

# MOST THINGS

Rich Larson

**Rich Larson was born in Niger, has lived in Spain and Czech Republic, and is currently based in Canada. His new collection *Changelog* drops September 2025 from Fairwood Press. In the meantime, enjoy the quantum chaos of “Most Things,” his latest and greatest SFnal thriller, in which two hired guns and a whistleblowing scientist try to stay one step ahead of her dangerous employer . . . and the transdimensional monster she’s unwittingly unleashed.**

“**T**he new millennia is the Trojan horse of the old . . .” Arvo takes a neat little puff off his vape. “And older still, the sling of it unborn. Jeff Bien.” His construction-gnarled knuckle taps his temple. “Got that one memorized.”

We’re highway driving, and I’m almost too high to make conversation. I breathed too deep from that same vape, and earlier I ate a half-crushed handful of shrooms from the baggie in the glove compartment, so that plus the beers and the blow has me all kinds of fucked up.

It’s always been my stance that different highs need different words, and for this one I need a word that is a living yellow-black swamp whirling through space, churning up vacuum, extending feelers and tendrils into every fold of my brain.

“What’s it mean?” I ask him.

“Means nothing changes, Mack,” Arvo says. “Means machine learning is just a digital ant colony, and all this shit about the Slip is a dead end, and the Anthropocene is just one more link in the entropic chain. Means we’re all just swapping carbon till the heat death.”

It’s another hot muggy night, but with the windows rolled up, with the aircon roaring and vape smoke swirling, we float in a refrigerated mist. I can just barely make out the comets of streetlamps streaking past.

“You’re ruining your own birthday, man,” I tell Arvo. “Shut up and cut us a rail.”

Arvo says I’m always invalidating other people’s feelings as a way to keep mine in check. Arvo’s got analyses for days. But I do, too—I’m just less of a show-off about it. That’s why we got to be friends, I think. Plus we were the only two drywallers who weren’t full-on meth heads.

“I have never been ruined,” Arvo says. “I am the sum of a thousand ruins. That’s, uh, that’s Jane Craven.”

He laughs his burbling laugh, wedges his phone between his kneebones. Arvo was always a thinker, which is why he washed out early from the navy. I didn't really take to it until prison, where everything slows drastically down.

"One more big job," I decide. "Then we're halfway clear on the debt, and we can take a vacation. You need a vacation."

"Think I might," he says, staring forward into the dark. "Yeah. Yeah, we could go to the coast. See the sea. It's not even that far."

Arvo taps the last of our blow onto the phone screen, shaping it into a skinny white worm, and I realize something important.

"Arvo," I say. "In your state, you shouldn't be driving."

He hemisects the worm, snorts his half, thumbs his nostril. "You're driving, though."

I look down at my hands, which are pillowy crackly things, and see they're wrapped around a steering wheel. "Fuck," I say. "So I am."

I jolt. Arvo hollers. Then we remember it's on auto, and nobody's driving, and we laugh and laugh and Arvo nearly drops his phone passing it to me. When I snort the last of the powder off its screen there's a notification waiting underneath. I recognize the cipher: darkmarket contract, high pay, medium risk.

We haven't done a kidnap before, but the high tells me it's a good idea. The high wants for smashed-in doors and squealing rubber. I show Arvo the screen.

"Big job," I say. "Happy fucking birthday."

He hesitates, then his lips peel back off a grin.

The contract only gives us a face and location, but I always get curious, so I put her wrinkly little mug into the net and get back a name: Dr. Shayna Gripsin. She's a quantum biologist, which me and Arvo agree sounds made-up, currently working for Phobos Labs. We're supposed to grab her on her way to work, then take her to a specific south-end apartment, then fuck off.

We're only twenty minutes from the intercept point, so there's no time to get sober. I upload the car directions while Arvo builds us a gun from the individually fabbed components we keep stashed in the upholstery. As they clack together I get the idea that if he were to put them in the opposite order, it would build a gun that brings people back to life, but I know that's the high so I don't say it.

"I'm not loading it," he says, clicking the trigger guard into place. "Display model only."

"I know," I say.

Sometimes I think Arvo thinks of me as bloodthirsty, because of that first job and how it ended. He's ex-navy and I'm ex-con, like I said, so when oil died and took construction work with it, going darkmarket was the only thing that made sense. Some dealing, some thieving. We made some amateur mistakes, back at the start.

"I read this trick," he says, passing me the finished weapon. "For fostering more positive communication. Whenever you want to say *I know*, you say *you're right* instead."

"That's fucking stupid," I tell him, sighting down the barrel, aiming at the negative space of the dash between my feet.

"Fuck you, Mack," he says.

"Fuck you, too, Arvo."

The car glides down an exit ramp, and suddenly we're in the pines, dark bristly towers on each side of us. The doctor has a scenic commute, though she is probably not enjoying it today. I can see the hump of a stalled-out car up ahead, hazard lights blinking in the morning mist. Whoever did the hack pulled her politely onto the shoulder first.

We pull in politely behind her, and as I reach for my mask I get a semantic lurch

in my brain. Suddenly everything, from the ochre light-pollution sky to the glowing numerals on Arvo's phone to the placement of my feet on the rubber carmat, feels intensely familiar, quasi-religious.

"It feels like we've done this before," I say. "Doesn't it? Like this is—an archetype. Like we're reenacting something."

"It'll be easy, then," Arvo says through a spiny vertical maw.

He already has his holomask on, face replaced by a stylized Venus flytrap, maybe because we're kidnapping a biologist. I toggle mine to match. We have another laugh before we get out of the car, and this time it's like we're expunging bad gas from our bloodstreams, two divers in a decompression tank getting ready to surface.

"I circled risk beneath those fog-dulled stars," Arvo says. "I never took a goddamn thing too far. Erin Rodoni."

"That's what you got me for," I say. "On three. One. Two—"

We spill out on a gush of cool vapor. The cracks on the road are tarred over, and the high makes it look like flowing black magma. It streams downhill toward the doctor's car, and all we have to do is follow. I head driverside with the gun; Arvo heads passengerside in case she panics and tries to bug out that way.

But she doesn't look panicky when we swoop up on her. She has her seat fully reclined, her fingers laced over her stomach, eyes shut like she's meditating. She's older than her photo. Small and frail-looking, bones already shrinking down. I try the door, find the hacker unlocked it for us, and fling it open.

Her eyes fling open, too, and maybe it's been an all-nighter for all three of us because her whites are all red with burst capillaries. She pops upright, takes in the gun, the holomask. She gives a sigh of completely inappropriate relief.

"Right on time," she says. "Thank God."

I don't like that at all, and as Arvo would say I'm not the best at processing unexpected emotions. I drag her out more roughly than necessary, grab her phone from her hand and huck it into the woods. She gives me a betrayed look.

"No need for that," she says. "I'm coming."

I feel sort of bad, so I loosen my grip on her arm on the way to our car. Arvo has the trunk open and waiting for her. She brushes a burrito wrapper aside and clambers in, still very calm considering she's being kidnapped. I want to ask her to repeat that first thing she said, to make sure it wasn't my brain playing tricks on me. I want to tell Arvo something is wrong, and it's not just the high.

That's when a dirtbike soars out of the trees. It bounces from dirt to tarmac, slashes a tight turn that smears rubber across the highway, halts dead-center behind us. The electric motor barely mutters. I stare at the rider, who is clad in a bright orange jumpsuit and insectoid crash helmet, wondering if pre-dawn dirtbiking is a thing now, how everyone got into wild-swimming for a minute there.

"Oh, shit, shit, shit," our doctor says, groping for the inner handle of the trunk. "We need to go! We need to—"

Arvo slams the trunk shut, either to oblige her or in hopes the rider didn't already spot her. He's still watching us, unmoving, so I show him the gun.

"Off with you," I say.

The helmet comes off instead, and even in the dim I can tell something is deeply, deeply odd about what's underneath. The rider's got long lank hair falling down his forehead, hiding his eyes behind a black curtain. But even though the night's just as muggy as before, not a puff of wind, the hair is moving, sort of slithering—

"Mack." Arvo's voice is urgent, even through the digital distortion. "Let's get in the car. Buddy might have already called the cops."

I don't think buddy has, but the empty gun feels emptier than ever, and all my

spinal fluid is turning to icy slush. There is no reason I can think of to dramatically take your helmet off and then act all menacing and silent like that unless you are a slasher-flick lunatic.

"Don't follow us," I tell the rider, backing toward my door. "Or you're fucking dead."

