

LIGHT JUNKIE

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“Payment?” the woman asks you with clear distrust.

You open the lid of the black box, just a crack. Brilliant, blinding light leaks out. You close it quickly, and the box dissolves back into the shadows of your hands.

You both wait a moment to savor the luminous residue coating the inside of your eyelids—moonlight in a world of perpetual night.

But the box is quickly reabsorbing the escaped photons.

When the lingering light fades to shimmering black, then smoke black, then mud black, then dull black, then black black, the woman finally acknowledges the receipt of payment.

“One quarter flux.” She takes the box to discharge it.

You scratch at your beard in anticipation—a tic you’re glad she can’t see.

“Here,” she finally says. You can feel that her arm has moved by

the displacement of the air.

You reach into the black black and follow the warmth of her body heat to her outstretched hand. It is holding a syringe.

But soon, you are holding it. And soon, you are sitting in your favorite dark corner of your favorite dark alley, tucked away from the dark streets full of people using every sense but their eyes to see their way in and out of homes with aesthetically pleasing wall art no one will appreciate again, of unlit grocery stores to select canned goods by the sound of their shaken innards, of labyrinths of office cubicles now used for the kind of work the VP of HR could never have imagined (even while tugging the slug during his scheduled, closed-door, “ideation time”).

You uncap the syringe. Feel the veil of air between the needle tip and your open eye. Even though you can’t see it, you blink on instinct. Lashes brush past metal, razor-sharp.

You force your eyes open. You stick it in.

* * *

A white waterlily unfolds. A fly, shimmering green, lands on it. The green becomes the sunlight filtering through summer trees. Mint leaves are stirred through a mojito with a silver straw. Sparkles on rippling water. Golden hair as bright as a 10,000 lumen lightbulb before they were all stolen, broken, or burned out.

* * *

The sound of a drum beats your brain back into consciousness. Your head throbs to it. You feel pressed down into the concrete by the weight of the darkness. At some point, your light-hallucinations turned to dreams. You keep your eyes closed. Focus on the filling and emptying of your lungs. Try to remember how your fingers slipped through that golden hair like wind through

a North Dakota wheat field. But the memory is forced—like reading a description of a sunset versus viewing it with your own two eyeballs. When you finally give up and open them, there is no difference than if you had left them closed.

If others bother opening their eyes in the black black, you can't know. But you bother. You're not sure whether it's an act of hope or stubbornness. Or masochism.

Every time you get lit, you become even more aware of what you've lost. What the world has lost. But you're past lying to yourself that you'll never do it again. You'd rather be dirty in the light than clean in the dark.

You feel sick, but you can't just stay here, face in the pavement, drool crusting in your beard, stomach tight as a drum.

As you exit the alleyway, you feel the street open up in front of you. The dark is less heavy here, less stale. Apart from the solid object beside you. You know it is there by the way the air has to move around it. How it absorbs the ambient sounds. Even though the streetlamp no longer functions, it has the audacity to still take up space. Self-important piece of—you kick it.

Yup, solid.

You walk. Out of sync with the relentless drumbeat.

Some people prefer to walk in the streets, but most are blocked by car crashes—drivers panicking without traffic lights or streetlamps in the headlight-eating dark dark. Many ended up abandoning their vehicles, blinker lights left flashing until the batteries ran out.

At first, after the sun never rose, everyone flailed around. Knocking over vases, cursing at whacked funny bones and foreheads hit on corners of cabinets. But as the weeks and months of

blundering blindness persisted, a heightened awareness arose. And while it took months more for some to stop stretching their arms out in front of them, eventually most settled into a trust of their senses, a knowing without knowing how, of where the sidewalk ended and the lip of the curb rose. Someone looking for an Alicia told you it was the brain learning how to echolocate. Like you're all bats in a cave, and that cave is what used to be your average dot on a map in bum-fuck USA. *Proprioception* was another term you've heard thrown around. Whatever the reason, people stopped tripping. Noses stopped bleeding. Blind faith took on a new and real meaning.

The drumming is getting louder. You are pretty sure it's coming from the church at the center of town; probably think they're guiding lost souls though the darkness to the light of Jesus or some shit, but you've never bothered to investigate. He wouldn't be there.

You're surprised no one has shattered the drummer's hands—drummers' (has to be more than one. Never fucking stops). There've been moments where you might have done it yourself, but the masses seem to like it. Some way to keep time. A beat for every second, double beat on the minute, and so on, and on, and on... because apparently, everyone else is afraid of losing track of it. But you don't see the point of keeping track of how long you've existed like... this.

Perfume ahead. Floral and soapy. It doesn't quite cover up the smell of unwashed undergarments. The inside of your nose itches. Sneakered feet pass on your left. Stockinged thighs rub against each other. Bracelets clink softly.

You imagine a secretary out on her lunch break "getting her

steps in,” heels tucked under her office desk. But the offices have all shut down. Maybe she used to be one. But why anyone these dark days would bother to dress in anything but sweats, you can only guess. Maybe she has nothing else to wear? Maybe it gives her a sense of normalcy? Maybe you don’t care.

“Carl,” she says as she passes. It was once a question.

“No,” you answer, indicating that you are not Carl and also don’t know any Carls looking for their lost one. You don’t need to ask the name of your lost one because you know that this is not him and no way his scent sensitivity could handle this lady’s level of spritz. But out of courtesy, you return the now obligatory greeting. “James?”

“No,” she says, power walking away in her cloud of stale perfume. A flutter of disappointment moves through you. But you leave it behind as you too walk on.

The intensifying beat and consequent headache indicate that you’re nearing downtown.

You hear the commotion a block away. Must be a couple hundred already congregated there. *Shit*. You slept too long.

The approaching motor drowns out those who, up until this moment, had waited patiently for its arrival but are now shoving and elbowing each other to get in a better position. It *almost* drowns out the sound of the drum.

You arrive outside the grocery store just in time to see two massive lights pull up. Their light doesn’t penetrate like normal. But this darkness is not normal. Denser. The delivery truck’s headlights search into it like a deep-sea submarine.

The morning after the sun never rose, people were afraid. Most hid in their homes, carelessly using up all of their candles and

flashlights, even lighting multiple at once because they were terrified of the dark. When they went out, it was with generator-run strobe lights and flashlights with a full pocket of batteries. That was before folks wised up and started to hide their light behind closed curtains or down in windowless basements. Before people were mugged for a keychain flashlight. Before every match had been struck and burned to the finger-singeing end. Before whole houses were set on fire and let blaze to embers.

