

## VIII

Gia woke up to a night sky. She felt mosquito bites all over her body. Which in someways was a good sign. They're not essentially to the ecosystem but an indication of a healthy or at least healing one. Gia focused on the stars and listened the toads sing their alien songs. Toads were also an indication on a healthy ecosystem. Gia preferred them. A cat gently purred on her belly. Her feral friend Yano was now awake. He stretched and vocalized a brief acknowledgement. Gia brushed his cheeks with one finger.

Gia sat up and scratched her forearms. The light in the tent was on. Over the months, Ava and Gia had slowly transitioned there tent to go from holding in the heat for winter to keeping out the bugs for summer. A gnat flew up her nose as she breathe in. Gia looked forward to the entering a space where these tiny robotic fairies where not. As she got up Yano looked as though he wanted to be carried. Gia obliged.

Gia was surprised by it but Aims asked her to unlink. That the familiarity of Gia's presents was getting in the way maybe. Things had certainty gone to shit. Gia heard music coming from the tent. Ava's movements were terse. Gia didn't look forward to the coming interaction but there was no way to avoid it.

Halfway there her foot dropped into a gopher hole. Their bodies separated with the combined effort of Yano jumping and Gia throwing. Gia put a hand forward. As the ground came to meet her, she noticed her left pinky was bare. There was sudden pain then nothing.

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Emily sat in a the gazebo of a triangular park near the library. She knew the neighborhood and had even talked with Danny in this spot before. He and her were never really close, mostly in adjacent circles. He was the first person she'd done in person antifascist work with. Which is 90% online research and 5% in person research.

It was years ago, they sat outside a university lecture hall and pretended to smoke and show each other things on their phones. She felt unsafe during that action and decided that that 5% wasn't for her. Some young guy in a not well fitting suit and baseball hat got a recording of her face that night. It was before COVID so wearing a mask would have drawn attention.

She didn't really know this guy. Or what he's capable of. Drugging her apparently and subjecting her to whatever that was. She needed to leave that space and be somewhere she decided to be. She saw him exit the library looking around. Her hand wrapped around her mace

hidden in her pocket. They made eye connect. She chose were spot to be visible. There were several escape routes. This was all stuff he taught her. *Fucking creep.*

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Danny was holding it together. Reality around him wasn't though. Since he first linked he stated getting episodes of collapsing perception. That wasn't something he could find any information on. Not that he had told anyone. Aims was so hesitant because of what happened to him. If he told her or anyone she connected with, she might have called off the plan.

An advantage to having a mind shattered by a time travelling fungal goddess is she couldn't seem to know his thoughts at any level. Even basic communication was energy intensive apparently. This was good. He hated his Goddess.

He burned the skin that their mycelium could connect to daily. Every morning it healed rapidly and became functional again. So he burnt it again. He wore a bandage over it. The skin was supposed to be covered after all. The burning was something also that no one knew about. Burning help with the episodes. He wished Emily wasn't looking so intently at him. He needed to burn.

He knew that she'd book it if she lost in of sight of him. She sat under a worn down wooden windmill once used to pump water. His mind wasn't seeing reality. He hoped she was really there. As he approach into tackling distance has saw that she and Aims merged to have the same appearance. Was he seeing Aims? or was memories of Aims now containing Emily. It didn't matter. He knew that at least in this moment their hatred was mutual. There was a relief in that.

"May I approach so we can speak softly?" Daniel asked. She had a weapon. He could sense it. His body tensed ready to attack.

"Don't touch me again. Ever. And yes if you must." She said. She had no eyes. Just two holes to deep nothingness. It made looking at her horrid face easier.

He sat down at the bench so that her throat was just in arms reach. He lit a cigarette, inhaled and began coughing. She seemed bemused by that. He hated that smile. "What did you see?" He asked.

A plaster mask of a stern look covered her face. She needn't bother. He could see her terror that her eye holes betrayed. "A bunch of bullshit. Some video your cult made."

"A video. Why does that got you so scared then?"

She scooted away. Now out of reach. He couldn't move closer yet. "What the fuck dude. What's wrong with you? Why did you drug me?"

He was regretting the honesty play. It might have costed Emily her life. It would be a shame. "Had to. For you to link with her." He said. The look on her face, Aims' retched mask, told him she did see Aims. Maybe that's why there faces were now the same. Maybe Aims infected her mind too.

"What is she?"

"A monster" he let slip.

"Why did you drug me so I could link with a monster? Why did you assault me?"

Daniel realized he didn't know which action she referred to when she said assault. "Your useful. That's it really. I thought you'd be up to the task. So I invited you. We don't have the luxury of informed consent. Too much is at stake."

"Assholes like you always saw shit like that. Without consent we build nothing good."

"It doesn't need to be good. It just needs to be dynamic. We're barreling toward a static world. A world without life."

"That's alarmist bullshit. Justifications for the heinous shit you're doing."

"You didn't make it to that part I see. Yes I see that in you now. A confidence that the sun will rise tomorrow. Comfortable self assured denial. The world is ending soon Emily. Sooner than you think."

"Wow. You are actually insane. How did I never see that. Fuck man I looked up to you for some dumb ass reason. Some bullshit you said and didn't mean actually help me eat after weeks of struggling. Probably just telling me some shit you read from some zine or something. The action, the work, was any of that real. All just felt like smoke and mirror and nothing happening. Everything was need to know and I never did. And I still did shit with you. For you really. I never felt close to your equal. I hate your ass. Fuck you." She spit in his face. Maybe literally. Reality was soup.