The rider doesn't answer, just sits back on his bike and takes a deep shuddering breath. Then he moans, and even though it's summer all this steam comes gushing out his mouth, like he's working in a meat freezer.

That plus the sound make my insides suddenly feel like frozen meat, too. I have to take my eyes off him when I climb inside the car, but I find him in the rearview cam. We start driving, and he stays straddling the bike, and I am appropriately relieved when he finally shrinks out of sight.

I toggle my mask off and turn to Arvo, to ask him if he saw the same shit I saw, but Arvo's already turned to me.

"Breath shouldn't frost like that," he says. "Not when it's this warm."

I nod. "You see his hair? The way it moved?"

"His fingers, too." Arvo looks worriedly at his own. "Wiggly. Like there's no joints."

I missed that little detail, but it only adds to the massing unease. "And this doctor in the trunk," I say. "Feels like she arranged her own kidnap, does it not?"

"Does," Arvo says, eyes back on the road. "But it doesn't matter."

"We can ask her," I say. "Ask her about the dirtbiker, too."

"It doesn't matter, Mack. Let's just get her to the spot and get home." He rubs his temple. "This was a really bad idea."

"That's the comedown talking," I say, because I can feel my own lurking, the twitchy exhaustion that will hit like a load of bricks unless we get more blow. "It was a medium-bad idea." I pass him the gun. "Just in case, though, Arvo."

He clenches his jaw, but opens the chamber. The doctor rustles in the trunk.

It's another ugly sunrise. Atomic yellow, slashing up over the dead refineries and empty warehouses, seeping into the hazy skyline until it's colored like chlorine gas. Light finds all the trash and demolition rubble and unimaginative graffiti. I keep watch on the rearview cam, but there's no sign of anyone following us south-side.

We park in an alley behind the prescribed apartment block, and when I get out of the car every square inch of glass or aluminum is somehow at the perfect angle to shank my eyeballs with reflected sunlight. That's the comedown hitting. I slide my holomask on and the tint helps a little.

"Nothing new on the screen," Arvo mutters, waving his phone. "Still says hand-off."

I go around to pop the trunk, catching a bad whiff of human shit on the way. Nobody's in the alley but us, which lends some more weight to my self-kidnap theory. When I open the back the doctor is staring up at me, arms folded sarcophagus-style.

"39 Observatory Road?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say, and I tamp down my curiosity because I know Arvo wants to be done with this. "Out."

She clammers out of the trunk, scanning up and down the empty alley. "This isn't right," she says. "Someone's supposed to be meeting me." She pulls a second phone out of her pocket, which makes me feel stupid for not properly frisking her, and taps out a number. "This is not ideal," she says, half-whispering. "This is not ideal."

"We did our bit," I say. "So sign off on the contract, and next time don't use dark-market to get a fucking cab ride."

"Other plans fell through," she says. "Were we—" She locks onto the metal dumpster across from us. "Do you hear that?"

I do: a tinny, jangling ringtone echoing up from inside. The semantic lurch hits me again, with a bit of a gut-lurch accompanying. As Dr. Gripsin crosses to the dump-

ster, I know that I have seen this scene before and that it's not a good one. She goes up on tiptoe to shove the lid open. The ringtone gets louder. The smell of human shit turns eye-watering.

"Oh," she says, faintly.

It's a body, has to be, but I go look anyway to get specifics. When I peer over the doctor's shoulder, I see the crumpled-up corpse of the man who was meant to be meeting her. There's a buzzing halo of flies around his shattered skull, a sticky coat of blood on his face, and, as smelled previously, he voided himself when he died.

It's the third body I've seen in my life, but the worst by far. I feel volcanic bile carving up through my chest and taste a bit of it leaking into my mouth. Dr. Shayna Gripsin gropes for the dead man's phone. Her arm is too short. I swallow hard, lean over to help. As soon as I have the phone pried from his stiff purplish fingers, I slam the dumpster shut.

Somewhere in the distance, the wail of a police siren suggests it's time to bug out, lie low, and leave the quantum biologist to her fate. That will almost certainly be Arvo's vote. He's clambering out of the car now, mask on, gun in hand, to see what's happening.

"Body in the dumpster," I tell him. "Someone all but blew his head off. High-caliber round."

"Oh," the doctor says again, not to me. She's still holding both ringing phones, like she can't decide from which end to end the call.

"This is the issue with darkmarket contracts," Arvo says, scratching his neck below the mask. "The issue with anonymizing everything. One day you're doing neighborhood drug-drops and next you're in the middle of a fucking cartel war."

But this isn't that. This is far from that. I can feel the certainty accumulating in my deep tissues like mercury: we have stumbled into something much more improbable and unsettling than a cartel war.

"We have to get out of here," Arvo says. "Come on. Let's make tracks."

"You're right," I say, to foster positive communication. "You're right. But if we leave without her, I feel like the dirtbiking maniac is going to find her, and he's going to make the very shortest work of her."

Arvo gives a staticky snort. The doctor seems to startle back to reality at the noise. She finally ends her call to her dead acquaintance, and looks up with watery eyes.

"I'd deserve it," she croaks. "I'm the one who brought it over."

"The dirtbike?" I demand. "You import dirtbikes?"

Then I hear the electric whine of a small engine, and when I turn to the mouth of the alleyway I see she's brought it again, and its rider, too, conjured them with just a mention.

"Brought it over from a place that shouldn't exist," the doctor says.

He guns his motor and hurtles straight at us.

It happens again.

We three in the alley, the fly-furred body in the dumpster, the rider barreling forward silhouetted by the scraped-red sunrise: it all becomes a passion play, or a sim on loop. The doctor tugs my arm, says something about the car before she turns and flees, but the semantic lurch bolts me in place and I can only watch my reflection blooming in the rider's shiny crash helmet as he bears down—

Three shots, pop-pop-pop. The report claps my head clear, and I dive left as the rider sloughs right, unbalanced by three mushroom rounds to the torso. His backwheel still clips me, spinning fast enough to smoke through the sole of my trailing shoe and take a patch of skin with it. I tumble upright screaming.

Arvo's in a proper stance, braced for recoil, gun cupped in both hands. Dr. Gripsin's

in a panic, lunging onto the driver's seat of the car, reaching for the ignition even though it's coded to me and Arvo only. The rider's in no apparent hurry, untangling himself from the mangled wreck of his bike. The blood weeping from his hole-punched chest looks more black than red. He reaches one arm in Dr. Gripsin's direction, fingers outstretched just a bit longer than fingers should be.

"Stay down!" Arvo howls at him. "Stay down or I shoot again!"

"Shoot again anyways," I say, because of the way the man's moving, the way he's bleeding, the thing the doctor said about a place that shouldn't exist.

"He's not armed," Arvo says. "I'm not going to shoot unless he . . ."

The rider's calf was pinned between two jagged metal bits; he drags it free with a long strip of jumpsuit fabric and flesh accompanying. That's not the scary bit. Anyone hopped up on adrenaline or combat drugs can do that. The scary bit is how the injured leg jumps and writhes, like a big rubbery worm with a mind of its own.

"Shoot him until he's dead," I say, feeling a cold and sudden clarity. "Otherwise we're dead."

"You're still high," Arvo grunts, and I wish it were true.

Then the car rumbles forward, meaning the doctor is good with her phone, at least. Arvo pivots to prevent the carjacking, and I'm tempted to make a grab for the gun. The rider is on hands and knees now, taking slow heavy breaths. Steam, or something thicker than steam, is leaking from under his helmet. If there was ever a time to shoot him in the head, it's now.

"Get in!" the doctor shouts from behind me, meaning that she never planned to carjack us, or else that she switched plans when Arvo pointed the gun at her. "There's cops and worse coming, and you can't kill him anyways."

The police siren is not distant anymore. That much is true. The other parts are unclear, particularly whether we're not permitted to kill him, or if it's physically impossible. But Arvo has the gun, and Arvo's stubborn, so now is not the time to find out. I take a last look at the rider, at my warped reflection in his crash helmet.

Then me and Arvo jump in the backseat, and Dr. Gripsin tears out of the alley at frankly irresponsible speeds.

"Who the fuck's that man, then?" Arvo demands, as soon as we can't hear sirens. "And why's he after you?"

He migrated to the front, forcing the doctor over into the passenger seat, but I stayed in back to inspect my foot. The bike tire scorched a hole through my shoe, shredded my sock, and left a raw red welt on the bottom of my foot. It won't feel nice to walk on, and there's no use asking the doctor for help since she's clearly the wrong kind.