All the batteries were instantly gone from every store. Those who saw the writing on the wall? Or had they been removed ahead of time? You never saw the point in speculating, though you seemed the only one. In the early days, everybody exchanged life stories with every body they bumped into on the street. *Had the sun gone out? It was cooler, but not dark-side-of-the-moon cold; why not?* They congregated together for rigorous debates in Town Hall. *Why wasn't the electricity working? How were they supposed to hear news without electricity?* Talked themselves in circles. *Why was the darkness so thick? Volcano eruption somewhere? Dust cloud? Government experiment? Some alien weapon?* You went to a couple of them yourself. It was the sort of thing James would have gone to. But while there had been a few other Jameses, none of them had been your lost one.

The second the truck stops, people gather around the headlights like moths. A fluttering of frantic pale faces and flux boxes gorging on photons, significantly dimming the effectiveness of the bulbs. You'll never get close enough to collect more than a stray photon or two, and you need more than that to refill your box. The one you just emptied took weeks.

Next truck—another will come.

You hear the *click cla-clunk reeeeeeep kunk* of the trailer doors being opened. They're never locked. Some self-appointed do-gooders begin unloading the floor-to-ceiling boxes of provisions. Other do-gooders stand guard, creating a path from the truck to the store doors—once automatic, now permanently wedged open. You're pretty sure they're only guarding the goods so they can keep all the canned peaches for themselves.

You missed out on the flux, but you stay for your ration. The line moves quickly when no choice is offered. Some peach-stealer hands you a can. You shake it and hear corn sloshing inside. At least it isn't mushrooms.

Where the food is coming from, you've got no clue and far as you know no one else does, either. *Backstock from before? Warehouse full of grow lights still on the electric grid, somehow? Or could it be that not everywhere is as dark as here?* When the trucks first started coming, the crowd called out to the driver. Begged him for answers. Called him a coward for not getting out to help them unload. Once, there was a riot and the cabin door was pried open. That's when they discovered that there was no driver inside. Someone looking for a Raheed told you that self-driving vehicles use infrared cameras so they can "see" in the dark. The headlights were for show.

As you walk away, downing every last drop of sweet corn juice, you hear voices from inside the truck's now emptied cargo space—people who've finally had it with waiting around for answers. Many have left in the truck, packing themselves in nearly as tightly as the stacked boxes of canned goods. They always say they will come back and tell everyone what they discover, but to your knowledge, no one has ever returned.

You stay.

It's not even a question. You know this place. You know where to find the payment and where to take the payment. Wherever it is the trucks go, you don't know that place.

You let your senses "propriocept" you to the business district. Dusky cubicles in dusty offices.

You once had a cubicle here. Can't do data entry with no electricity. Can't do anything else with no skills.

Before the sun never rose, you would have considered sex in the dark to be anonymous. But now, you know your hookup by the way they smell, by the oiliness or roughness of their skin. And you can feel their face to find out features: nose size, hair line, age. Or you could. But you've decided you like to envision everyone who you let fuck you as gym bunny beautiful. Sometimes you even imagine celebrities. Why the fuck not? Henry Cavill railing you from behind. It's hot. But most of the time, you just think of James.

* * *

You run your hands around your hookup's collar. Down his sleeves. Over his chest. He's thin, but not fit. Most are thin these days. Why work out when you have no one to impress and you need to conserve every calorie you can get?

He smells like cedar. His skin is soft and slightly doughy.

As you take his pants off, you feel it sewn into his jeans pocket: the hard, cylindrical shape of a battery.

When you're done, you get dressed first.

"Hey, I think you put on the wrong pants," he says.

But you're already out of there.

* * *

"Toooooe Beans!" you call out as you approach your front

door. “Toe Beans!”

You can’t imagine how an animal could survive in this. Nothing to eat, but each other.

In the early days, the sidewalks crunched with dead leaves. Now, they’ve been crushed to dust. The insects are as silent as winter. There might be rats living in some dump somewhere, but fuck if you know where garbage goes. You haven’t heard a bird in months. Either they all died or flew to where there wasn’t perpetual night. Maybe they were just sick of these fucking drums.

“James?” you call out as you enter. You knew there would be no answer, but still, that flutter of disappointment.

Deadbolt. *Click*. Door locks.

Your reach finds the chairback of what used to be the sit-and-take-off-your-shoes chair, back when you cared about things like getting dirt on the new oriental rug. It is now the barricade-the-door-so-that-I’m-not-murdered-in-my-sleep-for-this-battery chair.

Scraaape. Clunk. You wedge it under the doorknob. Test it.

You turn towards what once was your living room but is now your barely-living room. The darkness here is empty despite the absurd quantity of decorative objects that James artfully assembled around the place. Empty of laughter. Empty of dreams. Empty even of arguments.

You count the steps as you walk upstairs—*one, two, three, four*—not that you need to anymore. Just habit—*eleven, twelve, thirteen*—

In the early days after the sun never rose, you spent most of your time in this house. Counting the steps from the bed to the toilet. From the bathroom to the couch. From the couch to the

closet, half of it empty of everything but hangers. Plenty of space to sit on the bare floor and wonder in what other closet James' tragic Carhart hoodies were now hanging.

You told yourself you were waiting to see if the cat would find his way home, but even you knew that was the ass end of a shit excuse. Sure, James had packed most of his clothes and his toiletries and his precious bookmark collection, but he'd said he'd be back for the rest. Separated didn't mean broken.

How perfectly pathetic—to have thought that the dark dark would somehow scare him back to you like a kid afraid of shadow monsters. Like he isn't more afraid of being hurt by you.

Even though you undress without light, you feel exposed. Naked.

Water still runs but it's *ice-cutting-cold*, and you shower as quickly as possible. The body wash has long since been used up but there's still a few drops of dish soap. You allow yourself one.

You shove the battery into the very bottom corner of your pillowcase for peace-of-mind. James' pillow you put over your head. It no longer smells like him. You wish you had paid more attention to how he smelled, but he was so fucking pretty you barely noticed anything else. You still hear the drumming, but at least it's muffled.

When you wake, you don't remember what you dreamed. If you remembered your dreams, maybe you wouldn't need to get lit so often. You have no idea what time it is, either. If you listened to the drums, maybe you would know. But why would you want to know how long you've been alone?

* * *

You wait in the alleyway until the woman arrives. It takes a while, but she always shows.

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She inserts your battery into her tester. It glows orange.
Almost dead. *Fuck.*

Worth something, but not enough.

