-formed. The lower half of his body was still only metal and ceramic instead of flesh—and Auren knew he had to buy his maybe-savior some more time. He felt he

owed him that much. Even if it meant compromising what he believed in. He'd do anything to survive.

"Come on guys. I'm sure we can come to some sort of agreement," Auren begged.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your head, synth; prepare to be wiped and rebooted," the pirate replied sternly.

The squad had nearly reached him. But before they could grab him, Auren kicked out more viciously than he'd meant to, shattering the nearest man's fragile knee into a mess of gore and pain. He stared at the damage, aghast.

"By the stars!" One of the pirates screamed.

The others looked from their comrade's crumpled leg to the gore splattered across Auren's naked body and ran from the room. The fallen man was mumbling something incoherently. He scraped and pulled himself across the floor with his arms, his destroyed leg dragging limply behind him as he did so.

Auren fell to the ground and sobbed at the sight of what he'd become.

Behind him, there was a vssssssssssp of decompression and then the sound of plodding wet footsteps across the carbon floor before a warm, damp hand fell on his back. He flinched at the touch, feeling unable to move or to speak once more as he wallowed in the horror of what he'd just gone through.

A familiar voice, deeper and lower than it had been in his head, murmured in his ear.

"Get up, soldier. We're getting you out of here." Lupo pulled him to his feet and brushed the hair out of his face.

He was older than Auren. Taller. His hair was dark, and his frame hairy and chiseled. He was handsome. And he held Auren at arm's length and looked into his eyes now with genuine-seeming concern. Auren had rarely been looked at like that by anyone save his brother.

"I promised you that you could trust me. I mean to keep that promise. Now, are you good to go?"

"Yeah. I'm good." Auren said weakly. He was still sniffing though. And his body was simulating the experience frustratingly accurately.

"Alright then. There are flight suits in the cabinets over here. Get dressed, and let's get out of here."

"But where are we going?" Auren protested, even as Lupo slipped into one of the aforementioned suits.

"The pirate king who runs this operation uses his private yacht to transport contraband across this region. It's currently docked with the resurrection ship. Don't worry; the ship's crew has already been dealt with. All we need to do is stroll aboard and kick-off."

"Dealt...with?" Auren asked hesitantly.

"Vented straight into the void. Like I said, they're murderers and thugs." Lupo waited patiently as Auren stumbled in to his suit.

He couldn't know if he'd traded one enemy for another. Auren eyed Lupo wearily. But the big man stared at him levelly, unrepentant for his vengeance. And the transparency of his vendetta was oddly compelling.

“I promise you can trust me. I might be angry. But I’m not cruel.” Lupo assured.

Auren looked around the lab and realized with glum disbelief he didn’t have a better option. And so he went along with the man who had just murdered people with his own hands.

“Let’s get out of here.” Auren relented.

The pair set off.

“Stay close,” Lupo whispered.

They ducked under a window that opened into the resurrection ship’s mess hall. Within, a security team was performing sweeps.

“I disabled the internal sensors before you downloaded me back into my body.” Lupo explained.

They scampered on. An intersection in the hallway up ahead was marked with an indicator for the docking bay. Auren finally allowed himself a breath of relief as they approached one of a few docking tubes. Like all the doors before, it slid open for them.

Auren looked around nervously, and Lupo tried to be patient with him but failed.

“Are you coming or not?” Lupo implored, waving him along from within the tube.

To his relief, Auren followed him inside.

Lupo had memorized the ship’s schematics a week ago when it docked with the resurrection ship. He grinned as they boarded it. The vessel was even more luxurious than he’d imagined. A sleek axial hallway ran the span of the thing. On one end, a command bridge and viewing cone awaited him. On the other, an Alcubierre drive and bridge room sat empty and idle. The craft’s medbay, fabrication unit, and living accommodations were exactly where he’d expected to find them, filling the space between the ship’s two ends.

