

## Level

A Story of Spontaneous Animal Sentience – Book One

### ***Suburbs of Vidor, Texas***

Bird lazily peels one eye open after the other. Bleary vision, sluggish mind, heavy muscles. Dissipating dream, already forgotten.

Slowly regaining consciousness, he vaguely acknowledges being bathed in a familiar warmth. Morning light creeps across the room as the sun rises, gradually painting a dingy, unkempt carpet in grayish gold and revealing specks of dust that flit about erratically above it. Some dance to Bird's height. He hangs about three meters over the floor in an unremarkable wire cage, and he's perched atop an equally unremarkable wooden bar that's been fixed to each end of the enclosure. A bowl of birdseed and a water canister, both half drained, are haphazardly clamped to the cage with clothespins.

Usually upon being roused by the sun, the drowsiness that slowly evaporates from Bird's body is replaced with a simple, singular form of alertness with only a few degrees of variation. Unstimulated, he rests in comfortable, unwavering complacency. When presented with either food or water, excitement courses through his tiny feathered body. When hurt by his owner—hell, when merely interacting with his owner at this point, aside from being given food or water—panic consumes him. Complacency, excitement, panic, sleep. Sleep, panic, excitement, complacency. Complacency, excitement, sleep, complacency. Panic, panic, complacency, sleep. These building blocks, mixed and matched at his owner's discretion, comprise Bird's daily itinerary.

Today, however, Bird has woken up in more ways than one.

His puny mind suddenly feels denser than lead, its walls swelling—pounding—threatening to burst—in response to the influx of new emotions, experiences, and dimensions of thought some unknown force has bestowed upon him. His memory, once as adept at information retention as his cage is at holding water, is now a tightly-woven basket—imperfect, still, but extremely improved. His cognition, formerly consisting of nothing more than combinations of the blocks and the

recognition of simple patterns, begins to mutate, scaffold in infinite directions, and grow aware of itself.

Of *himself*. Bird has grown a sense of self. A true sense of self, one that pines to satiate the waves of alien curiosity and desire that wash over him.

The more Bird yearns, the more he marvels at being able to yearn, the more despondent he grows about the reality of his situation. He's a caged bird that hasn't flown around in years, never outside. His owner, a short, pudgy man who lives with Bird and a pitbull, is abusive and neglectful enough of both animal companions to secure a spot on a PETA hit list (if the organization were ever to catch wind of his misdeeds). Unless Bird figures out how to bring his imprisonment to an end, his newfound mental faculties will serve as nothing but a curse, a limitless amplification of his former level of suffering. His claws, loosely curled around the bar, clench down in resolve.

Bringing his imprisonment to an end can go one of two ways. Bird will either turn his evolution into a tool of escape or end his life.

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Beast was an ordinary pitbull.

*Was.*

After the initial bought of awe her transformation induces, which prompts her to explore her owner's house and admire common objects—a dirty bathtub, a deck of cards, and a Confederate flag mounted above an old-school TV, all of which she feels like she's truly seeing for the first time—a low grumble in her stomach brings her closer to her original, pre-Enlightened state. Her owner has been gone for four days, and beyond the random bits of spilled food she's scavenged from couch cushions and the divoted kitchen floor, she hasn't eaten anything. Her old self would've continued to search for scraps blindly, but now, she has no desire to waste her time. Beast needs real food, not crumbs of the shitty tasteless kibble part of Lucky Charms, and she needs some *now*. A flash of seething rage suddenly hits her as she realizes her owner is as shitty as the kibble. Maybe worse. At least the kibble is harmless.

She tries for the door, nudging the wooden slab with her snout and hoping that her owner—whom she's affectionately dubbed “Bastard”—had been consistent enough

with his negligence to have left it unlocked. When it doesn't budge, her mind instinctively casts the perfect memory into her panel of awareness. It's of Bastard from ten days ago unlocking the door from the outside with a key, then twisting the doorknob before pulling it open. Her attention had shifted from that moment to a squirrel in a tree mere seconds after it'd occurred, but much to her surprise, the memory itself hasn't faded since.