You head back to the office district. Sure to enter a different building. Watch out for the smell of cedar.

No batteries on this hookup. Even better. A flashlight—at first, you thought it was something else hard.

She tests it, the briefest burst.

You stick the syringe in.

A silver straw stirs. Sparkles on rippling water. Golden hair. Bright as a 10,000 lumen lightbulb.

The drums are still beating.

Suuuck plop. You know it's black beans before you pop and peel the can open.

The answer to "James?" is still no.

The water in the shower is still cold.

You imagine Timothée Chalamet this time.

Golden hair. Bright as a 10,000 lumen lightbulb.

Today's menu features a cold can of waxy green beans.

Still no James.

Still no hot water.

Still the drumbeat. Maybe if you just *threaten* to break their hands.

You catch a whiff of cedar and decide that today isn't a good day for the business district.

You walk your old neighborhood instead. Past the basement apartment you once fondly called "the spunk bunker." Where you brought James home from that party after you bonded over both being from North Dakota, only a town and a hundred miles of wheat fields over from each other. Back when all your plates were disposable and you didn't know to use fabric softener. You've already searched there, but the nostalgic in you still likes to pass by.

Even though there are no lights in the windows, you know which houses aren't occupied by the silence. Homes of those who left on the truck or who felt safer living communally in the old mall. And if you're not sure, you just test the door—every house has been broken into at this point unless someone inside has barricaded it shut. If it opens, no one's home.

You walk up the garden path and feel dead plants brush past. Someone landscaped this once. What a waste of effort.

Something else brushes your legs. A tail curls around your calf. "Toe Beans?" you ask stupidly.

The cat meows pitifully in reply—not a meow you know. How this cat is still alive—

"Peter? Erin?" comes a young woman's voice from somewhere further up the path ahead of you.

You're startled by her presence. Cat must have distracted you.

"No," you reply. "James?"

"I know a James."

The flutter in your gut feels like a butterfly trying to beat its way off a spider web. "James Haart?"

"I'm not sure. We can ask him. He's inside."

You have to be careful not to trip over the cat as you follow the sound of the young woman's steps up the path.

Key in lock, and she *scrapes* the door open.

The smell hits you like a bag of cat litter in the stomach, and you almost puke. Cat piss. Old cat food cans. Cat dander. You wretch. Breathe in a cat hair, or few. Gag. Too many cats to count circle your feet.

You're about to turn heel when she says to the room, "James?"

This is the sort of lost cause he'd get caught up in. Saving all the fucking cats in town.

But then, you think how the stench would cause his sinuses to fill, and then he'd get that inner ear thing that caused the vertigo he was always being a drama queen about. No way he could handle—

A gust of rank air rushes towards you. Your head smashes to the side in a bright flash of pain.

The rush of air again. Even though you know what's coming, there's no time to duck.

"Wait!" you yell.

Too late. What feels like a shovel makes contact with your skull again.

"I'm sorry but they're starving! And it's not their fault."

A third blow. You stagger. There's a warmth on the side of your head. You wouldn't be surprised if it's cracked open.

"I have a cat!" you call out.

No blow comes.

You use the opportunity to fumble behind you for the doorknob. "Toe Beans. He'll starve, too, if I don't make it home."

Your palm cups smooth, domed metal...

"I'm sorry for Toe Beans, but he's just one cat and there are so

many—”

...and you fucking *bolt*.

Your footfalls sync with the drum beat as they pound out your surroundings: Post box. Dead tree. More self-important streetlamps.

Crazy Cat Lady’s strides are slightly off-beat as she pursues—probably hoping you’ll collapse from the concussion so she can finish you off. They echo off the houses that line the block.

She’s calling out to you. What sounds like, “Just one cat!”

You hear the distant rumblings of a motor. Veer towards it. See the glow of moth people. *Reeeeep kunk cla-clunk*. Hear the doors close.

“One more!” you shout as you sprint to the truck, stitch in your side.

Reeeeep. For once, you’re thankful for whatever do-gooder is on door duty.

You slide in.

Kunk. Cla-clunk. The trailer doors close you safely inside.

The vibrations of the truck reverberate through you. It lurches forward, and you bump into another body. Haven’t done that in a while.

“Sorry,” you wheeze as you find an unoccupied spot to sit against the trailer wall.

You wipe the sweat from your forehead on the sleeve of your jacket, or could it be blood? You sniff it. Rust. You can only hope the wound isn’t too deep.

There are fourteen other bodies in the cargo space with you. You know them by their distinct breath. Breath that smells like

lima beans. That smells like Listerine. Breath that is shallow. That is trembling. That is steady and almost meditative. Your own: breath ragged and irregular and tasting a little like cat feces. Such diversity.

What you all had to go through to choose this truck on this day would be quite the story. If you had it in you to care.

“Erin? Oliver?” asks a woman’s tearful voice. She sounds middle-aged. No one replies.

“Amy?” asks a younger-sounding man sitting beside the crying woman.

There’s a pause. Then it continues around the circle of bodies.

When it’s your turn, you think, *There’s no point. What would be the chances?* But everyone is waiting for you to ask it, so you do. “James?”

Always that disappointment.

“Todd?”

“Randy?”

“SinJuan?”

“Cathy?”

“Lilly?”

“Um, I’m Lilly,” responds a voice. Every single body inhales. It’s like all of the oxygen has been sucked out of the cabin. “Brian?”

“Lilly, oh my god! Oh my *god!* I looked for you everywhere! I didn’t want to leave, but I thought by now—”

“I looked for you, too! I was on my run. Then all the street-lights went out. I got turned around. I was so lost.” Lily starts to sob.

“I *told* you those late-night runs—”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

You have to endure a great deal of slobbering kissing as the truck drives on. Everyone else is silent. Probably imagining the reunions they will never have. Your head is throbbing too much to think about anything else. Feels as if the drums have moved inside your skull. You don't know if it's the blows to the brain or the withdrawal setting in.

After what seems like hours, the emoting calms down.

"Does anyone else have to pee?" asks a timid voice.

"Hold it," says another.

"I don't know if I can anymore."

The trailer smells like a public urinal by the time you start to see the light leaking through the seams in the door. It's subtle. A dull black against the black black, but it's enough to send your travel companions speculating excitedly. *Maybe there's still power. Maybe it's moonlight. Maybe we'll be able to see the stars!*

When the door finally opens, you see light pollution in tiny pockets on the horizon.

"Exit the truck now," says the voice of someone who's repeated this a hundred times before. "Follow my voice now."