His mind clicked in clarity. If he jumped up and stepped toward the middle of the platform, he could pivot and pounce either direction she moved. "Yeah. I was fucked up before. It's worse now. Though the processed changed you to. I can see that. Damage can see damage. And we are both shattered. I oversaw that happening to you. Contrived your participation. I knew the possibility for a bad reaction. And you've had that bad reaction. Like I had. Your mind isn't working as it used to." He inched closer. "Right now reality is fracturing. You aren't drugged anymore. But still your mind has forgone false stability." She was frozen. He inched even closer. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"You did-" She trailed off. "I want to kill you. Rip out those bloated, smoldering eyes. And tear into your throat." She said ready to do just that. Then a moment of self awareness slipped through her. He jumped into action and landed on top of her. His hand covering her mouth. She bite down hard and black sludge oozed out of him. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and slammed it into the pulsating tumor on the back of her hand that was clawing at him. A muted scream and her body rived in pain. Then she stopped and looked at him passively. He collapsed next to her. And took a breathe. He pulled out his lighter and lit another cigarette. Took a drag then put it out on his uncovered wound.

The thin veil of reality reconfigured to something stable. "Burning helps" he said. "You can kill me if you like now." He turned to face her but no one was there. He looked down at the deep bite marks in his hand. He looked back to the library.

The human who inappropriately vouched for him was leaving. They scared, almost running. They had seen something. He got up and planned the intercept route in his head. He needed to find out what they saw that got them so scared. He didn't want to have two security risk running around.

He had to ensure the others safety. That was his role. Before long he found himself in front of them. They were looking back toward the library, now out of view, as he rapidly approached them from the front. He then bummed right into them.

"Shit I'm so sorry." He said with a charming smile and offered a hand up to the now less frighten human.

"You were at that meeting right? I saw you go out with that one girl who looked upset." they explained. "I regretted not leaving my contact and figured the meeting had ended so I went back to the room. And- and everyone was just asleep. I checked their pulses. It looked unnatural and was creepy. I just left. What is going on?" They looked at him concerned but there was something else. They were attracted to him.

His mind raced to find an explanation but none came. "Why don't-"

"Jeez man what happened to your arm." They said. He placed his right hand over the teeth marks hoping they hadn't noticed.

"Yeah jeez that's a bleeder. I slipped and fell down. Wasn't supposed to leave the meeting. Was hurrying back and well I guess I should have been more careful. And-"

"My cars nearby and I have a med-kit. We need to stop that bleeding."

"I really need to get back. I will be fine."

"Don't be crazy. You're literally dripping blood everywhere."

They were right. In his hurry to intercept he hadn't noticed. A trail of blood drips lay behind him. "Fine. Your right he relented. The pain is pretty bad actually."

"I bet." They seemed in their element now. They needed something that made sense and that they could handle.

"Where's your car?" He asked and desperately search his brain for some explanation for everything they had seen.

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Aims separated the six that remained into two groups of three. She cycled between two stable vibes rapidly searching for an anchor they all shared. She found it: night, day, earth, stars, stillness. The six appeared on the surface of the moon. The vibrant blue earth in view, the sun shone and caste long shadows as it set on the lunar horizon. Stars peaked there way into view and an over saturated band of the milk way filled the sky. The air was warm and still. They wore jumpsuits that felt spacey to Aims and they could breathe the air of embellished lunar surface.

"So we're on the moon. Because this isn't reality. It's a sort of simulation I'm trying to make it stable and feel safe." Aims said.

"Wh-Where's Emily" Ron said.

"She asked to leave the simulation. You can too if you like. But I hope you will stay so I can show you what I came to. Does anyone want to leave?" She asked. They were all silent.

Possum jumped and notice that this was lunar gravity. The others jumped to and Aims joined in. "So why are we on the moon?" Lisa asked.

"It's a place everyone here would feel safe." Aims said.

"So this is a simulation? How?" Ron asked while jumpy. Possum manged a back flip behind him.

"I am not human. I can only communicate through a neuralink. I created this simulation to facilitate that communication."

Mark and Danielle started to dance a bouncy dance. Jean sat down tired. "If you're not human then are you an Alien?" Jean asked.

"Basically" Aims said. "Today was just about testing to see if communication was possible. I'm low on energy. The simulation will end soon. And in real time several hours will have past. Time works differently here."

Danielle asked "When will we come back?"

"Daniel, not you, but the nervous guy that started the meeting. He'll be there when you wake up. And give you next steps." Aim said. "I hope to see each of you again."

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The six were waking up now. Twenty four minutes left of the reservation. Daniel hoped no one else had found their way in here during his absence. His bite wound was bandaged and burn mark covered. He placed all that damage behind his back. The six looked around.

"Was that real?" One asked.

"Yeah you remember we were on the moon?" Another said.

"Yeah I did a back-flip" A third added.

"If you would like to attend," Daniel started. "our next meeting will be in a more secure place."

"Where?"

"That's for the six of you to pick out." He said. "Who would like to be the point of contact?"

They looked at each other. One looked at him and stepped forward. He met her and gave her a card. "Message that contact to discuss the when and where and I will show up so you six can link again. Please discuss amongst yourselves. I will leave you now." Daniel moved toward the door while keeping his arm out of sight.

"That's it?"

"That it." Daniel responded and left. He had work to do now. Earlier he secured one of the safety risks. Now he needed to hunt down the other.