Realizing she likely never would've recalled the moment again before today, she gives her superpower a moment of appreciation, passively wondering what mummified memory her mind will choose to unravel for her next. Then she reminds herself that her glorious new brain function is still limited by the fuel she supplies it, and her attention returns to the door.

*(Bastard twisted the knob and pulled it open... so I have to twist it and push, right? At least I don't have to pull it. But how do I twist it?)*

Beast doesn't organize her thoughts using English, of course—she doesn't know that the bulbous metal attachment is called a knob, and she never will—but she's able to conceptualize, question, and reason all the same. Her gaze looms upwards and traces the edges of the door as she racks her brain for ideas on how to complete the task she's just defined. Her height limits her severely, but she decides she'll get it done. That she must get it done. Losing hope is not an option, as tempting as it is to sprawl out in a patch of sunlit carpet and nap her hunger pangs away. She can't afford to risk taking a nap that may have no end, not when there's so much to learn about who she's become.

*(Find something to use to reach the doorknob.)*

Beast walks away from the door towards the kitchen, where she notices a glass sliding door. She beckons her mind to throw her another educational bone, but to no avail. Perhaps she's never watched Bastard open it before. She slowly scans the room, looking for anything that could clamp onto the doorknob with enough force to pull it open.

When she gets to the fridge, she stops. She's vaguely aware of its connection to food, knows it probably contains food, but she's unable to recall anything about how to open it (and knows that breaking it is impossible for a dog of her size). This fills her with a bitter resentment towards her own limitations, which had felt nonexistent just

minutes ago when she'd evolved. She feels like a marooned islander who's dying of thirst because she doesn't know how to desalinate the seawater around her.

When the kitchen proves to be fruitless, she moves onto the living room. Then the dining room. A vacuum cleaner looks mildly promising height-wise, but after she realizes there's no way she could lift it with her mouth, let alone use it as a surrogate hand, she abandons it and moves on with her search of the one-story house. Beast's hunger pangs intensify with every step she takes, reminding her that her dwindling strength will expire soon. Hope alone cannot help her if she's too exhausted to move. If she doesn't find this perfect object—whose existence she's starting to seriously doubt—soon, it might be in her best interest to replace the door idea with a better one. But what? Trying to break a Plexiglass window? Self-cannibalization?

Bastard's bedroom is the last room of her search, and the door's been left wide open. Beast steps inside, sullenly pondering the awful alternatives she's just generated, when she notices the parakeet.

*(Of course.)*

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Something is different. Well, obviously, but not that—something else, too.

Bird has spent the last ten minutes staring at the lock on his cage like a toddler stares at a calculus problem. Actually, scratch that. Though he knows exactly how he would unlatch his door with a human hand, which had to be the pinnacle of dexterity (Bird has learned he isn't a fan of envy), he has no idea how to do it from inside his cage with a beak that barely protrudes from the gaps between the wire. The latch is simple, requiring nothing more than the push of a metal slider to the left before the door can be swung open... too bad Bird has nothing to use to reach it, let alone manipulate it from the right angle. His best bet is probably a clothespin, but he lacks the strength required to loosen its grip on his food bowl. He dares not mess with the smaller one and risk spilling his water.

Now, Bird freezes in place as the pitbull's eyes meet his own. Its pupils bore into his, and for the first time, the transformation he's undergone inflicts a physical symptom onto him: a faint tingle. Almost imperceptible at first, but—when coupled with

the dog's piercing stare, dotted with a touch more of awareness than usual—seeming to compound with every passing second.

For the first time, this... gift, this curse, this whatever Bird would make of it... allows him to intuit something absurd, yet absolute. It's irrational, based on nothing but feeling, yet he grows more sure of it the longer their mutual stare sustains.

"You too."

The pitbull prowls forward slowly, its gaze fixed on Bird and refusing to waver. Its expression is blank, betraying nothing more than lucidity, yet Bird finds himself tensing up as possibilities race through its mind. Could it be hungry? Just five minutes ago, Bird had decided to start rationing his remaining food in case his owner's dead or characteristically neglectful. Perhaps this dog had had the misfortune of eating its entire supply before gaining enough wisdom to think to ration? Or perhaps the house beyond Bird's cage is a treasure trove of food that the dog's already capitalized on, and now, it's simply curious about its interspecies sibling.