Since you were last to enter, you are one of the first to get out.

"Excuse me," you hear someone behind you ask. "Is it night?"

"No," says the voice.

So, the dark dark is here, too. Yes, you feel it. Pressing in on you, as if you've stepped out of the truck into a thick fog.

"Follow my voice. This way now."

Your fellow passengers stick together in a huddled clump. Something familiar. Though, until several hours ago, they had all been strangers. Well, except Lily and Brian.

As instructed, the clump follows. But you've never been a rule

follower. And who knows where this bureaucratic drone of a voice wants to take you. Wherever it is, you doubt they have what your unabating headache and itching skin are nagging you for.

So, you slip away. Head toward the distant glow. Probably just another moth flying into a flame.

* * *

All you have to do is follow the stream of light particles to its source. If only there weren't so many more obstacles between you and it. Street vendor stalls, newspaper racks, bus stops, fire hydrants, trash bins, traffic light posts, telephone poles, signs that once gave important information about handicap parking and where there was permit-only parking and where was absolutely NO PARKING and which days were street cleaning days and what would happen to you if you dared park there on a street cleaning day...

And more people. The tone of the greeting here is less "Could you please tell me if you are or have heard of a James?" and more "You better tell me where James is or I'll fucking cut you."

You feel like you've been walking for hours. You find a street bench and sit down beside what feels like a wad of blanket and some soggy cardboard. Your feet are begging to breathe, but you don't dare unshoe them should the owner of said wad return. You rest only as long as you need and then get on with it.

Sometimes headlights pass—it seems a number of the streets have been cleared of crashes—but they'll mow down anyone who tries to capture their flux. No walking down the middle of the street here.

The light is getting brighter as you move towards it. You begin to distinguish mud black from the dull black.

You unclip your flux box from your belt where you always keep it in case you pass by a lost photon. Run your thumb across its surface, slick with solar panels.

When you get to the source, there are moth people six deep along the perimeter of a fence, flux boxes lifted high, trying to collect what they can from the beam of light that lured them there. It radiates up from a central skylight—a beacon of wealth—that casts a sooty glow over the surrounding darkness so that you can just make out the form of the massive mansion from which it emanates. The thump of music from behind its blacked-out windows calls to an old desire inside of you.

An armored vehicle appears.

It inches up to the gate, parting people like a plow through a landfill.

You try to squeeze yourself through the press of bodies so that you can get close enough to climb on and ride it inside the fence. Then stop yourself, mid-shove. Wonder why no one closer is trying to do just that? Freeze. They must know something you don't.

You close your eyes to block out the visual distractions. Let the sounds of the crowd echo off your surroundings. That's when you perceive the heavy presence of the towers.

A thousand centipedes creep across your skin.

When you open your eyes and look up, you see the black black silhouette of the guard tower looming.

The gunshot hits your ears, and you look over just in time to see a body slide off the armored vehicle and back into the crowd of trash people.

You will need to be invited in.

* * *

Life in the city takes getting used to. There are more objects to navigate around. People are more aggressive. More suspicious. The lines for the canned goods are longer. The shaken innards always sound like mushrooms. The drugs are more expensive. They're also stronger. More tempting. And you can earn flux by exercising for a light ration. Whole gyms retrofitted. Human-generated power. There's also talk of work just outside the city that earns you more, but you have to hand yourself over to a drone voice to get that gig. No thank you. Besides, your flux box fills faster. Days instead of weeks. But these weeks, you've been using less. Exchanging photons for information. On how to get into that palace of luminescence with its ever-present fluxbeam glow.

It's not easy. Resisting the lure of the needle.

You finally find your ticket in: she likes to show up to the mansion soirees with fresh arm candy. But it's a one-off. Her bodyguard will make sure you stay superglued to her side, and you'd have to be a very special lay for her to take you more than once.

When you finally locate her house (almost a mansion in its own right), the gatekeeper does not seem surprised at what you ask.

Click of a flashlight, and you're blinded. You used to have a face that got you into clubs for free, but you haven't looked in a mirror in a long time. Haven't shaved in a long time, either. You hope the drugs haven't made you look like a meth-head.

You meet the criteria, whatever they may be, and a security guard takes you through a pitch-dark gate straight to a pitch-dark pool house. The help isn't important enough to waste light on, apparently.

"Wash up. Suits are in the closet. You'll find one your size," the

guard instructs. “And don’t forget to floss.”

“Can I shave?” you ask.

“No. She prefers facial hair.”

You’ve been made to sit up front with the driver and bodyguard. There are only two seats. You’re practically penetration distance from the bodyguard’s lap. And he smells—greasy hair follicles and pomade.

It’s surreal to be inside the car as it pushes through the mass of light junkies surrounding the mansion gates. Every pale face is turned toward the headlights, hapless guppies mesmerized by an angler fish’s luminescent lure. So many faces that they all blur together into a sea of desperation.

You hear a bang. And another. The sea parts for you. The gates open.

You can’t help but feel important.

You can now feel the thump of the music in your chest. Makes you giddy.

There’s not enough ambient fluxbeam glow in the unlit vestibule to see your ticket in, but by the air that flows around her you sense someone that doesn’t take up much space. Slender. Frail. She smells like linen and lavender. Screwing an old lady; not exactly something on your bucket list.

“Mrs. Witherow,” acknowledges the bouncer. “And?”

Click. Another flashlight in the face.

“Guest,” she says, hooking her arm around yours. Voice is girlier than expected.

Another *click* and you’re dropped back down the mineshaft.

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Something is pressed into your hand—pair of sunglasses. You slip them in your jacket pocket. Might as well ask a starving man to portion control.

The hooked arm tugs, and you follow it through a heavy velvet curtain. The clouds part. The long dark tunnel ends. And you step into white.

You hear yourself gasp. The body beside you giggles.

There is movement. Blurry shapes swimming through the milky light. You squint. The shapes move to the rhythm of the music. You realize they must be dancing.

The arm pulls again, and you are led into Nirvana.

As your eyes adjust, you start to see colors emerge. A figure in cobalt blue, another in lipstick red. Beside you; iridescent lilac. *Color without a needle in the eye!* Silver trays float by carrying cocktails. Liquid amber and grapefruit pink and apple green. The waiters wear gold stripper-skimpy uniforms instead of tuxes. Others entertain on the dance floor. One, lathered in glitter with slicked-back blonde hair...

There he is, sparkling like a disco ball, spectacular to behold. Your estranged husband.

You blink. Make sure you're not light-hallucinating.