"The man is nobody," Dr. Gripsin says. "He's the horse, not the rider."

"He was just riding a dirtbike," I point out, prodding around the edges of the welt. "He's clearly some kind of rider."

"I was being metaphorical," she says, snappish. "If you want literal, he's the host organism for a quantic parasite." She drills a finger against her temple. "At this point, he doesn't have enough of his own gray matter left for legal personhood."

"Just say that, then," I tell her. "Don't bring other forms of riding into it. Don't start talking about farm animals. It's fucking confusing."

"Agreed," Arvo says, drumming his fingers on the wheel, driving manual now to calm his nerves. "And what the fuck's a quantic parasite?"

Dr. Gripsin is doing something with the dead man's phone, linking it to hers. "Have you heard of the Slip?" she asks.

"Yes," Arvo says, at the exact same time I say no.

"You explain it," I say to him. "She's shit at explaining."

“That superlab in Kenya,” Arvo says. “The one where everyone died. They were trying to get into the Slip.” He takes a hand off the wheel to mime tossing garbage. “It’s all that quantum bullshit. Wormhole theory, Many Worlds Hypothesis. Stepping sideways into another reality.”

“They’ve been running experiments on a smaller scale over here,” Dr. Gripsin says. “In secret, of course. My employer was probably planning to kill me today, so I feel justified breaking NDA.” She does pause, though, and draw a big breath before she continues. “Phobos Labs made it into the Slip this time last year. The research drone brought back chemical samples containing a novel microorganism.”

I recall my pre-kidnap reconnaissance, her made-up sounding job.

“That means a new, very small lifeform,” she adds.

“I know,” I snap, not bothering with positive communication. “So you’re saying, what, a tiny alien took over that man’s body? And it loves dirtbiking?”

“Why are you fixated on the dirtbike?” Dr. Gripsin says, weary-sounding.

“Yeah, Mack,” Arvo says. “The dirtbike is nobody. The dirtbike is just a horse.”

I’m glad he’s got his sense of fun back, but it’s not helping me orient myself in this big strange mess. “How did it get a host in the first place?” I ask, suddenly suspicious. “Was he a test subject, or something?”

Dr. Gripsin flushes. “The exposure was accidental,” she says. “The samples were handled with full gear, artificial vacuum. We still don’t know how the contamination occurred.” She blinks. “But once we realized he was infected—yes. He volunteered to be our test subject.” She rubs her face, lets her veiny old eyelids flutter shut. “He always said he was on borrowed time anyway. Chemo wasn’t working out.”

“So the parasite took over his body,” Arvo interjects. “And now it’s after you. Why’s it after you?”

Dr. Gripsin’s eyes open. “I don’t know,” she says. “Everything’s been chaos. It escaped containment last night, but I didn’t get word til early this morning. O sent me the footage.” She swallows. “O being Otto Klymshyn. The dead man in the dumpster.”

I feel a little prickle of guilt for completely forgetting him.

“I called the director on my way to the lab,” she says. “I told him we needed to go public, for everyone’s sake. That’s when they stalled my car and said they were sending security to pick me up. Except I saw they also wiped me off the company books at the same time.” She inhales. “Would’ve taken too long to hack the car, and it’s full of trackers anyway, so I called for a ride.”

I recall the bullet hole in her coworker’s head, and the fact the rider never pulled a gun on us, or showed any signs of having one. If the company contracted the hit by darkmarket, me and Arvo might have even seen the job slide by while we were drinking.

“Jesus,” I say. “Who the fuck do you work for?”

“Obviously it’s a warlab,” Arvo says. “Military-funded.” He gives Dr. Gripsin a not-quite-accusing look. “That’s where the money is.”

“It wasn’t *obvious* when I first got the job,” Dr. Gripsin says, defiant—but how calm she’s being, how clear she’s thinking, sort of makes me suspect she’s worked with dangerous folk before. “They were interested in potential military applications of the parasite. O and I were already considering the whistleblower, and then, when the host escaped . . .”

“Company stalled your car, you called us in to kidnap you to safety, yeah.” I pause, recalling the rider’s dramatic entrance from the woods. “And the escaped test subject just happened to show up right when we did?”

“It knew, somehow,” Dr. Gripsin says. “We still don’t understand its capacities. Or its behaviors.” She shudders. “The first time it went full monstrosity mode, it tried to swallow me whole.”

Arvo looks over and mouths the words *monstrosity mode*, maybe just to test out the poetic potential. If I hadn't witnessed the rider's uncanniness in person, I would think this whole thing was her having a psychotic break. Even now, a small part of me is whispering the possibility that I got much, much higher than anticipated, and this is the peak of it, and Dr. Gripsin is not even truly in the car with us.

I poke her shoulder; she smacks my hand. The sting feels real enough.

"I need to get to the coast," she says, holding up a map on one of the phones. "That was always our—always my bug-out plan. Five hours' drive. If you can get me there in one piece, I'll quintuple the kidnapping pay."

"Why don't you go to the feds?" Arvo says. "Or better yet, put it all on the net and let the feds come to you."

"I don't trust the state or local authorities," Dr. Gripsin says. "As for blowing the whistle . . ." She holds up the other phone, where an avalanche of notifications is rushing down the screen. "I just did." She purses her lips. "Things are going to get weird in the next couple hours, so I don't have time to waste. You want the money or not?"

"Yes," I say, at the exact same time Arvo says no.

Dr. Gripsin grimaces.

"Give us a minute," I say. "You climb back here, I'll climb to the front."

Dr. Gripsin gives us five, since we are still moving in the general direction of an autoroute that could technically take us toward the coast. I lay it out for Arvo: more money than we make in half a year, enough to get us fully clear of the debt, plus excitement, plus a trip to the seaside.

"You wanted to go to the sea," I remind him. "You love the sea. It's all poetic."

"If we do this, we're going to get killed or arrested by the end of it," Arvo says, folding his arms because the car is back on auto. "Can't you feel that?"

"Christ, Arvo, you should be over the Moon," I say. "*Nothing matters, nothing changes, just waiting for the heat death*—well, here's something new for you. Something brand fucking new."

Arvo's ears go red. "I was high when I said all that."

"You still meant it," I argue. "And I know the exact feeling you mean. So let's incur some extra risk, make some serious money, and step sideways into a new reality."

I was holding onto that last bit ever since Arvo said it, readying it to fire back at him, and it hits. His head tilts back, how it does when he takes a big puff or reads something he particularly likes. He glances at Dr. Gripsin in the rearview mirror, judging. Then finally, finally, he nods.

"Okay," he says. "But at least get half now."

"Okay," I say, turning around to face the doctor. "We have a deal, so long as you pay half up front."

"Fine by me." She pulls a blockbank up on her phone and mine chimes a moment later, showing a successful transaction minus the darkmarket finder's fee. The number of zeroes is unfamiliar, but appealing. "Done," she says. "You mind ditching the masks now? Or at least switching them off? I feel like I'm tripping acid."

It's reassuring to me that she uses hallucinogens, so I reach for the back of my holomask. "Forgot we had them on," I admit. "They're well-cushioned."

I look over, because Arvo might veto showing face to a woman we were technically contracted to kidnap. He shrugs, so I proceed.

"How often you buying psychotropics?" I ask, my voice losing distortion as I pull my mask off. "Me and Arvo, we got a good supplier right here in town."

"I make my own," Dr. Gripsin says. "AL-LAD, mostly." She gives our faces a long look, then shakes her head. "God, you're young."

“Yeah, thanks,” I say, because I’m never sure what to say when people say that.

“Here.” She hands us the phone with the map on the screen. “Toss that out the window once it’s uploaded. Stick to the speed limit. Keep an eye out for cops, public or private.” She pauses. “And keep an eye out for the host, too.”

I’ve already decided to keep calling him the rider in my head, because it sounds better, but I nod along. “Sure, sure,” I say, even though I have a million questions about the Slip and the quantic parasite that slipped out of it. “Think I tossed some gummies back there. Feel free to partake if you find them.”

Arvo uploads the map to the car. I kick back beside him, rubbing my sore foot, and watch for orange jumpsuits in the rearview cam.

The sun is fully up and the highway is clear, a long line of tarmac code stretching all the way to the horizon. The car knows how to execute it just fine on its own, and Arvo can only take so much excitement—excitement meaning drugs and alcohol and sleep deprivation—so he passes out within the first hour. That leaves me alone up front.