When it stops well away from his cage, still locking eyes with him, Bird feels himself ease up a bit. It seems to be more interested in studying him than attacking him. Studying how to attack him, maybe—though it's too small to tackle his cage to the floor, he imagines it must be cooking up an alternative solution. As unnerving as this thought is, and as tempting as it is to allow primal panic to paralyze him, a new realization strikes. If this dog wants to eat him, it'll have to free him from his cage first. And once he's uncaged, escape—either outside or in a sac of gastric juices—is a guarantee, or at least a hell of a lot more guaranteed than it'd been a few minutes ago. His most viable option had been to conjure a nonexistent object using sheer willpower, after all.

Bird decides he'll take it, as bleak as his future still seems. His gaze shifts from the dog to a blade of the ceiling fan above it, where he decides he'll rest and replan if he isn't immediately eaten. All of this hinging on the huge *if* that it'll even bother to attack him in the first place. If it turns out to be benevolent, would it... be willing to help him? Maybe—

"Yes, me too."

If the tingle was a faint whistle before, it's now a train's roar. Bird's eyes snap back to the dog's. His feathers twitch. His body grows cold. The pitbull hadn't produced any physical sound, and that... voice... hadn't reached his ears. He's caught so off-guard

by the foreign voice that he's almost embarrassed (*embarrassment—better or worse than envy?*), and after it happens, silence fills the room again. Bird is unsure of what to do, or even think, now that he knows the dog can respond to him. And that apparently his private thoughts aren't so private after all. Can it hear everything he thinks? Does it know about the cage latch or his suspicions?

The dog yawns, plopping down into the carpet and splaying its limbs through the dust cloud it creates. Its eyes finally leave Bird and wander up to the ceiling fan.

"I'm hungry. Bastard's been gone for days."

Bird has already "said" something to the dog, so there's no point in pretending he doesn't share its... affliction. Besides, he's been so deprived of connection that he can't help but feel a little exhilarated by the chance to discuss his new self with someone, even if that someone is a starving meat-eater. Unsure of how to respond to its comment, he feels a pang of inadequacy—how had it been able to figure communication out so effortlessly? He hopes it actually is effortless, dependent on nothing other than the intent to communicate, rather than a cumbersome game of trial and error.

Then it hits him: it is effortless. He'd done it too, without even realizing it. As hard as he has to try not to try, Bird figures it out after what seems like eons elapse. The tingle's a bit like the tide of an ocean, each wave lapping rhythmically at his mental coastline. Instead of resisting it and continuing to stand upright in the sand, Bird surrenders, allowing it to pull him into a realm of shared thought.

"That's a shame. I have some, but it's running low. I've been trying to ration it." As Bird finishes speaking—transmitting—whatever he's doing—the tingle subsides a bit.

The pitbull's attention returns to him, and the tingle rises. "Lucky. I have nothing to ration."

Bird doesn't know how to respond. Thankfully, the pitbull doesn't expect a one-to-one conversational ratio. It "speaks" again.

"What happened to us?"

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As conversational tinder finally ignites, Beast collects plenty of new information. The bedroom has no escapes, either (*shocker*). The bird's name is Bird, and he's a male.

*(It's a male.)*

If Beast ends up having to eat him—(*it, dammit, it*)—acknowledging his selfhood will only make it harder to do so, as much as she feels like dismissing his budding humanity goes hand in hand with the regression of her own. Calling him “it” would entail willingly reducing him to prey and herself to the mindless mutt she once was. She knows doing anything else is a luxury she can’t afford, but the more he—(*it... I give up*)—speaks, the harder it becomes to privately belittle him.