He stops dancing and just stares at you. You wonder if he looks so shocked because he's surprised to see you or if you really look that shit.

He slides through the gyrating bodies until he is standing only an arm's length away.

You want to say how you wandered the streets thinking of no one but him. How sorry you are for not appreciating him before. How you only exist for the drugs that let you relive that day by the

lake where the sun shone off his golden hair and you realized you wanted to marry him. But all you say is, “The cat is gone.”

“He’s here,” James says.

“Toe Beans? You took him?”

“I didn’t want him to starve.”

A slight tug on your elbow—Witherow has turned to speak with someone on her other side. You see her in focus for the first time. Do a double-take. Her hair is styled in a sweeping bob similar to that of the mature woman she’s in conversation with, only it’s ginger. She’s wearing a full face of make-up but doesn’t need it. Lilac ball gown is classy but slightly too big. And too formal for someone her age. Twenty-something? Makes you question how accurate your assumptions were in the business district...

“So, you’re with the Witherow heiress.”

“I didn’t know her before today,” you answer truthfully.

You can see in his eyes that James doesn’t believe you, but even in the dark, you would know. You lost his trust long before any of this.

You notice Agent Pomade—stance wide, hands clasped at his groin—eying you from his proper station several paces behind. Angle your body more in the direction of your ticket’s conversation.

James gets the hint. “I have to get back. I’ll find you later. You can see Toe Beans if you want.”

“I would have fed the cat,” you say as he dances away. You’ve never seen him dance a day in your life, before.

* * *

You keep having to remind yourself that you’re not light-hallucinating the silver platters of hors d’oeuvres and champagne

flutes floating through the clusters of bejeweled guests. The arm that remains firmly hooked around yours models its own extravagant emerald bracelet. Public displays of wealth; weird how this shit still matters here. Diamonds don't even buy batteries out in the dark dark.

But flux does.

You glance down at your box. Already full. *Now who's rich, bitch?*

It's clear Witherow is showing you off. "Just because they don't have light resources, doesn't mean that they're not still human beings." Dragging you from boring old rich lady— "Oh, yes, his life was *abominable* before the Witherow Foundation's new initiative came to his aid," to boring old rich lady— "You're too kind, but I credit my parents' philanthropic spirit."

You thought this was a sex thing. Or maybe it is, and this is just the foreplay.

As the evening progresses, you piece together your ticket's backstory: parents on a private jet the morning the sun never rose. Never landed at their destination. (Old lady clothes suddenly make sense; they were obviously her mother's.) An orphan seeking validation from her parents' peers. Tragic. Would be more tragic if she wasn't exploiting your misfortune to appear superior.

You keep your eye out for James, but the fashionably late crowd have added their jewels to the exhibition. You only catch flashes of the skimpy gold uniforms slipping between the press of guests. No way to tell if any belong to him.

You're on edge. *What if he doesn't come back?* Then you remind yourself that this is the man who once helped the neighbor mulch his entire back yard right after having an anaphylactic

attack—EpiPanned himself in the thigh like he was sticking in a fucking roast turkey thermometer—because he had ‘said he would.’

* * *

A couple hours later, James brushes past you and whispers, “Bathroom.”

* * *

“I hate the beard,” he wastes no time telling you.

“And here I thought I was entering my era of hobo chic.”

James gives you his ‘not amused’ face, but you catch a hint of smirk.

He pushes open a granite stall door. On the closed seat is a monogrammed towel. Folded. With a razor placed on top.

Maybe before the sun never rose, you would have been repulsed by having to shave in a toilet. There’s a lot you’ve done in the dark that would have turned your stomach in the light.

When you go to dry your face, you discover, tucked into the towel, one of the golden waiter uniforms. You shed the suit and leave it in the empty stall.

Agent Pomade is still waiting outside the bathroom door where you left him. He lets you pass. You chance a glance back and see him shifting foot to foot. Getting antsy.

The uniform is skintight even though you’re mostly bones. You keep checking your bulge to make sure it isn’t lopsided or anything. You’ve gotten so used to playing pocket pool in public that you’ve forgotten how to be discreet about it.

James slides up next to you and hands you a tray. “Heard of hiding in plain sight?”

* * *

You weave through the crowd. A hand grabs a drink here, sets

down an empty glass there. One hand with an emerald bracelet places a drained champagne flute on your tray.

“...starving on the streets before we saved him,” your ticket in is telling an older woman with bright white hair that only looks gray in contrast to the surplus of pearls that drip from her every appendage. “I’ll have him tell you all about it when he rejoins us. Shortly.” She looks towards the bathrooms. Straight past you.

She’s trying to hide it, but you can tell she’s pissed.

“Every person matters, you know,” you hear her boast in feigned modesty as you move away. Far away.

There is no sunrise, but you sense the party is dwindling into early morning. Finally, James says, “Let’s clock out.”

They have clocks here.

You collect the cat from the storage closet where James keeps him while he’s working. Find a vacant bedroom and claim it for yourselves—there are staff bunks but no privacy.

The room is drenched in drapery. Quilted velvet. Royal blue. Only one bed, but it’s a California King.

You may never have noticed his smell before but it is immediately familiar to you. Now you can define notes of musk and sweetgrass too.

“Are you wearing cologne?” you ask.

“The soap is scented here. *All* of it.”

“But your sinuses...”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” He waves your concern away and goes back to petting Toe Beans who is stretched out between you and

James on the royal blue velvet bedspread. His ginger fur vibrates as he purrs. *Cute little cock-blocker.*

“But have you been dizzy?”

“They have antihistamines here.”

“They get you all groggy. And the non-drowsy shit—”

“I’m fine!” Looks you in the eyes. “I promise.”

You always found his sincerity to be a little unsettling. So, you look away. Watch your fingertips run through his hair—*wind through wheat*—down his cheek bone, his jawline, his Adam’s apple, his collarbone, his biceps...

“You’ve been working out.”

“They like us to.”

“You hate working out.”

He shrugs.

“How’d you get this gig, anyway?”

James plays with the cat’s paw, pressing the footpad so the toe beans fan out, then releasing the pressure and watching them snap back together. “I’d rather not talk about that yet, if you don’t mind.”

You mind.

“How long have you been here, then?” *In this golden fucking light palace, while I’ve been fumbling through the world like a mouse stuck in a storage closet*, you want to say. But you refrain. You’ve learned the hard way what happens if you let thoughts pour straight from brain to tongue before filtering first. “If you took the cat, you must have left right after it happened?”