Lupo let out a little whoop. It felt good to be alive. It felt good to be. He ran his finger along the wood grain of the ship's wall as he wandered to the hallway. Auren was trailing him silently, likely thinking him quite mad. But Lupo didn't care. He giggled as he noticed the soft piano music filtering in from the ship's speakers. Compared to the silence and limitation of the years he'd spent out of body—this was all a miracle.

“You said this was a pirate's ship?” Auren asked. He'd expected something less...executive.

“Was a pirate's ship. It's ours now. Let's get the fuck out of here!” Lupo yipped.

Auren had followed him to the ship's bridge. Lupo hopped into the command chair, pulled up the control display, and began hacking into the ship's command unit. Like all of the pirate's systems thus far—it was no match for his naval intelligence training, and a pleasant chime sounded as he transferred flight control over to himself.

“You want to sit down for this part of things.” Lupo warned Auren.

He began to disembark from the resurrection ship immediately. There was a clunk as their vessel decoupled itself from the other. Then Lupo knowingly fired their maneuvering thrusters at far too high a setting this close-in, searing open huge holes across the larger vessel's surface as they angled away.

He laughed maniacally as he did so, imagining all the pain he was preventing these assholes from perpetuating by shutting down their little scheme once and for all.

This is for you, Bartie. He thought with a flash of feral hatred.

“Stop! What are you doing?!” Auren yelled.

But Lupo couldn't stop. He'd promised himself he'd do this the moment he was able

years ago.

Lupo fired the ship's cannons before the resurrection ship could reply in kind—aiming for where he'd memorized the reactor to be and pounding holes across into its hull. There was a flash, and then a chain reaction of explosions caused the bulk of the vast reincarnation ship's innards to erupt into the vacuum as it wrenched apart. It was impossible not to see the bodies of pirates arcing out in the expanding field of ice and doom. Lupo swung them away spectacle, pushing the engines to the maximum as they outpaced the shockwave of destruction expanding out into the void.

“Hang on!” Lupo yelled.

He spooled up their Albucierre drive and prepared to jump into hyperspace before they were overtaken by shrapnel.

Directly ahead, two pirate destroyers blinked into local space. A flurry of red alert symbols immediately flared across the viewscreen.

“What are those?!” Auren cried.

“Nuclear missiles.” Lupo murmured.

He was redirecting all power to the engines now. He'd even dropped the shields and momentarily killed life support to accelerate the drive spooling up.

“Multiple warheads incoming. Restore power to point defense immediately.” The ship computer warned.

Auren screamed in terror.

“Impact in 5...4...3...2...1...” The ship's computer counted.



And then, to Lupo's utter amazement, they blinked out. All at once, the viewscreen was delightfully cleared of all its warnings. Nothing but a field of stars whirled beyond as they channeled across the hyperlane on autopilot toward the place Lupo had almost abandoned the idea of returning to: Thestle.

"Yo, serial killer, mind telling me where we're going?" Auren demanded. He leaned down beside Lupo and stared out at the stars. His mouth fell open.

"Holy shit," he gasped, watching as space flew by at a truly mind-numbing rate.

"I'm sorry. I swear before all of this I was a kind man." Lupo said. He hoped Auren could believe him.

"Where are you taking us?" Auren asked after a time. He'd sat down cross-legged on the floor beside him and was still raptly watching the stars as though he'd never seen them before.

"Thestle," Lupo replied.

"It's 6 days transit. I can help you enable realistic settings if you'd like to maintain a more natural schedule, or I can deactivate whichever you don't want to burden yourself. Personally, I think the more realistic we keep our simulations, the more human we'll remain. What that says about me after what I've been through...I'm not sure." Lupo grinned.

Auren looked at him with eyes that seemed to want to trust but couldn't manage it.

The younger man rubbed his chin thoughtfully, closed his eyes, and rocked slightly as though he were coming to terms with some tremendous inner conflict. He wiggled his feet anxiously, rubbing one atop the other as he considered his options.

Lupo let him think.

“I’ll do the natural thing, too. I don’t know if I trust you yet. But I think I’m starting to.” He said quietly.

And that was more than enough for Lupo, who was thankful for the company.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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