

- EUGENE -

*I didn't do it.*

The front door shakes three times. A metal ting from the detective's wedding ring bounces through my unit and through the reinforced galvanized steel tubes holding this whole prison of a bunker together. "Mr. Granger, I just wanna know what happened to you and your wife." Detective Hearsay's muffled voice froze me over a half-filled backpack. "What did you see up there? And why did you come back alone?"

*Are you kidding me? I just got here! My fists clench in rage. This isn't good. Not good at all. I don't have time for this. It was supposed to be quick. Come in, grab the monster, and leave, but now I've got a detective wannabe up my ass. I keep stuffing cans of cat food into the bag pretending not to notice- "Shit." I said a little louder than I should've. My wrist flares up again, throbbing with an intensity so clear even a blind person would see there's something wrong with it, with me.*

"Mr. Granger? I can hear you in there!" She knocks on the door again. Three times.

*Always three times.* I quickly look around the vibrating room for something to cover the purple puss-launching volcano on my wrist. I run to the kitchen, snatching a pair of oven mitts, and decide that I'm in the middle of baking.

Three more knocks on the door. *For fucksake! The metal echo is really pissing me off.*

"Mr. Granger, please! I'm not going anywhere. Open up!" Her voice is hesitant.

*I guess I have no choice.* I run over to the front door, hoping to prevent another triple knock because the noise has become so infuriating that I can now feel every pulse of my heart shaking my skull. *Normally, I'm not like this. Wait- the smell.* I flick on an apple pie candle.

Knock! I grab the door handle on the second knock and fling it open- a little faster than a sane person should- *I am sane*. “Hello,” I say with a convincing amount of nonchalance, pretending there isn’t sweat glistening on my forehead. “A bit early, dontcha think?” I force a smirk.

She looks at me with the same concerned expression she always manages to wear. “Where is she?” Her voice lowered. “Where’s my sister?”

“I don’t know.” *That’s mostly true. She’s on the surface, but as far as the exact location, I’d have to give a ballpark answer.*

“Everyone thinks you killed her. Can I get a testimony?” I can’t even bring myself to speak. “Can I come in?” She asks, looking past me and into my unit for information.

“I’m in the middle of baking,” I raise my oven mitts up.

She paused, just looking at me. I avoid eye contact, focusing on the school of fish swimming behind her. “Oh, hello there, Eugene.” She says, dropping the ‘tough’ act to bend down and pet my handsome orange son, Eugene.

I’m so tense right now. I didn’t even notice he was just rubbing against my shins, and now purring on his way to hers. I notice the taser on her hip and realize that running was never really an option. *I need to handle this first. I hope the candle has spread.*

About a half hour later, I managed to get Detective Hearsay to leave- now with three new pages of pointless notes, and I’m sure two of them were related to how adamant I was about keeping my oven mitts on. I’m sure she’s on her way to the community center right now to recruit *the watch* but for now, I’m free. Finally *free*.

I blow out the candle that hasn’t fully spread to the edge yet- Normally, that’s taboo in my house, but there’s no time for candle etiquette. I run to the basement, ripping off my oven mitt. It’s worse. *It’s so much worse*. Puss involuntarily squirts out of the purple volcano growing on the inside of my wrist- much of it already hardened to a crust on my fingers.

My stomach turned in on itself. I can only bend my wrist back now- I just found out pushing it forward just squirts out more puss. *At least it’s finally numb, that’s good*. I throw the tainted oven mitt into the metal trash chute, pretending it isn’t a biohazard, and listen for the whoosh from the fire. *Whoosh*.

I pulled the remaining oven mitt over my purple hand-the swelling made it significantly harder this time than last. I run over to Eugene, who is busy scratching on the post I gave him about a week ago, which is already *nearly tarnished*. I can’t help but tilt my head in endearment. *My absence really must have done a number on him*.

“You did all that?” I scoop him up, causing him to scream out in exaggerated agony, but I really don’t have time for his dramatics. I open his mouth and look inside.

*It’s been about an hour since he tried it... Looks good. No discoloration, or really any effect at all. Good! Doesn’t mean we’re in the clear, but that’s good, I think.* I set him on the ground, giving in to his demands, and he runs– less than a meter away. *Dramatic.*

Effects showed up about an hour after Tenny was exposed to it, and it was about the same for me. *Granted, I didn’t exactly pull out a stopwatch when she bit me.* I look at the oven mitt and fight the urge to squirm.

I walk over to Eugene and squat down next to him. His wide, dilated green eyes always ease a racing heart. I sit on the ground clicking my tongue, and he immediately climbs onto my lap, purring from the acknowledgment. I hold him against my chest. “Okay, Eugene, you’re gonna have to be brave.” I ran my non-infected hand over his soft orange coat and up his striped tail. “We’re going to see mama, okay?”