I like the look of things out here on the highway, even though they look like they’re nearly gone. Long drives always remind me of when I was a kid, hauling cross-country with my dad, skating from one motel to the next with stolen identification. We drive past overgrown fields, abandoned monocultures. Rusty old oil derricks and farmhouses coated in yellowish moss.

I almost want the sunroof open, except there’s smoke billowing down from the north, as usual. A little flock of firefighting drones whines past overhead, moths to flame. A year of my prison sentence was spent firefighting, doing all the dirtiest and most dangerous bits, working with other convicts plus some pros from Portugal or Catalonia.

“You got an accent on you,” I say, twisting around while I say it so Dr. Gripsin can’t pretend to not hear. “Where from?”

She stares at me. “That’s really what you want to know, is it?”

“No,” I admit. “That one was for rapport. I want to know about the Slip.”

“Ask your friend,” she says. “He’s the explainer.”

“I don’t want to wake him,” I say. “Yesterday was his birthday and we got a little fucked up. To stave off his birthday despair.”

“It’s not uncommon,” Dr. Gripsin says. She pauses. “How old?”

“Twenty-nine,” I say. “Imagine next year. He’ll be a wreck.”

She snorts. “And you?”

“Twenty-seven,” I say. “Finally caught up to my dad.” I knock my knuckles against the window, which is what me and the old man used to do when we were tired of speaking: little Morse messages, back and forth. “Feels kind of like going off the edge of the map, you know? No more preview for how I might look, how I might talk. From here on in, it’s all fresh snow.”

“So fucking young,” Dr. Gripsin says, shaking her head. She pauses. “Was that you getting more rapport?”

“Just thinking aloud,” I say, real innocent-like. “What’s the Slip look like?”

She gets an odd look on her face. “We’ve only gone in with drones,” she says. “So we’ve only seen it through cams and scanners. Have you ever done one of those non-Euclidean geometry simulations?”

“Don’t do VR,” I say. “Don’t think it’s healthy.”

“Well, it looks a bit like that,” she says. “Plus an ice cave, plus an ungulate’s digestive tract, is what Otto always said.” Her mouth works. “He was descriptive.”

“But there’s real living things inside,” I say, hoping she’s not thinking about dead Otto in the dumpster. “Stuff that can exist in there and out here, too. That’s fucking crazy.”

She grimaces. "One living thing, at least," she says. "Yes."

I'm trying to picture the Slip, trying to picture the research drone buzzing through a bunch of glittery innards, and that's the only reason I notice one of the firefighting drones has broken off and circled back. It's a heavy duty quadcopter equipped for swailing, meaning the tank hanging off it like a pregnant belly is full of fuel instead of foam.

"How powerful is this shady company of yours?" I ask, pointing to the silhouette in the rearview cam. "Are they commandeered-a-public-drone powerful?"

Dr. Gripsin peers at the display. "Yes. Probably."

"Well, they're probably getting a good look, then." I grab Arvo's shoulder and shake him awake. "Problems, Arvo. There's a firefighting drone spying on us."

He startles upright. "What?"

"Firefighting drone," I repeat. "Broke off from the rest of them, and now it's getting real close to us. Real low." An alarming thought prickles my neck, turns my hands sweaty: If Phobos Labs put a bullet in her colleague's head and left him in a dumpster, they might want more than a good look. "And it's kitted out for swailing," I say.

"Swailing," Dr. Gripsin echoes, as Arvo switches back over to manual. "What the hell does that mean?"

The drone swoops even lower, extending its sooty metal proboscis. Arvo grabs the steering wheel just as a jet of white-hot flame erupts out the end.

Swailing means a controlled burn, to form a firebreak, and that is why the drone chasing us down the highway is armed with a fucking flamethrower. At this point I don't think Dr. Gripsin cares all that much about definitions; she is hollering her lungs out as we slew and swerve and try to avoid being cooked.

"The gun, Arvo!" I shout. "Where'd you put the fucking gun?"

"Under the seat," he grunts, wrenching us to the left, back across the median. At this speed the rumblestrip jolts me into the air, slams my skull against the car ceiling. I come down already scrabbling, and a second later I find the familiar shape of the handgrip. Arvo put three rounds in the rider, which means four are left in the clip, which might not be enough.

"Sunroof open!" I shout next, addressing the car.

The glass slides apart, and the smell of scorched metal and rubber floods in. I monkey back to where Dr. Gripsin is sitting, throttling her seatbelt, and get up onto the seat beside her so I can poke my head out. The speedwind whips me in the face; that plus the smoke makes my eyes tear up. I get the very blurriest view of our adversary, but the buzzing engine and reflective paint put me in mind of a furious metal wasp.

My first trigger-pull is pure reflex; the gun's recoil and Arvo's swerving make me bash my elbow bone into the roof of the car, and I have no fucking clue where the bullet ends up. The drone's proboscis ignites again. Flames scorch the air where my head was a millisecond ago, close enough to sear my eyeballs dry.

"Hold my legs!" I howl down at Dr. Gripsin. "I need to get steady!"

There's no good way to brace yourself in a moving vehicle while firing a weapon out the sunroof, but we try, me wedging myself as far forward as possible while Dr. Gripsin splays out on the seat below, pinning one of my legs with her body and holding my other by the ankle. I hit the briefest equilibrium, everything in line, the drone's big dark cam directly over me.

I miss by a fucking mile.

"Slow down, Arvo!" I shout, because there's no way we're outrunning a flying machine anyway, due to friction or what have you. "Tell Arvo to slow—"

He hears, or has the same thought, and what was probably just a tap on the brakes wrenches me upward and backward. Dr. Gripsin loses hold, and suddenly I'm

splayed on my back on the roof of the car with only my legs still dangling inside. The smoke-bleached sky is impossibly big overhead. The drone is upside down now, ahead of us, and as it pivots to correct the overshoot I cup the gun in both hands, brace myself, and sink the second-last mushroom round right into its fuel tank.

It goes up like a supernova. Roaring, seething, spitting out slagged fragments of metal and plastic, one of which lands sizzling close to my head. Dr. Gripsin hauls at my legs, and I tumble back inside the car, letting the gun slide right out of my trembly boneless fingers. All I can do for a bit is gasp.

“Mack,” Arvo says from the front. “Mack, that was fucking tremendous. You okay? You good?”

“I’m good,” I say and do not tell him I was aiming, stupidly, for the drone’s cam and not its fuel tank. “You good?”

“I’m good,” Arvo says. The dash gives an electronic bleat. “Car’s not good,” he says. “Our back tires got torched.”

I look over at Dr. Gripsin, who is looking ill from all the excitement. “You still want to know about sailing?” I ask.

Switching out vehicles is the smart play, would be even if the firefighting drone hadn’t slagged our rear axle, but I’m going to badly miss our car. Technically it was Arvo’s car, since ex-military makes for easier transactions than ex-criminal. But the money was half mine, our first big spend after our first big job, and it feels like we’ve done a whole lifetime of smoking and night driving in it.

Its replacement is a farm truck with flaking blue paint, swapped via darkmarket midway down a gravel range road. The woman who hands us the key also informs us that an alien invasion is imminent.

“They sent a disease through first, apparently,” she says, not looking all that concerned. “Quantum ticks, or some such. So I figure we’ll be back to quarantine measures, soon, like the old days.” She shakes her head. “People didn’t learn shit from Mombasa. All this Slip research should’ve ended right there.”

“Mad hubris,” I agree, while Dr. Gripsin scratches her nose in the face-hiding way. “Keep the car well hid till you scrap it. Someone might be looking.”

We pile into the truck, which she did us the favor of charging in full, and once Arvo familiarizes himself with the retrofitted dashboard we rumble off, kicking up dust behind us. I can tell from his face and his silence that he’s still processing, micro-analyzing every little thing he did from the time the drone came after us. Cataloging how close we came to getting roasted, or at least run off the road.

He needs to do that, so I leave him to it.

“We ought to know what we’re dealing with,” I say, turning around to Dr. Gripsin, who’s still pale from fear. “Tell us more about the parasite. And the idiot who volunteered to let it eat his brain.”

Her cheeks regain their color and then some. “His name was Emmet,” she says, in a clipped voice. “And he was fucking brilliant.”

“Sorry,” I say. “Tell me what happened to Emmet.”

We’re still crunching gravel; the downed drone is sure to attract authorities so we’ll have to do criss-crossing backroads for a while. Slow, but safer. I start reloading the gun.