“I assumed you left on the first truck.” Is that a hint of apology in his voice?

“Did you even look for me?” you ask as casually as you can.

“I looked. When I went to get Toe Beans.”

You don’t know what to say to that. He looked. But he didn’t wait.

You pick at a button on the quilted bedspread.

You’ve never been good with awkward silences. “So... do you know what the fuck *happened?*”

He laughs.

You laugh.

Toe Beans unslits his eyes to give the humans a dirty look.

Clearly relieved to change the subject, James dives in. “OK, what we know for sure is—” He tells you how there was some sort of military operation during the Cold War called ‘Project Needles’ where Nixon tried to up America’s global military communications game by sending 500 million tiny needles into the ionosphere. “Where electrically charged particles reflect radio waves back to Earth,” he explains, knowing that you wouldn’t have the faintest idea otherwise.

But you’re only half listening. The other half of you is thinking how pretty he still is. It’s not like you forgot, but memories are like reflections in a smudgy mirror—your bathroom mirror before you moved in with James and his Windex obsession.

His lips continue to tell you how the head of some telecommunications conglomerate, apparently inspired by Nixon’s unrealized vision, “and hubris,” gave himself the authority to launch a new wave of them, only not needles, microscopic satellites, and only not 500 million, but over a *billion*. Surprise, surprise, it had unintended effects. The ionosphere normally only blocks out certain ultraviolet rays, but these “nanolites” (you snort) altered the ionosphere’s gases in some way. Now, the electrically charged

particles reflect light back into space, effectively blocking out the sunlight. “Thank God certain infrared wavelengths still make it through, otherwise the Earth would have frozen solid. Humanity exterminated for faster streaming of memes!”

It takes you a moment to register that the explanation has reached its end.

James was always the smart one, so you trust that he’s sourced the science shit. There’s really only one question to be asked: “Who’s we?”

“What?”

“You said, what *we* know. Who is ‘we’?” you ask again. James was always the smart one; you were always the jealous one.

You can tell by the way James bites his cheek that he wishes he’d chosen his words more carefully. “It’s better you don’t know.”

“Is there someone else?” you ask, not really wanting to know the answer.

“No, no. It’s not that.” Now James picks at the velvet-covered button. “I just... can’t tell you.”

“But I’m your husband.”

“We’re getting divorced.”

You can’t tell if he’s joking. He always did have a dry sense of humor. You decide to pretend he is. “I don’t think the government office that issues divorce papers is open for business these days,” you respond playfully.

“We’re still separated.”

He doesn’t return your playful tone.

* * *

You can’t sleep. The stench of detergent on the comforter is too strong. The air too dry. Too stale. And James shut off the

light—as if to punctuate his point—after telling you to “just drop it already.” Opposite side of the California King.

You’ve pretended to roll over in your sleep twice already, but there’s still a queen-sized chasm between you. You flop over once more. Let the back of your hand touch the skin of his shoulder.

But James pretends to be asleep, too.

You sense the black black climbing the walls of the mansion like invasive ivy. Trying to find a crack to worm in through.

When finally you drift off, finally, you dream. Of shadowy back alleyways and mystery cans of produces being shaken down dark isles.

Some time in the night James presses up against you and, “separated” or not, you fall back into old habits.

* * *

It’s the next morning. Or so the clock tells you. Toe Beans is kneading your pillow and purring loudly. James’ bedside lamp casts a halo behind his head. The more you stare, the more it shimmers.

“So... is this all from flux boxes?” you ask him, trying hard not to blink. “Or can’t you tell me that, either?” You meant to tease but it came out more bitter.

You tense.

James smiles at you—an *oh-you-are-so-clueless-it’s-adorable* sort of smile. “These people aren’t the type to buy flux by the box.”

He’s teasing you back. Your shoulders relax some.

“Batteries then? They disappeared from all the stores.”

This time he laughs at you out loud. “These also aren’t the type to buy batteries in the store. They buy battery *factories*. Some you’ll meet here, they were just lucky enough to have a small off-the-grid energy source and became light-rich overnight. But most, they

own the nuclear power plants, hydroelectric dams, wind farms, geothermal pumps... everything.”

Doesn't make sense.

“Doesn't make sense,” you voice. “If there are wind farms and shit, why doesn't the electricity work, then?”

Deadpan, he says, “It does. It's just being siphoned off.”

“You're fucking with me.”

“I wish I was.” It's still so damn sexy when he furrows his brow like that.

“Do you, now?”

After the sun never rose, anytime you craved James you had to scrounge up payment and jab a needle of unknown origin in your eye. Now you can just—

James turns his face away before your lips can touch his. “About last night...”

Fuck. Shit. “I knew there was someone else.” You catch a whiff of cedar float through your memory. Yes, you're aware you're being a hypocrite, but jealousy doesn't give two shits about reason.

“I told you, it's not that. It's just... we broke up-”

“Separated,” you correct him.

“-for a reason.”

“Does any of that matter now?”

“I don't know,” he replies pensively. He looks off to the side at some spot on the plush carpet. There he goes, overthinking again.

“Why help me ditch Witherow, then?”

“Because... I know her modus operandi. She never brings a guest more than once. And because I know that once you leave here—unless you can buy your way—you won't make it back in.”

“So, you do want me here.” *Validate me!* you want to scream.

“I wanted to make sure you were safe.” He looks back at you, brow still creased. “You don’t look well.”

He’s not wrong. Still, not nice.

“Thanks.” You keep your face stony. “So last night, that was pity sex, was it?”

James sighs. You know he’s thinking you’re being too reactionary. And maybe you are. But his words sting. Or that just the bite of withdrawal? You’ve been using less these last weeks, but less is not none. Now it is none.

“I never stopped looking for you, you know. All the while you were here, playing fuckboy.” You feel the resentment blistering its way up your throat. “You cared more about the fucking cat than me.”

“If we’re getting into all of *this*, I need breakfast first.” James gets up and shimmies his absurd gold uniform back on. You look away, already regretting your outburst. “Do you want some?” you hear him ask gently.

Your hunger is louder than your ego. “Long as it’s not canned mushrooms.”

* * *

You open all the drawers. Look in the closet. Nothing of value. Not back-alley value, anyway.

You’re back under the bedspread by the time James returns. He’s carrying a plate heaped with continental breakfast staples: croissants and jam, waffles with syrup, scrambled eggs. And coffee. The smell makes you want to cum.

Out there in the dark dark, the daily canned ration was your only option. Some people savored it. You got it over with. It was just fuel. Fuel to get your body where you needed to get it to. Fuel

to get done what you needed to get done. A means to an end. And that end was always the tip of a needle.