I ran through the glass and metal tunnels of Subtequatica, holding Eugene tight against my chest, assisted by a makeshift sling that I wrapped over and around my torso. *Seventeen years in this subaqueous labyrinth and I still manage to get lost– There it is.* The only exit out of here, perpetually guarded by two germaphobes and lit by a glowing double helix. *Oh, do I love the exit tube?* For most of my time here, it was simply known as the ‘off-limits pillar into the abyss,’ *Only to be used in case of emergency or breach.* Lights wrapped its exterior and rose and rose and rose and rose and... rose into the unknown.

Focusing back on the guards ahead of me, I play my nonchalant card again, hoping it’ll work better than it did on Tenny’s sister. *It doesn’t.*

The only vocal one stepped forward. “What are you doing, Mr. Granger? You’re supposed to be in detention.”

“They said I wasn’t guilty.” I shrug with a giggle.

The two of them looked back and forth between me and each other, and by the third look, I was fighting the urge to laugh.

After standing in front of them for about three seconds, I took the liberty of following up with some peaceful rhetoric– “I think it would be better for all of us if you just let me through.” I reassured them. *After all, it’s true.*

“Nobody is allowed in or out of here. Especially not you, after that stunt you pulled a couple days ago. I don’t know why they allowed your return, but if it was up to me, you would’ve been denied access and killed in the tube.” The vocal one, Charle, had this handlebar moustache so that was so long you could yank.

“Listen.” I start pacing back and forth– but they speak before I can continue.

“No. Go back home, Rick.” The same guard spoke. *I really hated this guy– always have.*

“Granger!” A deep booming voice echoed from behind me. “Put your hands up, and get on your knees.”

*Shit.* I turn around to see the chief of the watch and a handful of guards with tasers and bats inching toward me. They were wearing matching jump suits that made them look like a boyband. For once, I was glad that guns were banned.

“Easy.” I hold my hands up pretending to submit. “You wouldn’t shoot Eugene.”

“Let the cat go, and make this easier for both of us.”

I sigh. “Alright.” I pretend to start untying the wrap that held him up against my chest. Though I never had any intention of staying in this *sanctuary*. I yank the glove off my hand, an action so sudden it startled the chief into firing their taser which hooked onto my now–even larger infection, growing on my wrist which completely nullified the high voltage burning through the wire that connected us. Charred circles grew where the taser hooked on.

“Monster!” The chief screamed, dropping the taser and falling backward, a shared reaction among the watch that came to arrest me.

I run for the exit, dragging the taser across the ground with me, shouting and squirting pus at the two guards standing in my way. *Unfortunately, the first burst of pus was the only one that managed to have any propulsion. Fortunately, it was enough to make them turn away, not seeing the others that just oozed down my arm and elbow (which was extremely uncomfortable).*

Both of them jumped back, covering their mouth and pushing themselves across the ground, screaming combinations of curses and squeals. I ran more aggressively at the mouth-breather, making him slip back with a yelp, giving me just enough satisfaction to back off. Inside the elevator, I grabbed the wheel at the center of the door and spun it clockwise as hard as I could. My infected hand barely helped since I could no longer grip with it.

“Stop it!” The more tolerable guard shouts. Back turned, I ignore him. Focused on spinning the wheel quicker– quicker– click. I fling it open, run in, and close it behind me. A loud clank followed by an automatic respinning of the wheel ends with a thud. But the handle was deformed– *Wait, was that me?* I did close it with the infected hand. It could be– Ouch! I accidentally brushed my infected hand against my thigh which felt like a burning stove top.

Charl thumping on the glass door reminded me to get this thing moving. I hit the only option for making this elevator move. Up. Which triggered the sound of something being drilled. Then it moved.

Whew. I check in with Eugene; he's fine, no signs of any abnormalities– That's good.

*It's a long ride, better get comfy.* I wobble back and slide down the elevator wall, gazing aimlessly into the distance. I pull him closer against my chest, feeling the purrs reverberate through my body. It calms me... “It's gonna be okay.” I pretend to reassure him. It was really for me.

Hundreds of interconnected tubes spread across the bottom of the ocean, lit up by neon advertisements and floating lanterns– I never really understood how they worked, but boy, were they pretty. *The only thing I'm going to miss about this place... is the view.*

Protection from what could've been a million things: Aliens, radiation, bugs, heat, Marxists, gods, devils, angels. Nobody really knew what we were hiding from, but the thing that was most surprising was that some of them were right.

Though I'm still not too sure what the hell those things are up there, by a rough process of elimination, I managed to remove 'gods' cause no god could be this cruel.