“It started in his leg,” she finally says. “It wasn’t an infection the way you’re imagining it. No immune response. Cells were being duplicated and replaced, not damaged.”

I’m tempted to tell her that’s basically what cancer is, but I remember her saying something about Emmet doing chemo so I keep my mouth shut.

“The machines couldn’t see it for ages,” she says. “No abnormal growth. No muta-

tion. The doppelganger cells took over for the original with no change in function or folding." My listening face must look thick to her, because she throws in a metaphor. "Like rebuilding a house," she says. "Brick by brick, with materials that are 99.99 the same."

"Point zero one is plenty of space on the cellular level," I say, because Arvo's not the only one who reads things. "And if you're talking quantum, well, that's a whole fucking universe, isn't it?"

Dr. Gripsin looks surprised for a split second, which is good—fuck her for pre-judging. "In a way," she says. "In any case, he lost consciousness."

I look over at Arvo. "Five beers and Arvo does that, too," I say, to test out if he's ready for human interactions again. He ignores me.

Dr. Gripsin does a grimace. "Consciousness in that nebulous philosophical sense," she says. "He remained physically healthy. Showed pain avoidance."

An autohailer thunders past us, close enough to sway our truck, and it startles my brain enough to give me a little aftershock of the high, particularly of that reenactment feeling. Like Dr. Gripsin has said these exact words several times before, always while a particularly aggressive automated vehicle passed us on a hill. I force it away, try to concentrate on the doctor's next sentence.

"He knew how to eat, where to shit, did something that looked like sleeping," she says. "But he displayed no drives beyond basic self-preservation. There's a superficial comparison to lobotomy, but lobotomized patients are self-aware. He couldn't even pass a mirror test."

"Where they put the X on the elephant's forehead, yeah?" I ask.

She nods. "As far as we could tell, the parasite had no awareness either. It was just—repaving. And in the process, smoothing out whatever quantum activity is responsible for whatever we call consciousness." She points her chin at the gun in my lap. "Then three weeks ago, something, somewhere, pulled an invisible trigger."

"To trigger what?" I demand.

"A rapid and violent metamorphosis," the doctor says.

As if that weren't ominous enough, the truck's engine starts to whine.

That is the issue with darkmarket vehicle swaps: sometimes a real trustworthy-seeming woman gives you a farm truck where the battery is on its last lithium-lunged gasp, but the indicator is jiggled to show full. The solar panels in the bed can't do much, not with the smoke thickening up again, so we limp back onto the autoroute to find a charging station.

When we struggle up a hill, cresting it by the very skin of our teeth, I get a glimpse of flashing emergency lights way behind us. They're heading for the drone wreckage.

"This whole stretch of highway is going to be crawling with cops," I say to Arvo, loud over the whine of the dying engine. "Whether they're on her company's payroll or not."

"Back to the backroads once we're charged," he agrees, then glances back at Dr. Gripsin. "Stay out of sight till then. On the floor, maybe."

She gives the dirty mats a matching look, but when we coast into the lot of the charging station she slides down off the seat and curls up down there, coat thrown over her head. Arvo gets us within striking range just before the engine gives out completely; the cable snakes over to our charging port and latches in. I clap him on the shoulder.

"Excellent driving," I say. "Earlier, too. When we toasted that drone." He still looks like he's agonizing over something, but that's not uncommon and now is not the ideal time for it. "What do you want to eat?"

He squints over at the service shop. "You're going inside?"

“Only to the vending machines,” I promise, grabbing a folded-up backpack and my mask. “It’s been half a day since we bought those burritos. Man can’t run on empty forever.” I shrug. “I mean, now that the coke’s gone.”

“Anything,” he says. “Just be quick.”

“I’ll get you something, too,” I assure the doctor, who rustles slightly in response.

It’s hard to tell if it’s a *thanks for your thoughtfulness* rustle or a *stay in the fucking car* rustle, but I’m hungry as hell, and we all need food to stay alert and functional. I mask up and set it to stranger mode—one of those less-than-legal mods that generates a well-synced human face, good enough to pass for a real person wearing a mask set to transparent.

Then I slide out of the truck, double-check to be sure the battery’s really charging, and test my bad foot on the paving. It’s bearable—the worst bit is actually the hole in my shoe, how the warped rubber pinches blistered skin. We’re the only vehicle stopped, alone apart from the whiskery attendant who’s squatting on the curb having a vape. I give him a nod, then make for the vending machines with barely a hint of a limp.

Of all the awful things humanity’s created, vending machines are my favorite. Both boxes are playing the same looped ad, a crashing wave of sweet bubbly cola, but the glass goes clear when I come close enough. There’s always something hugely comforting about that treasure trove of foil pouches and bioplastic cartons. The familiarity, I guess.

Arvo said *anything*, but he meant those disgusting pizza gyros he loves so much, with the soggy anemic-white bread and the goey red-and-white filling that clearly came out of a nozzle. I get him two of those, then the whole row of chips, and then, while I’m trying to decide what Dr. Gripsin might want, I see an orange jumpsuit in my peripheral.

I whirl so fast I trip on a stray chunk of concrete. The vending machine I’m not using has gone back to playing ads, except this time someone sponsored a news segment. It’s the footage Dr. Gripsin got early this morning from her now-deceased colleague, the footage she put up on the net before we started our little road trip: the rider escaping containment.

I watch, entranced, as a small man in an orange jumpsuit pins a security guard to the floor. The cam quality is middling and the screen of the vending machine is smeary with handprints, but I still flinch when the rider’s head erupts into a writhing waspish mess, extrudes a muscly pseudopod that darts toward the guard’s terrified face.

It curves path at the last second, finds his legs instead. There’s no audio but I know the sound of bones breaking and fill it in as the guard’s joints snap. No small wonder Dr. Gripsin panicked when he came soaring out of the woods.

I finish raiding the vending machine, dumping everything into my backpack, and check the net on my phone. The footage is omnipresent, but most people are dead sure it’s deepfaked and can’t be bothered to read the decrypted notes and communications leaked with it. Her company already deployed a bot army, which is busy generating much faker-looking versions of the footage and linking in a load of shoddy conspiracies to lower the credibility.

“I saw him, you know.” The attendant breathes out a blue-tinged cloud of smoke, jabs his vape at the vending machine. “This body snatcher from the Slip.”

My hackles go up. Our battery must be nearly charged, but curiosity gets the better of me. “Yeah?” I say, turning so he can see my fake face. “When?”

“Had a dream about him last night,” the attendant says. “All he wanted to do was wade out into the ocean and turn into coral.”

People are very strange these days, Arvo says. He puts it down to the Anthro-

podcene, generally, all the system shocks and industry chaos, all the sleep deprivation due to creeping heat and despair. I don't know about all that. I figure we had it so good, for so long, that we're more exiting a long sleepwalk than anything. The strangeness might actually be more normal.

I'm on the verge of asking the attendant for more dream details, in case they turn out to be useful, when a ghost car pulls into the lot.

If you spend a childhood evading cops and spooks, you get a sense for how they look undercover. It's not the make and model that gives a ghost car away—they commandeer anything these days—but the way they move. They got the best autodrive available, very smooth and prowly, and the car currently sidling up to the charging station opposite ours is the smoothest and prowliest I've ever seen.

My nervous system goes about eight for ten on these things, so I set my deepfake eyes to keep watching the ads while I reach for my phone. I thumb the word *cop* to Arvo, who has come to trust my nervous system. Then I agonize. Either I go back to the truck now, unhook the cable real smooth and nonchalant, and we try to drive off—or I wait it out, drawing no attention to the truck, and hope the ghost car recharges and fucks off without taking notice of us.

Slings and arrows of uncertainty, Arvo would say. It only gets worse when the ghost car opens its doors and a woman climbs out, mask set to either transparent or particularly stony-faced stranger mode. She has dark eyes, a broad stern mouth, an aquiline nose that's been broken at least once.

The cop checks the charging cable, leans back against the grimy side of her car, then thinks better of it and has to shuffle forward, slapping sooty dust off her back. In doing so she catches sight of Arvo, who's sitting in the driver side seat of the truck staring straight ahead.

The attendant's finished smoking, but I grab his elbow before he can head back inside. "That woman's a cop," I tell him. "See the bulge in her sweatshirt? Holster under there, guaranteed."

The attendant's bleary eyes flick toward her. "Ghost car," he says. "Yeah."

"You should tell her you saw the man in the orange jumpsuit," I say. "It's a quantum alien, you know? I bet it communicates through dreams."