But *this*—you take a bite of the croissant and let the butterfat coat the roof of your mouth. The sweetness of the raspberry jam rolls over your tongue. Then the tartness smacks you in the back of the jaw. Saliva squirts. You moan.

“Good?” James laughs.

“Mmmhmm,” you reply, mouth so full you can barely chew. You cram another bite in.

“You’ll make yourself sick! There’s plenty more where this came from.”

You swallow. Slow down. Savor.

The thing about apologies is it’s best to get them over with. Before the hurt festers in the heart you’ve wounded. “I’m sorry, muffin top,” you offer. “You know I get hangry.”

“I know.” Your husband is nothing if not empathetic.

“Imagine what a bitch I was living off of one can of beans a day!”

His voice is soft. “I can only imagine.” His halo shimmers. It’s like he’s a saint trying to empathize with a sinner on how shitty Hell is.

You can’t stop staring at the lamp behind his head. You’re seeing sunspots now.

“So, if the electricity works... why the flux boxes?”

“So those with more can control those with less,” James says cynically.

“Elaborate?”

“Just a way for The Committee to create a new currency.” Off your look— “New government made up of the same old corporate

lobbyists who ran it before, anyway,” he rants. “Entrepreneurial grifters.”

“Are they behind the trucks, too?”

“They pretend it’s philanthropy.”

You think about the huddle of your fellow passengers blindly following that bureaucratic drone of a voice into the unknown.

“What do you mean by, ‘they pretend?’”

“Is that the time? Better get ready for my shift,” James deflects. “Just gonna hop in the shower real quick.”

You roll out of bed to follow.

“Mind making the bed?” he asks before closing the bathroom door on you.

While the shower runs, you throw the comforter over the mess of sheets. Then dress. You’re not one to feel immodest, but this fucking uniform... You’ve seen less skimpy outfits at circuit parties.

“What are you doing?” asks James.

He dressed in the bathroom.

“What does it look like?”

“They don’t just let anyone work here.”

“But if I’m not working, why would they let me stay?”

His lack of answer says it all.

You see the shadow of back alleyways and dark aisles.

James scoops up Toe Beans. The cat mews in protest. “I just don’t think this is a good idea.”

“We’re separated, remember? I can do what I want.” You know you’re being petty, but you can’t help yourself. Your skin is prickling. Withdrawal needling you like a tattoo gun.

* * *

The industrial steel door is thrust open with force, halting just inches from your face. It blocks your view of James across the room from where he left you by the double doors to the kitchen. The door swings back and you once again see the huddle of gold uniforms. The group of them looks over at you.

You find yourself wishing you could hide in the dark dark. Shake *that* lunatic thought from your withdrawal-addled brain.

James walks back over to you.

“I explained the situation. And they do understand the unique circumstances. But this also isn’t a good time to let someone new on staff.”

“Why not?”

He doesn’t answer you.

You can feel the black tendrils squeezing the walls of the mansion. Just the thought of the dense, dark air suffocates you.

“James, I can’t go back out there!”

“I never said you had to; there are other Shine Houses. You’ll be transferred to one,” he assures you, “once arrangements can be made.”

Your throat unconstricts slightly. “When?”

“Soon.”

Now, it’s your chest that’s tight. “Did you even ask if I could stay here?”

“No.” He looks down.

Good, hope the guilt keeps you up at night.

James leaves you in the storage room with Toe Beans.

You entertain yourself with organizing it by color. Cocktail napkins with bleach. Mop heads with pasta noodles. Windex with mouthwash. Once a uniform walks in, but she takes one look at

LIGHT JUNKIE

you, at the shelves, and walks right out again.

When it's *about-fucking-time* for him to clock out, James comes to collect the cat, and you.

You follow him, seething, to a vacant room. Pearl satin and rose gold.

He doesn't enter with you.

"Here, you take this one; I'll find another."

He takes the cat with him.

* * *

Hot bath. The tub is so big you could drown in it. And you have a stomach ache. Your belly sticks up out of the water. Over-stuffed and bloated.

The absence of the drums has left a vacant space inside your skull. Nothing to fill it with but regrets.

You find yourself wishing you could sit by the lake for a while.

* * *

The lights are always on.

Every night is an occasion to celebrate.

The gold uniforms still whisper every time you pass by.

James still won't share a bed with you.

"Nothing will happen," you say, hoping he'll make a liar of you.

But either he doesn't trust you or he doesn't trust himself.

He still won't tell you who the mysterious 'we' is or why the food trucks are really being sent out.

You miss seeing him by the lake. Least in that smudge-smearred reflection he was smiling lovingly at you.

You still can't sleep, even with a night light on.

You haven't been shipped out yet, but it can't be long.

The tendrils tighten.

* * *

It's gotta be the twentieth room you try. It looks like the interior designer of this one was the love child of Liberace and Marie Antoinette. Everything is patterned—scalloped shells and curlicues—from the daybed to the vanity to the upholstered footstools. Mirrors, mirrors everywhere. There's a fucking crystal chandelier over the four-poster.

James is drowning in an oceanic, powder blue, ruffled duvet with matching bed skirt and shams (before James, you had no idea what shams even were). He's crying.

This room would be enough to make anyone overwhelmed.

“What's the matter, muffin top?”

He looks up and hastily wipes his eyes. “What are you doing here?” he asks in that voice he uses when he's trying to hide that he's upset.

Because I'm trying to save my ass. “Because I'm not ready to give up on us.”

“Not now, please.” James covers his face with a large ruffle. The cat-sized lump of ginger fur in his lap twitches its tail.

You enter the gaudy room. Close the door behind you. Not even a squeak of a hinge. This place would be lethal in the dark dark.

You approach the bed and sit down beside him—sink down. This duvet is thicker than all the blankets you've ever owned, no exaggeration.

“Why are you crying?”

“Because... I'm trying to save humanity,” he says into the frill. “You wouldn't understand.”

“Try me.”

“I-” James hesitates. You can tell he wants to spill. “-can’t.”

“You can.” You pull the ruffle away from his face. “Tell me, muffin top.”

“I can’t.” His voice shifts from despair to resolve. “And I don’t have a fucking muffin top any more.”

If you can’t get him to let you in you’ll be sent to some other house. And some other house doesn’t have a history with you. Some other house almost certainly wouldn’t think twice about sending you back into the black if you fucked up. And let’s be real...

“So what, you’re saving humanity by dancing around in a gold Speedo?”

