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**YOU
WEREN'T
MEANT
TO BE
HUMAN**

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FIRST TRIMESTER

ONE

Crane doesn't know this yet, but he's been pregnant for almost three months already.

TWO

Crane didn't say *yes* to this, though maybe that isn't the best choice of words. Crane doesn't say anything if he can help it. And he wouldn't have written it out, either, scrawled proof of consent like an exploited porn actor under duress, *I agreed to this I swear*. He stopped speaking for a reason. Writing it down defeats the point.

But Levi is still putting him over the manager's desk, a hand to the back trapping him between a broken printer and the security camera monitor, and his jeans are down to his thighs and there are bruises under his jaw, and he can't bring himself to care about if he agreed or not.

Behind him, Levi mumbles, "Stay down."

Is Levi still smoking back there? He doesn't think so but it

smells like it. God, that'd be hot, if he was—use the dips between the vertebrae as an ashtray, fuck up the cheap tattoo there with a scar, it'd look so good. Levi's body heat warms the bare backs of Crane's thighs.

Crane whines. It's pathetic.

There are sticky notes pasted around the security camera monitor, little things for him to focus on while Levi unbuckles his belt—the telltale jingle of metal on metal, the low rasp of the zipper. *Last feeding June 2. Reorder cigs. Y'all stop dying or we won't have no one to work the day shift.* That last one's a joke. Or Crane thinks it is. The gas station's never kept regular hours.

Then there're the camera feeds. The front lot with the gravel and pumps, the dark smudge of the road almost visible after nightfall but not quite. The sales floor with the register and self-serve coffee machines, currently unattended. The manager's office camera looking down at their backs. The locked room with the hive of worms and flies.

Levi grabs Crane's hips and pushes inside him. No condom, no lube, no foreplay to get him wet, besides the hand around his throat thirty seconds ago. It hurts. Crane lurches forward, gasps, nearly knocks the monitor off the desk. Levi steadies it. His thumb is on the screen by the hive, covering where blood's gummed up the tile grout.

“Easy,” Levi says with that throaty rasp guys get when they're finally inside halfway-decent pussy. “God, you feel good.”

He's right. It feels good. It stings, burns the way it does when you're unprepared as hell, but that's half the point, and Crane watches himself get fucked raw on the security camera monitor

because he can't get off unless he feels sick to his stomach about the whole thing.

That's how it's gone for as long as they've been together. Levi shoving him against a wall, pushing fingers between his teeth, and Crane taking it whether he wants to or not, because it's not as good if he gets a choice. Levi smells like Marlboro Reds and the gun cleaner he uses on his Mossberg 12-gauge. When he fucks, his dog tags clink together. Crane gets the idea that Levi likes the sound of it, and that's okay, he does too. Fine, he'll spread his legs as much as he can, hobbled by his jeans, whimper like a bitch in heat, reach down to get himself off. He can be a man while there's another man's cock in his pussy, if that's what he wants to call himself. Sure.

Something moves on the security camera, and it's not them.

Crane scans the cameras in a blur, tries to clock where he saw it but can't. He reaches behind him to get Levi to stop, hold on, he saw something, but Levi grabs his wrist and wrenches it behind his back. It throws Crane off-balance. He slams cheek-first into the desk, and his teeth cut the inside of his mouth.

"The hell you fighting for?" Levi rasps, suddenly so close to his ear. Still fucking him. Doesn't even break rhythm. God, that feels good, *please*— "Thought you liked when it hurt."

He does. He does he does. Never mind the screen, it doesn't matter, it can't be that important. He wants Levi to use the bruises on his throat as a map of where to put his hand again, squeeze until his vision goes black at the edges. Or, or he can struggle again, make a fuss, see if Levi might call him a *faggot*, because there's nothing quite like a slur to really make his cunt throb.

Unfortunately, when the monitor flickers again, he catches it.

A person. An indistinct column with a head and four limbs at the edge of the front lot camera 1, shambling up the gravel drive from Corridor H to the pumps.

And, on back room camera 5, the hive is awake.

Shit. Shit, *shit*.

Crane straightens up. Shifts his weight back, jams his free elbow against Levi's ribs. *Let go*. But Levi doesn't get it; doesn't see the monitor, doesn't grasp the situation, whatever. He grunts, "What are you—" and slaps a hand over Crane's face to hold him still.

So Crane bites.

"*Jesus!*" Levi pulls out with a sudden wet sound, backs away, and yanks up his pants like there're other things Crane might be keen on biting.

There aren't. Crane is too busy catching his breath, trying to cover up.

Crane's going to regret this later, but that's fine. He's looking forward to it.

"What?" Levi barks. As if shocked that the autistic guy he's been using as a sex toy for two years is acting like an autistic. A mark is blooming on Levi's hand. The imprint of each tooth is already black. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Crane points to the security camera monitor.

Levi strong-arms him out of the way and tilts the screen to a better angle. While Crane readjusts the padding of his sports bra and zips up his jeans, Levi inspects the feed of the manager's office, the two of them in the dark surrounded by files and old boxes and cleaning supplies, then the front lot, then the hive.