The cop is straight peering at Arvo now, and Arvo is unmasked, because it looks suspicious to be masked up in a car, but it'd be better if he *were* masked up because I can see the nervous sweat gleaming on his upper lip from here.

"I don't like getting involved," the attendant says, and ambles back inside the shop, leaving me to watch in paralyzed terror as the cop walks up to Arvo's window. I wasn't lying about the bulge in the sweatshirt, and now I'm thinking about the size of handgun it could hide, thinking about the caliber of bullet that blew Dr. Gripsin's friend's skull apart.

I'm obviously not going to let that happen to Arvo. My legs unfreeze, and since the gun is in the car I stoop down and pluck that stray chunk of concrete off the paving instead. It fits good in my hand and my heart starts to pound. I shuffle forward, using the charging ghost car as cover, hoping the attendant is not watching the cams.

Dart around the front of the car, take one long stride, and swing for the back of the woman's head. That's the plan. There's a cold snowball growing in my stomach, the one I always feel before a fight, but with any luck this will not be a fight, this will be one big hit and we're gone before she can get up—

"Long enough with those snacks?" Arvo shouts, and I barely get the rock behind my back before the cop turns around.

"Got one of everything," I say, hefting the bottom of the backpack with both hands, the sweatier of which is still gripping the rock, like I need to display how full the bag

is. Then, to the cop, who's now taking a good look at my deepfaked face: "You coming from up north? How's the fires?"

"Pretty bad," she says. "And I was just saying—doesn't help when some lunatic starts shooting the drones down."

"That's those cop lights we saw," Arvo says, in a high tight voice she hopefully thinks is his normal one. "Someone blew up a firefighting drone."

"Was probably the alien that came out the Slip," I say. "You see that? Some secret warlab, right here in our own backyard. They found an alien in the Slip and brought it home."

The cop stiffens up, apparently even worse at acting than Arvo. "I saw it," she says. "Looked . . ." Her eyes travel up and down my generated face. "Fake."

The ghost car's alarm goes off, horn wailing, headlights flashing. She fumbles for her phone on instinct. I use the moment to drop the rock behind my back, then step wide around her, hands spread open and innocent, and get back in the truck. She's still jabbing at her phone, trying to silence the alarm, as our charging cable unhooks and slithers back to its perch.

"Hate it when they do that," I shout at her, and we pull away.

The battery is truly charged this time, and once we're humming along the highway Dr. Gripsin emerges from her coat cocoon. Some sort of custom script, possibly the same one she used to hack our car in the alley a lifetime ago, is scrolling down the screen of her phone.

"She'll have to reboot," the doctor says. "But the hack's traceless." She pops fully upright. "How suspicious was she? Do you think she'll call it in?"

"She'd be stupid not to," I say. "Arvo was dripping sweat."

"Because I saw you coming with a fucking rock," Arvo snaps. "Christ." His knuckles go white, then purple, then white again as he chokeholds the steering wheel. "What was the plan? Bash her brains out, then go inside and do the station attendant, too?"

"I had the rock because she had a gun," I snap back. "I had the rock because they just tried to incinerate us an hour ago. They're not playing nice, Arvo."

He doesn't answer, but I can tell he's thinking about that one job and how it ended, and I don't like that at all.

"By now, there's more than one *they*," Dr. Gripsin says, tapping furiously at her phone. "Multiple government and private agencies will be interested. The host itself is the big prize, but any surviving Phobos Labs employees are decent consolation." She looks up, all the creases in her forehead deepening. "None of them will play nice—with anyone involved. Maybe you two ought to come with me."

"We are coming with you," I say.

She blinks her tired eyes. "Onto the boat, I mean. Out of the country."

The truck jolts as Arvo turns us off the highway, back onto a gravel range road.

"That's where we're heading?" I demand. "A boat?"

"Did you think I just wanted a beach day?" Dr. Gripsin demands back.

"We're invited on the boat, Arvo," I say, knowing he likely won't answer. "We can all three be fugitives at sea together. She likes us that much now."

Dr. Gripsin scowls. "I'm worried you'll be terrible at laying low," she says.

"Lying low," I say, on Arvo's behalf. "And we're plenty good at it. We'll have plenty of your money to help, remember?"

She does a long blink, then washes her hands of us. "Okay. What did you find to eat?"

I finally realize I'm still wearing the backpack, and I've been mashing it almost flat. I wriggle free, unzip it, then turn around so I can dump the battered cornucopia of bad food out across the backseat. Dr. Gripsin goes for the caffeinated chocolate bars, which tracks, and I grab the less-squashed of Arvo's gyros.

Having a third party listening always put an odd pressure on conversations, makes them feel staged or caged in, but I'm not asking Dr. Gripsin to plug her ears and she's pretty busy licking a foil wrapper anyway.

"I dragged us into an uncontrollable situation," I say to Arvo, tearing his gyro out of its plastic. "I know slash you're right. I'm sorry."

Arvo does something between a shudder and a shrug. "I agreed to it."

"Before a swailing drone tried to cook us alive," I point out. "Before we knew every cop in the country would be looking for us." I hold the gyro toward him. "I'm the one who dragged us in, so I'll do whatever's needed to drag us out. I grabbed that rock because I was fucking terrified, Arvo. I thought that you were about to get killed." I watch his face close. "That's the only reason I would ever do it. Same as how you shot the rider when it was coming for me."

"I know, Mack," Arvo says, switching to autodrive and grabbing the gyro. "You just move too quick sometimes, is all."

He puts his free hand on my shoulder, squeezes it, and I feel something burst in a good way, spreading relief through my whole body. "That's why I got you, Arvo," I say. "Final stretch now. Nearly out of it."

He takes a big messy bite off the gyro. I reach back to grab a bag of half-crushed chips, and instead of raising her eyebrows or saying something smart about rapport, Dr. Gripsin just gives me a little nod. I appreciate that. I might be getting to like her back, even.

We take backroads, and between the forest fire smoke and the dust kicked up by our tires we might as well be driving through fog. It reminds me of the misty pines this morning. I can't help but listen for the soft whine of a dirtbike, even though I saw that bike crashed and mangled in the alleyway. Things clear when we near the coast: a stiff sea wind sloughs all the particulates away, and I feel relieved but exposed, too.

"South Pier," Dr. Gripsin says, as though we don't have it mapped. "Keep to this road."

Her forehead wrinkles have gone extra deep, which is smart—things always go wrong right at the end, right when you let your guard down, and she's watching for that. We cruise through the carcass of a tourist town, one of those places people used to go for a holiday before the beaches were all bluebottles and seaweed.

I see a sun-bleached wooden mural with holes for people to stick their faces through, and if it were just me and Arvo, and we weren't transporting a fugitive quantum biologist, I'd probably lobby for a photo because I'd probably be day-drunk.

We follow the seawall south, past the shipping dock, which is diminished but functional, to the private piers, which are all but abandoned. The road is narrow, and once we have to squeeze around a stalled autohauler that got lost on its way to the shipping dock. No cop lights, though, and nothing that looks like a ghost car.

Still.

"To be safe, I figure we get a new ride once we drop the doctor," I tell Arvo. "Maybe keep heading south for a few days."

"Yeah," Arvo says. "Holiday."

Dr. Gripsin shows us what to look for on her phone: her boat is a shabby-looking thing, red paint flaking, hull slashed with rust, but I guess that's good if she's going to be lying low. Arvo spots it midway down the last jetty and takes us as close as possible to the chained-off wooden platform. The truck eases to a halt.

"Never got your names," Dr. Gripsin says, zipping her coat. "I suppose that's better for everyone." She holds out a fist, but angled wrong, as old folk do. "The money's sent. Best of luck lying low."

I'm dead sober at this point, but the semantic lurch comes for me anyway. The geometry of her outstretched fist, her other hand equidistant reaching for the door handle, the slice of gray sea and grayer sky through the window behind her: all props in their proper place, all aspects of the same well-worn groove. Her lines never change and I know mine, too.

"Same to you." I tap her bony fist, trying to shake the feeling off. "Fair winds, and all that."

Arvo checks our blockbank, to be sure of the transfer, then knocks her angled-wrong fist as well. Arvo believes fist-bump positioning's cyclical, turning over every generation—so before long she'll be in the right again, and we'll be the old folk doing it wrong. The doctor swings her door open.

I turn to watch her go, because I'm going to miss her a little, and that's when I see it: a flash of orange jumpsuit, a human shape moving not quite humanly. The crash helmet is gone, and in daylight the rider's face is awful. I got a hint of that before, when we first kidnapped the doctor in the pines, but now I get it full.