“Excuse me?” he asks slowly.

“You say you’re trying to save humanity, but you’re certainly comfortable doing it. Grinding up on these daddies while you eat their finger sandwiches and who knows what else. Looks to me like all you’re trying to save is your own ass.”

Before, sometimes the only way you’d get James to open up was to get him mad at you. Really mad at you.

“I *knew* you wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand. That you’ve always thought you were superior to me. You think I’m too unintelligent to understand what’s going on, or you don’t trust me. Which is it?”

“I never said you were unintelligent. You’re *always* reading into things.”

“So, you won’t tell me because you don’t trust me anymore.” You stand up and turn your back to him. Dramatic, sure. Effective? Hopefully.

“I won’t tell you because I don’t know you anymore.”

Well, that backfired.

“You know me. We’re married.”

“Separated.”

“Does it matter?!” you turn and yell down at him.

“Yes!” He’s suddenly standing, too.

Toe Beans hisses under the bed.

“It was less than a year ago,” you argue. “We still have a shared bank account, for fuck’s sake.”

“Bank accounts aren’t relevant anymore! A lot can change in a year!”

If he only knew how true that was.

You go all in. “I still love you. That hasn’t changed for me.”

That’s it. No more cards.

“I still love you, too.” If James says it, he means it; that sincerity again. “You’re here, aren’t you? But this is bigger than that.”

“There’s *nothing* bigger than that.”

And he collapses. Clings to you. Like you’re an airplane wing in the ocean and he’s just crash-landed.

* * *

You ask; he answers.

You want to ask it all before he changes his mind. But the information flows as freely from him as photons from a cracked flux box.

He tells you how the light rich are building a city above the ionosphere.

Project AirGlow.

All the power, the flux, the electrical grid, the retrofit gyms—it’s all being siphoned off to build it.

And to build it, people are dying. Graveyards of people.

The trucks are sent out to gather a larger labor force. The

canned goods are just so that labor force doesn't starve first.

"So, a few greed-driven asswipes are stealing all the energy so that they can build a city above the dark dark for themselves with forced labor from Mrs. Smith down the street?" you summarize. "That checks."

"It gets worse. They're planning to move their food resources up to AirGlow."

"What about everyone else?" As you ask it, you already know the answer. "They're gonna let everyone starve?"

"Everyone who can't buy their way up there."

"They're taking staff though, right?" Forgot to filter. *Fuck*. Hopefully, it comes off as concern for James and his colleagues and not pure, shameless self-preservation.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that."

You're surprised to see his bloodshot eyes smiling.

Pillow talk reveals everything.

There is a plan. To sabotage Project AirGlow. Make the light rich live in the dark like everyone else. The 'we' is a large portion of the staff who are in on it.

"If we sabotage AirGlow, then they'll just build another one. We need to cripple their infrastructure." James pauses for effect. "The power grids."

"So instead of rich fucks having power, no one will?"

"Humanity will live in light when they learn to work together."

Jesus fucking— James always was an idealist. Probably why he stayed with you longer than he should have.

"It sucks for the people stuck out there, believe me, I *know*." You sense the people outside the walls of the Shine House displacing the air like worms displacing the dirt in the black black

beneath your feet. “But *some* of us have made it. And wouldn’t it be better for at least a small portion of humanity to survive rather than risk *no one* surviving?”

“We’re way past philosophy” James retorts. “But, for the record, the consensus was ‘no.’”

“So you want me to die in the dark dark. You might as well bury me alive.”

“You know,” he says gently, “this is exactly why we didn’t work. You have a bad habit of thinking of everyone else last.”

“I’m sorry if I don’t have that kind of faith in humanity. But you don’t know what it’s like out there,” you start to argue, but then trail off... How do you convey to him hopelessness as heavy as the darkness? Bleakness black as a cave. That people are either desperate to survive or resigned. Just waiting to die. All you manage is, “No one has a purpose anymore. Except maybe the fucking drummers.”

“Drummers?”

“Some nut jobs back home are drumming out the seconds. To keep track of time.”

“Sounds like a headache.”

“My point exactly! People have lost it out there, James. A crazy lady tried to feed me to her cats!”

“OK, we’re gonna circle back to that later,” he says with genuine alarm. “But listen—” *Shit*. You know that look. The *I-know-these-eggs-are-10x-more-expensive-than-the-regular-eggs-but-they’re-the-morally-right-eggs-to-buy* look. “I get that it’s terrifying, but it’s the right thing to do.” Yup, *that* look. “We can give the power, *literally*, back to the people. And whatever happens,” he puts his hand on your shoulder, “we’re in it together this time.”

He leans in. His eyes close for the kiss.

You can hear the distant drumbeat beckoning you from across the black black abyss—*louder, faster*. Then you realize it's only your own heart beating on your ribs.

You want to shake him, to scream at him, but you keep your voice soft as candle light. "So, when is this happening? How is this happening?"

"When it happens, you'll know. Better you don't know the how."

"Because you don't trust me." *Proof!*

"Because I'm protecting you."

* * *

You notice it now. How the gold uniforms exchange whispers when they pass by each other with their polished platters of cocktails and finger sandwiches. If you close your eyes, you can sense it; whatever it is they're planning, it's happening soon.

The spandex of your own uniform shimmers with photons. They glisten off the crystal glasses and jeweled guests and stream up through the skylight—that fluxbeam glow—like a lighthouse illuminating the way to Project AirGlow being built somewhere high above where the stars can still be seen.

* * *

Your shift has ended. You've both peeled the tiny gold uniforms from each other's bodies and are now lying naked on glitter-covered sheets.

You look over at James, skin sparkling, sweat glistening. There's no changing his mind about crippling the power grids. You know your husband. His halo is too bright.

You can see no other way, even with every light switch flipped.

So, you tell him, “I want to help.” And before he can protest, “We’re in it together this time.”

* * *

You bathe in sun lamps and dance under prised chandeliers.

You sip sparkling champagne as rainbows gloss across the surface of bath bubbles.

You see the needle now when you stick it in.

You don’t need the drugs to see your surroundings, but you do need them to see that golden hair, shining like the sun that reflected off the water of the lake that day you decided he was your one.

When you pass by the other waitstaff and the moth people brought in for pursuits—pleasurable and perverse—you no longer say your lost one’s name. You do not want to know what happened to James when you ratted him out in exchange for a spot on AirGlow.

Instead, you ask a different lost one’s name. “Ian?”

That person you were. Before the sun never rose. He’s lost forever now.