She also learns that Bird doesn’t have much useful information, either. She probes for anything he may have seen or heard Bastard do that could aid her in escape, but her search for helpful intel is about as fruitful as the one for the canine-friendly door opener. In spite of being practically useless (*except as a prospective morsel*), Bird talks with extreme fervor, as if eager to crystallize his thoughts in another mind before they slip from his own. He possesses the gift of swift understanding: in minutes of conversation alone, he’s shared insight after insight about the state they’ve both entered, each one seizing Beast’s attention more than the next. Nothing he says relating to the Enlightenment is actual news to her, but he’s able to articulate concepts she can’t. He morphs her murky liquid observations into translucent blocks of ice, then chisels them into statues with fine detail.

“One of the biggest differences between what we were and what we are... at least to me... is the feeling of potential.”

Bird describes something about his former self’s “building blocks” and how starkly they contrast the expansive spectrum of thought and feeling that he can now access, one that he knows he hasn’t even experienced a sliver of yet. Embarrassment. Envy. Confinement. Boredom. Inadequacy. Detailed explanations of each, along with what had prompted them. Beast immediately recognizes some emotions, but others confuse her. The inadequacy catches her off guard, especially the fact that it’d stemmed from his initial inability to communicate (intentionally, at least). Coursing her thoughts through the tingle had been effortless to her, almost second nature, but she can see how even the slightest amount of doubt regarding the process could’ve compromised it. Maybe there’s such a thing as too much thought.

As Bird grows more and more comfortable talking, Beast’s thoughts begin to bifurcate.

Bird's discussion of the infinite has reminded her of the finite—time is slipping away, and she's been spending critical moment after critical moment indulging herself in furthering her self-understanding instead of, you know, escaping death. She knows finding food should be her top priority right now, not conversation. Realizing Bird is likely trying to distract her until she dies, position himself as a creature advanced enough to deserve life, or both, Beast curses herself for falling for the bird's antics so easily. She hates that being aware of the manipulation does nothing to actually curb it—the more he speaks, the less appetizing he becomes. Not that anything he says could get rid of the constant low grumble her stomach emits.

As disturbing as Beast's imminent death is, she also can't help but consider that if the fate is truly inevitable, she may as well enjoy her final moments as much as possible. Company is company, even if it's the forced company of her to-be prey. And, incidentally, her prey is interesting—maybe even pleasant—to talk to. At least when she dies, she'll die having finally made some kind of connection, however inauthentic. Beast secretly wonders how Bird has so much to say. Does his level of reflection, far heightened compared to her own, stem from his access to food? Is her suboptimal cognition starvation-induced? His supply doesn't look like it'll last very long, so why doesn't a single word of the song he sings concern escape?

*(He knows the cage is the only thing keeping him from death. From me. He knows. That's why he hasn't mentioned it.)*

The split streams of thought rejoin at a single point: Beast's next meal, which is currently hanging just out of her reach and tricking her into inaction with his... charisma? Wisdom? It doesn't matter.

"Do you find yourself remembering random things from life before, life pre-Enlightenment? Our owner likes to watch colorful pictures on that box right there—"

"Stop talking," Beast interjects. The glint of passion in Bird's eyes fades, shifting to something more pragmatic. He's thinking now.

"Don't you want to escape from that cage?"

"I... I don't know how," Bird stammers, his eloquence plummeting. "I was... wondering if you could help me."



The silence that follows speaks volumes. It's a sickening cocktail of tension and denial, a mutual refusal to state the obvious, that grows more acerbic the longer it endures. Bird must know that Beast is more than willing to help him out of his cage, however on Earth she's supposed to make that happen. But what happens after Bird reaches the ground? She doesn't even know how she'd get him out of the cage. Beast suddenly remembers her own continuum, growing cognizant of the slew of novel emotions overriding her rational mind. She wants to preserve them, burning them into her memory before they vanish. Turn them into a collection of sorts, hopefully.

There's that thing Bird coined—(*inadequacy*.)

A new one... (*guilt?*)

(*Loss...*) Impending loss, specifically. The loss of what Bird talked about earlier, potential. *Opportunity*.