Levi says, "New girl, huh?"



Crane is not the best person to greet a terrified and potentially unwell stranger, but better him than Levi. Levi talks about putting down defectors the same way hunters brag about bagging deer. He drinks too much. He'd been dishonorably discharged and only ever mentioned it to bitch about getting caught; what he did, Crane refuses to ask, but when he comes home with blood on his shirt, it's hard not to mull over the possibilities.

In comparison, then, Crane is the safer option. The boyish half-androgyny of twenty months' testosterone therapy—sparse facial hair, yesterday's eyeliner, almost-but-not-quite flat-chested, and a little too feminine around the mouth—places him squarely in the territory of *not a threat, probably*. It's just the dull stare and unblinking silence that throws people off and, well. This person will have to deal with it.

The girl is halfway across the parking lot when Crane steps out to meet her.

She's barefoot and glassy-eyed, one tank top strap slipping off her dirty shoulder. Hasn't showered in a while, given the state of her hair. The shitty fluorescent lights make it difficult to tell bruises from shadows. She's limping too. Feet are bleeding.

She walked here, then. From where? The closest town is a few miles up the mountain, but if she was from Washville, he would've recognized her.

She sees him and stops.

He waits a moment to see if she starts talking. She doesn't.

Down the gravel driveway, on the easternmost stretch of West Virginia's Corridor H, a truck grumbles past, headed toward the state line. To one side of them, there's old forest; one minute's walk to the other, the condemned livestock exchange. Nobody else for a good long while.

Crane's stomach hurts. He'd been in her place once, three years ago. Creeping too close to his eighteenth birthday, drunk for the first and only time in his life in the high school parking lot, striking matches and letting them burn out. He'd accepted a spot at a top state school earlier that year—majoring in political communication—and graduated salutatorian that morning. The packing list for his dorm was taped to the fridge, and while his classmates kicked off the rest of their lives at the school-sponsored YMCA grad party, there he was in the dark alone, trying to figure out the logistics of self-immolation.

All his childhood prayers had fallen through. There'd never been a car accident or building fire to do the hard part for him. Time was up. Childhood was over, the real world was knocking on the door, and he was tired. He was too scared to die, but he needed it to stop, and it was then or never.

But even after years of fantasizing and hoping and begging God, he still didn't have the guts to do it.

That's when the swarm found him. Because that's what happens: it finds you. By the time it makes you an offer, it already knows you won't say no, and then you end up in front of a strange building, hours from home in the middle of the night, with blood in the back of your throat and burns on your fingertips.

Same story every time, it seems.

Crane takes one cautious step forward, then another. The girl in the parking lot wavers, looking warily over her shoulder like she's thinking of running. Nope. She made her choice. Running won't do her any good.

He clicks his tongue to get her attention and holds up a bottle of water. *Here*, the gesture says.

"Who—?" she says, sounding sick, like she has a head cold.

The bottle gets a shake. *Come on. For you.*

She blinks, then picks her way through the sharp gravel to accept it. It takes a few tries to get the bottle open, but when she does, she sucks it down like she hasn't had a drop for days. When she has to stop to wheeze for air, she pours some onto her face. She splutters, blinking, and aha, there she is. Wild with hunger and confusion. Alive.

She starts to cry.

He'd cried too.

"Thank you," she sobs, "thank you," and Crane stands in the dark, looking past her to the road and rubbing the scar on his wrist, because he can't stand to look someone in the eye.



If he'd actually gotten the guts to do it that night, to actually set the match to something instead of shaking it out every time the flame licked his fingers, how would it have gone?

His burning—*Sophie's* burning, the brown-haired girl in a Forever 21 dress, the sweet female-thing that had existed in Crane's place for so many years—had been premeditated to a degree worthy of

institutionalization. She knew she wanted only the face to burn. That was the most bang for her buck, or more accurately, the most visible damage in the least amount of time. She also knew she was a coward, and did not have the willpower to go up in stoic silence like a monk or the activists lighting themselves up in rows on the Capitol steps. The face was enough; it would have to do.

Maybe she would've siphoned gas from the car's tank to smear across her cheeks, or the liquor she'd been choking down would work. The logistics weren't important. What's *important* was that she burned. The scars would be permanent, and she would be free. She'd already written a speech in her Notes app for her future doctor, explaining exactly why she didn't want reconstructive surgery. It's expensive, she'd say, and extra stress on a delicate part of a human body, and it's not worth it, and *I don't want you to do it, please don't fix it, if you fix it I'll do it again, I'll do it again I swear I will.*

She'd say, *I'm sorry I didn't have the words to say it any other way.*



Crane leads the girl inside, turns off the OPEN sign, and locks the door. She's worse up close. White face discolored like it'd been beaten in, fingers bloody and broken-nailed. Her feet track a red-brown mess.

Is Levi still in the office? Thank god. Give her a second to get it together without him.

"Sorry," she snuffles. "You probably just mopped, too. I'm Jess."

Crane shrugs, because that statement presumes he isn't used to cleaning up bodily fluids, and reaches behind the register to bring out