The heat coming from my wrist was steadily climbing up my arm to parts where it wasn't quite numb yet. I grab my elbow, flinching at first from the hardened puss and second because it's probably not a good idea to touch it, but *fuck it, it's gonna spread anyway.*

I catch my breath and watch as the tube-tacular city fades away– the last shred of light coming from an advertisement for pest control. *Good thing I've got you.* I couldn't help but smile at the sight of him. I clutch him tighter against my chest and fight the urge to squeeze him as much as I can. He made great efforts to escape.

My infected fist clenches without my consent. *That was odd.* And, a couple of seconds later, it unclenched just as sharply. It clenched again, unclenched again and again and again, at a growing frequency until my arm was shaking from the rapid convulsions. *I got less time than I thought. Shit.*

*All this, because we wanted to see what was out there.*

Eugene hissed in discomfort. *Shit.* “Sorry, buddy, here you go.” I pulled back, actively fighting against my ever-shaking arm. Yes! He jumped out of the sling and onto the ground next to me. “Good boy. Good boy.” I tried to pet him gently, but my shaking arm forced pets into pats.

I stop– too scared that I'll accidentally hurt him. I managed to wedge my infected arm between my knees, greatly reducing the vibration. The only way I could tolerate the

heat was if my knees were pressed against my chest. Uncomfortable, *but it's temporary*. I reach out to Eugene, clicking my tongue, but he's busy stretching. I'll let him be—relieved to see he's still acting normal. *Thank goodness.*

After a couple of minutes, still rising through the void, my elbow was next to fall under its control. The heat was starting to spread, too. If I hadn't wedged it in between my knees, I'm confident I'd be hitting myself aggressively in the torso or face right about now. Unfortunately, the uptick in vibration startled Eugene, who was comfortably leaning against my thigh. Thankfully, he didn't go far. My thighs are getting exhausted from this constant clench. *I'm not sure how much longer I can hold this.*

Thankfully I was saved. The gentle caress of light brushed our world euphorically from above. Casually painting in various species of fish that call the deep sea home. It was just as beautiful as last time. The shaking calmed down gradually. *Is it reacting to the sunlight?* I could finally rest the inside of my thighs. *Thank goodness.*

Whew... I catch my breath and look over at Eugene, who's devoting all of his attention to tracking the school of fish swimming by the window. Some things never change, huh? Last time, we compared ourselves to the pairs swimming together, saying it was us with glee and naivety. This time, I can only hope that we get to do that again.

I gaze at Eugene. How blissful he lives in every moment. There's just something so precious about having a little friend that isn't burdened by the pressures of society. My heart feels lighter looking at him. Wait— he still hasn't reacted at all to the puss from earlier. *Maybe he is immune!* Then again, it's not affecting me either right now. Worry floods back into my body. "It's gonna be okay, buddy."

After a few more minutes, the first calm since all of this started, I started thinking harder about what those things were up there. *They weren't gods. They definitely weren't Marxists.* I make myself chuckle. *It has to be some sort of alien, which I struggle to believe, even though it feels like the only explanation. I can't say I know every species on earth, but I do know a lot, and this ain't one of them. It very well could be something that awakened from the melted icebergs. I remember some mention of that in the news, years and years ago. But something about it was demonic. Like it needed a host. It's hard to say with such limited data, but so far, if my theory is even in the same ballpark as the truth, that must mean there is a leader, or a mother of some kind.*

The elevator left the sun's eye and entered a period of absolute darkness, the final stage of this ascent: deceleration. My arm seized up immediately. "Eugene!" My eyes dart

around the pitch black room, scanning for him, but it's no use; I can't even see my knees, which are still pressed up against my chest. I hold my breath, squeezing my legs as much as I can to prevent an outburst. I try to listen for anything abnormal coming from Eugene, but it's hard to tell from the vicious pounding inside my head.

Then, a voice.

An indecipherable gargling voice snarled in my head, with echoing s's, v's, and x's.

A pressure rubbed up against my shin, Eugene?

A rinse of relief came in tandem with the watchful eye of the sun returning its warming gaze upon us. I was spared from the grip of whatever the hell that thing is inside of my wrist. Eugene brushed his head against my shin purring. *He is okay. He's okay!* I reached forward, scooping him off the ground, and pressed him against my chest. "Oh, thank goodness, thank goodness. You're okay!" I rub my face against his fluffy coat, smearing my tears all over it. "Thank goodness."

The elevator slowed to a stop. A 'clunk' confirmed its inertia had zeroed out. The double glass door clicked open with a hiss, grabbing my attention. Salt water waves and arrhythmic squawks filled the silence from the elevator. What I got to see next was the most reassuring sight of my life.

There she was. Different– But there she was.

"Eugene."