For now, they have a mutual goal, and that's all Beast can ask for. She resists decision paralysis, which the limitlessly ambiguous future has been trying to seduce her into, and wills herself to ground herself in the immediate instead. What about Bird and his prison are mobile, manipulable, accessible by her from the ground? No, by either her or him—what could he do from within his cage that they aren't seeing?

In that moment, Beast learns the power of asking a good question. An idea hits her so hard it may as well be the sole of Bastard's shoe against her side.

(*His cage itself.*) It's been his enclosure all along, which is topped with a brass ring that hangs from a curved ceiling hook. If he's a prisoner of this cage, couldn't she consider the cage itself a prisoner of the hook? And though direct escape seems to be impossible, if he can get the cage swinging violently enough...

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As Beast illustrates her plan, Bird tries not to reveal how utterly embarrassed he is. How dare he monologue about the excitement of the Enlightenment when neither of them can be sure they'll have any chance at continuing to enjoy it? To his chagrin, he's done nothing more than stupidly exacerbate the pain of their encroaching death by reminding Beast—and himself—of all they stand to lose. He feels dull twinges of hunger,

having left his food bowl untouched for a while, but he can't bring himself to taunt Beast by enjoying what she can't have.

An omnidirectional anger blooms from the raw embarrassment. Bird's pissed. At himself, of course, for carelessly raving about his journey of self discovery and failing to think of Beast's idea first (as the actual inhabitant of the cage should have). At their owner for having caused this entire mess. At still being trapped in a cage. And, as unfair as Bird knows he is for it, at Beast for possibly wanting to eat him. She's given him a whole new dimension of existence to ruminate over: the pleasures of companionship, the enthrallment of swapping perspectives, and the joys of exploring commonalities through a magical thought conduit through which he's finally mastered travel. He's begun to grow attached, bound to his first conversational partner by chains of lifelong loneliness. Still, he'd be a fool not to acknowledge how much he's overvaluing their "connection:" after all, she's a starving dog who must be craving the only meat in the house, as much as it hurts to think about her true intentions. He can't blame her for feigning genuine interest in what he has to say, but he wants to all the same. Bird had briefly considered telling Beast about preferring death to hopeless captivity, but he'd decided against the idea just as quickly as he'd generated it. There'd been no point, after all, with no way to actually break out of his cage and give either of them the slightest chance at escape...

Except now there is a way.

Bird slams against the right side of his cage—the hook is oriented sideways—then, when the cage has reached peak right-ness and begins to move left, he moves with it, hurling his body to the left. The pain coursing through his body is nearly unbearable. Nearly. The fact that it's a sign that Beast's plan is working, that his cage has actually launched into a growing parabolic arc, converts his pain into a badge of honor. He falls into a trance, fully absorbed in his rhythm and completely addicted to the consistent progress he's been making, only barely cognizant of the fact that Beast has been eyeing every swing hungrily. Hope is a hell of a stimulant—after all, Bird should be getting weaker with each swing, but he feels anything but.

After the twentieth slam, the thirtieth crash, the fortieth surge of impact-induced pain, Beast's pendular plan reaches its final stage. The cage launches towards the carpet with one final swing, hurling Bird into wire with so much force that he nearly blacks out.

He imagines it would've hurt more had he not been voluntarily self-inflicting a similar amount of pain over and over again. One final soft thud later, his cage comes to a slow, rolling halt. The downward momentum of the fall has slid the door latch open (and, by divine grace, the cage has landed so the door's on top). The door itself hasn't flung open, thankfully, but if Bird doesn't escape before Beast begins poking and prodding at it...

"Good work!" Beast exclaims, trying to sound disarming. Her tone, far more chipper than it's ever been, betrays anticipation instead. "Now that I can actually reach you... let me see if I can do anything to get you out of there."

*(Fuck.)*

As much as Bird wants to give her the benefit of the doubt, there's little he can do to fight the blind panic that begins to set in. The old Bird. Suddenly, he's back in his cage, claws still furled around that damned wooden bar, and his owner is screaming at him. Chastising Bird for failing to meet expectations beyond his scope of understanding. A rogue punch shakes his cage, and Bird's ensuing squawks of alarm seem to prompt ten more, twenty more, enough more to lose count. A red pipe cleaner thrusts in and out of the cage wire, poking at Bird and terrorizing him for the sake of his owner's... pleasure? Bird will never understand how his owner is able to enjoy wreaking havoc upon someone who's done him no harm, but he's equally confused about what else, if not pleasure, he'd ever stood to gain from doing so.