People say the uncanny valley has to do with corpse avoidance, like the stiffness of mannequins reminds the brainstem of death and of disease by extension. The rider's face is opposite of that; everything is too soft and mobile. His forehead seems to be sliding downward, a curtain of putty that should bury his eyes but never does. His cheekbones are somehow growing outward and eroding away at the same time. His long lank hair blows against the sea breeze instead of with it.

He ambles toward us down the wooden pier, dripping a trail behind him. A tiny sliver of my brain deduces he was waiting in the water, sitting down there in the silt without needing to breathe, which lines right up with the station attendant's dream. The rest of my brain is an oscillating live wire, snapping from fight to flight and back again.

My hand found the gun without me. I worm my finger inside the trigger guard. There are three ragged holes in the front of the orange jumpsuit, but the bullet wounds are sealed up, leaving only neat black tick-sized lumps on his pale skin. He comes on, leaking steam from his parted lips. Dr. Gripsin is frozen halfway out of the truck, even though she really should have seen this coming, should have anticipated things going wrong right at the end.

"I'm thinking head, first," I murmur. "If that doesn't work, knees."

"Wait," Dr. Gripsin rasps. "Just . . . wait."

I look over at Arvo, who gives me the same message nonverbally, patting the air, and since I'm outvoted by one person I mostly trust and one person I fully trust, I wait. I wait, even though every nerve in me is screaming not to. I wait until the rider is nearly to the truck. He stops and sinks to his haunches. His mouth opens wide.

"Shayna," he says, in a splintered voice. "Is this real?"

My eyes fly to Dr. Gripsin. She looks as baffled as me to hear the silent bogeyman speak, but unlike me she recognizes the voice.

"Emmet?" she says. "Is that you?"

The rider's head lolls side to side. The motion strays just slightly outside the bounds of human anatomy; his neck stretches and retracts like rubber. "I'm far away," he says. "I'm watching always. Doing sometimes. From far away. Is it real?"

"It's real," Dr. Gripsin says. "God, Emmet. We thought you were—gone. You were braindead for weeks, you attacked me and O during observation, and then, last night—"

"I needed to get out," interjects the rider, who is a person after all. "I needed to find you."

I look over at Arvo, mostly to make sure we're inhabiting the same reality. His eyes

are fixed on Emmet the rider, but they look more excited than wary, like he's on the verge of assembling something.

"For what?" Dr. Gripsin demands.

"I'm far away," Emmet says, ignoring the question. "I'm watching this from far away."

Dr. Gripsin pauses. "Where do you think you are, Emmet?"

Emmet's head swivels, his neck twisting a few degrees too far. But he's not seeing the pier, the water, the gulls wheeling through gray sky. "The Slip," he says. "If this is all real, then I'm in the Slip." His hands crawl down his ribcage. "This body—this body you're seeing—it's like a drone I'm piloting. A really glitchy one."

"Fuck," Dr. Gripsin breathes. "We have to get you to a lab, Emmet. Except I'm fired, and Phobos is trying to kill me, catch you, and cover up our whole project."

Emmet gives a laugh that ripples the play-dough flesh of his face. "That's what we get for doing research in a warlab, Shayna," he says. "Otto always said we'd come to no good."

Dr. Gripsin grimaces. "Otto's dead," she says. "Whatever's happening with *you*, we can't figure it out here. You're coming on the boat with me."

"There's something I need to tell you," Emmet says, not seeming to register the news about Otto Klymshyn's dumpster death at all. "Trying to—remember."

"Remember on the boat," Dr. Gripsin says, and finally drops both feet to the wood of the pier.

"Wait," I say, stuffing the gun into my waistband so I can swing myself out after her. "Wait, wait. You're getting on a boat with him? He said he's only controlling the drone *sometimes*." I jab a finger to my temple. "And this might not even be him talking. It might be the parasite."

"I'm the one who brought it over," Dr. Gripsin says. "I'm the reason Emmet's infected and O's dead. I'll take my chances."

But I wonder if she's feeling the same thing I keep feeling—that this was always going to happen, that things are playing out in the only sequence possible. It's only a tweak, really, to what I already had in mind: me and Arvo still watch Dr. Gripsin sail away, but now her parasitized colleague is tagging along and possibly murdering her at sea.

We still get away clean, to spend our kidnapping-turned-taxi money somewhere far down the coast, so it shouldn't matter at all.

I feel Arvo's hand grip my shoulder again. "We did our bit," he reminds me, both of us watching Dr. Gripsin pull the rider to his feet. He takes a drag off the vape and blows the smoke past my ear in a long sigh. "We got paid. Let's go."

"Agreed," I say, even though it doesn't feel right. "Agreed. Let's make tracks."

He hands me the vape, and I'm so busy accepting the situation that I don't hear a smooth prowly car pull up behind us until it's too late.

*"Stop where you are, hands on your heads."*

The electric bellow comes painfully loud, amplified through the ghost car's speakers. I'm first to comply, since a few years in prison codes it right into your muscle memory, with Arvo coming close second. The car's high beams are pounding us with harsh white halogen, blindingly bright. I can only make out the cop's silhouette, braced against the driver side door with a handgun.

She's alone, even though there was a whole swarm of cops on the road, and she hasn't switched on a police beacon. I remember Otto in the dumpster again, and what Dr. Gripsin said about all the folks coming after her and the parasite. Me and Arvo aren't consolation prizes, though. We're unwanted witnesses.

Dr. Gripsin has yet to move, too busy staring into the light like a startled owl. Em-

met, meanwhile, has dropped back into a squat, face hidden behind his susurrating hair. I look at the tiny black marks on his chest where he absorbed three bullets, no issue.

“Thank fuck,” I shout. “Shoot the alien already, will you?”

“Hands on your heads!” the cop repeats, ignoring me. “All of you!”

Dr. Gripsin finally complies, lacing her fingers together behind her skull. Emmet can't be bothered, but isn't looking particularly threatening, either—hopefully the cop watched the leg-breaking clip. I keep trying to recall, from the feel of the metal and plastic pressed to my skin, the exact position of the gun tucked into my waistband and the exact angle I need to retrieve it in one big smooth arc.

Arvo understands the play. “Look, that's the thing from the Slip,” he says, twisting just slightly, giving my right side more cover. “It's real, it nearly attacked us just now, you need to shoot it before it goes berserk again.”

I still can't see the cop's stony face, but I can see her handgun is now pointed firmly at Emmet, and I can hear her mumbling into a mic, and I know whoever she's calling is probably the *worse* in the *cops and worse* Dr. Gripsin mentioned way back when we first met. If there was ever a time to move quick, it's now.

“Put your hands on your head,” the cop says, using the singular because all her attention's on Emmet. “Or—”

I go. Slashing down and diagonal, hooking my trigger finger inside the guard and the others around the stock, snapping the safety off as I bring it outside my hip and—

*Bang-bang-bang*: three shots, trying for Arvo's pyramid placement as she swings toward me. Two crunch against the ghost car's window. One hits meat; I can tell not from the sound but from the little spray of red thrown up into the headlights. She jerks forward against the car door and her handgun bounces onto the pier, metal flashing like a darting fish. She staggers after it, clutching her hip, but Arvo beats her there and boots it off the edge like he's going for goal.

Relief normally feels warm, but this time it's a strange icy trickle welling out of my chest. I sit down hard. Everything blurs, sharpens, blurs again. Suddenly Arvo's looming over me, eyes wide. My hearing's fucked, echoes swallowing echoes, so I can't hear what he's saying, but thinking back on the firefight I'm pretty sure there were four shots total, and one was the cop's, and she nailed me.

I breathe wrong, and finally feel the hot bullet lodged in my chest. “Oh, fuck,” I say.

Dr. Gripsin drops in out of nowhere, face shiny with sweat, and I hear something that sounds like *medkit on the boat, get him on the boat*. Arvo's arguing that the medkit should come to me, to not drag a gunshot victim around unnecessarily. Then along comes a rider, by which I mean Emmet the parasitized scientist, and Emmet ends the debate by plucking me up like I'm weightless and carrying me down the pier.

The world spins and darkens and I'm on the pine-smelling boat. I feel something ballooning inside my ribcage, blood filling a cavity it should not fill. Arvo's hands are pushing against it. I remember a cellmate showing me a scar on his thigh and telling me the story of how his whole leg swole up when he got shot, his nicked artery pumping the interstitial spaces full of blood, and how they nearly had to amputate it.

I get the shock-giddy thought that Arvo and the biologists will have to amputate my torso, but of course that wouldn't work, would it.

“Keep the pressure on,” Dr. Gripsin says from nearby, and Arvo pushes harder.

“Arvo,” I choke. “Distract me. Quote me a poem.”

“I only do that when I'm high.” Arvo's voice is knotted with panic. “Can't think of any. Except—fuck. Except: most things never happen.”

“But this one will,” I say, because I'm pretty sure I remember it.

The only poem he can think of is a poem about death. That does not bode well for me. I never liked contemplating death, and liked it even less after my dad died. But me and Arvo did talk about it once, some weeks after the job that went bad, and we agreed that no matter how zen you think you are about death as a concept, when it actually comes time to do it, you will feel sheer animal terror unless you are very, very high.

Maybe we were making a self-fulfilling prophecy, because I feel that panic eating me now, starting in the back of my mind and chewing its way forward, termites pulping through wood. The impossibility of *end*, of *over*, of *no more*—the brain is not built for it. There are all these grand beautiful things I'll never do flying through my head: climbing a skyscraper, exploring an icy cave, taking a suborbital to the other side of the world.

But more than that, it's small stupid things I've done already but never will again, most of them with Arvo: the day we logged sixteen hours on the virtual shooting range and busted all their records, the day we took entactogens in an abandoned swimming pool, all the night drives and night talks and even the fucking pizza gyros.

I should be glad it's me dying and not Arvo. I should be glad I didn't drag him all the way into the shit with me. He's still trying to stopper me up, but my heart's pumping fast, hard. Blood keeps soaking through the bandages.

"We need to staple it shut," Arvo's saying, in that voice that's still too high, too tight.

"There's no—" I can hear Dr. Gripsin rattling around in the medkit. "There's pins, could we use pins?"

"Shayna." It's the voice I don't know, which means it's Emmet. "I can take him into the Slip with me."

Dr. Gripsin stops rattling, and I twist my head around to look at the rider. He looks less human than ever: his whole body keeps melting and reforming inside his jumpsuit, his eyes keep seeping away then growing back. Maybe my shutting-down brain is contributing some bonus hallucinations.

"What do you mean?" Arvo demands. "Take him how?"

"That's the something I needed to tell you, Shayna." Emmet doesn't have a mouth now, or a head, he looks like a mass of black-and-yellow fungi squeezed into a roughly bipedal shape. But his voice is getting clearer, stronger. "The organism is—not a parasite, exactly. It has a more specific function. Compression. Data storage."

"Data storage." Dr. Gripsin stares. "There's not a single human cell left in your body, but you feel like you're *you*."

"I am me," Emmet says. "In the Slip. And I'm not the only one, Shayna. There are other minds all around me. I'm starting to—notice them." The spot where his head used to be is a mass of pale yellow polyps now, stretching toward me. "He's dead here. He could survive in the Slip, if I take him now."

"Is that what you were doing when you tried to swallow me?" Dr. Gripsin demands, not in an angry way. "Back me up to the Slip?"

"That's what the organism was made for, yes," Emmet says. "I can control it better now. I can ask first." One of the polyps rises over the others, and I'm not high in the slightest anymore, but it still reminds me of a demented little sock puppet. "Do you want to go to the Slip?"

Arvo twists, keeping his hands on the wound but putting his body between me and Emmet. "That's fucking crazy," he says, to Dr. Gripsin. "Tell him to stay the fuck away."

But it's my call, isn't it, and I can kind of see myself gliding through non-Euclidean geometry plus an ice cave plus an ungulate's digestive tract, stepping sideways into a new reality, so long as it means this is not the end. So long as it means I don't have to say goodbye to Arvo forever.

"Let him," I sputter.

Arvo stares down at me, looking more scared than I've ever seen him. "You're not in your right mind. We got no idea what kind of—what it'll actually—" He shakes his head. "Mack."

"I got the terror, Arvo," I say, which is true; fear's clamping down on every part of my insides, and I think it must be showing on my face, too, the same expression that old dealer had on the job that went bad, the same expression my dad had just before he quit breathing. "I don't want to die. I don't want to never see you again. You let him take me to the Slip, maybe I can come and visit." I try to force a laugh for him. "You know. If I'm not busy."

Arvo takes one blood-slippery hand off the hole in my chest, and uses it to grip mine. "Fuck you," he says.

"Fuck you, too, Arvo," I say, and then the yellow-black mass reaches for me, and then I think I die.

Arvo clammers over the erosion break and slides down the scrub-dotted slope to the beach. His shoes crunch softly on the pale sand; at the vertex of the surf's foaming parabola he stops and takes them off. The sea tosses and turns under a gasoline sky, bobbling the bloated organic repository tethered in the shallows.

He strips down to his dry suit, then wades into the waves until he's hip-deep. The repository notices his approach, sending a shiver through its enormous mass of slick black-and-yellow flesh. It extrudes a reasonable facsimile of a human body, complete with a familiar face, and maneuvers it upright in the water.

I drop out of the Slip and into the puppet.

"Hey, Arvo," I say, flushing the outermost cells with pigment and drumming up the usual breathe / blink loop, getting as close as possible to my old self. "How's things?"

His brow knits. "Frantic," he says. "But this whole year's been pretty fucking frantic."

I can't really wrap my head around time units anymore, but I know the feeling. It's always the most sublime kind of chaos in the Slip. "Upheaving the whole of human civilization will do that, Arvo," I say. "Lots of new arrivals in here. Met a Finnish woman with Locked-in syndrome just now."

"Yeah." Arvo looks out over the dark water. "Yeah, a bunch more countries just ratified Slip rights. Can't put Schrödinger's cat back in the bag, I guess." He rubs his face. "You know you been in the repository for a month straight, Mack."

Again with the time units.

"Better than you having to take care of creepy zombie Mack whenever I go autopilot," I say. "I'm doing important shit in here, Arvo, swear. You'd be proud of me. There's a whole species of stingray-looking fuckers from Kepler-62f who are uploading en masse."

"Shayna said, yeah." It's nice that him and Dr. Gripsin are first-name friends now, but his voice is dry. "Spreading the good word to every galaxy, right? Quantic parasites for all."

"Only when it's better than the alternative," I say. "When suns are going out. When hearts are slowing down."

I wish I could show him. Not just the Slip, the mind-bendingly beautiful unspace, the living sanctuary sewn into the quantum fabric of the Universe. Not just the mingled memories of a trillion sapient minds who'd have otherwise been snuffed out.

I wish I could show him the future, when the slow savage march of entropy he always talked about high finally comes to a halt. When there's no heat or motion left, when all that exists exists in the Slip, and then, in one big glorious burst—

"It's important shit," I reiterate. "But so's the shit here, Arvo. It's all important." I detach the puppet from the repository, snapping it at the stalk, and test my legs, dig my toes into the wet sand. "Want to go for a drive?"

Arvo's mid-vape and the question makes him cough. "Yeah?"

"I got time if you do," I say, which is true in a brand new way. "Give me a puff of that."

He looks down at the vape, then hands it over with a grin that's nearly the one I remember. We wade out of the shallows, along the surf, where the pale smooth sand is blank as fresh snow. ○

—With thanks to Jeff Bien, Jane Craven, and Erin Rodoni for their wonderful poetry and permission to quote it.

### **I Try to Explain the Concept of Teeth to My Alien Roommate**

I let him touch them. Like some combination of snake and prehistoric fish, his jaw simply clamps down; like nothing on earth, his saliva sinks in and dissolves. He watches me eat an apple with more bewilderment than appreciation.

I try to explain satisfaction. I try to explain why we talk about something having *bite*, why my favorite song says *flash some fang*, why the particular configuration of tissue that grows up out of the gum so captures the human imagination.

The act of consumption doesn't do it. They don't talk about their saliva with the same verve. I try to explain chew, chomp, chewing gum. I text him snake videos. I show him *Dracula*. I learn a lot about teeth: that they might have been scales, originally, shields beat into swords. They are alive. They are the sharpest part of me. I make pasta *al dente*. Cooked, but not too cooked. *Toothsome*. He eats the shells, hard, out of the box.

Maybe some concepts don't translate. Maybe to understand *bite* and *tear*, you have to live on a planet of things bigger than you, things you have to rip apart to swallow down. Tooth by tooth, gnawing until the world is the right size to devour.

—Rachel Linton