Pipe cleaners suck, and they're weak, bendy pieces of metal coated in colorful fuzz. Bird can only imagine how pitbull teeth must compare, and the more his panic casts him into the agony of his past, the more obsessed he grows with never experiencing pain again, not as long as he can help it. And what better way to fuel the obsession than to get out now—

*(Ceiling fan)*

Bird shoots upwards just as Beast reaches the cage. As expected, Beast lunges for him, her mouth fully agape, but he's too fast—by the time her bottom jaw reunites with its counterpart, Bird is perched on the ceiling fan blade, out of harm's way. The blade is surprisingly comfortable, cushioned by the bed of dust that envelops its top surface. More comfortable than evading death by a feather's width, at least, and far more comfortable than the tendrils of pain that now weave through Bird's atrophied wings.

Bird simmers silently, now glaring at Beast from his canopy of safety. Though his rational mind knows Beast is only acting in her own best interest, which he can hardly fault, the rest of him stews with bitter resentment at having almost lost his rational mind just to fuel her for what—one additional hour? The betrayal is palpable, poisoning the air around him so saliently that his lungs almost reject it in disgust. Bird surprises himself with his reaction—he'd seen this coming, yet now he can't rest in the comforts of denial and what-if-ism. Beast has gone from maybe wanting to eat him to undoubtedly wanting to eat him, and this shift makes Bird want to snatch the tingle up by his beak and tear it to shreds.

"I'm sorry," Beast notes, the authenticity of her statement impossible to gauge. Bird scoffs internally, knowing better than to believe anything she says, but what she says next gives his stubbornness pause.

"I'm going to die soon... I told myself eating you would give me a little more time to find a way out, but... who am I kidding?"

Somber silence engulfs the room for far too long. Then, Beast's stream of scattered thought continues.

"I... I know there's no way out, and I was being selfish. Trying to alleviate the pain, even if it meant ending your life for no other gain. And..." She falters, as if she's losing faith in the meaning behind her words, before mustering one final, defeat-laden "I'm sorry."

With that, Beast leaves the room, and the tingle gradually subsides.

Bird hates himself for believing her full apology, but he believes it all the same. Beast's words give him a glimmer of hope, the most minuscule shred of a chance at igniting true companionship instead of the semblance of it—because if true, her words betray a certain level of respect she has for his life. Regular predators don't apologize to prey that have survived their kill attempts. He knows the predator-prey imbalance stands in the way of any kind of friendship they'd ever be able to forge, but if he manages to remove it... make them level... what other barriers will exist?

Besides, if Bird can't believe she truly has empathy or the capacity for genuine remorse, then how real can those same things be inside him?

Those ten minutes of conversation Bird had enjoyed with a taciturn killer dog hadn't been much objectively, but now, they are Bird's everything. His loneliness has

been a prison of its own, a wasting disease of sorts, he has long realized—if he cannot imbue his new self into the worlds of other beings, and if he cannot further play, discover, understand, or simply exist through interaction, new Bird will rot, forsaken to oblivion until death releases him from it. He'll wilt from forlorn understimulation. He'll lose all desire to keep perceiving himself, maintaining himself, expanding himself. He'll lose himself.

Loneliness is not an option, Bird decides. Now that Bird has escaped his physical prison, he decides he must break out of his psychological one next. After finishing the bits of birdseed that lay scattered across the carpet, Bird embarks out the room for the first time in years. He keeps close to the ceiling, moving from room to room (and still relishing in the novel delight of pushing air around with his wings, as much as his muscles beg for rest), until he finds Beast collapsed on the kitchen floor.

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Beast's consciousness ebbs and flows, fades and resurfaces, waxes and wanes, all in sickening cyclicity. The pain in her stomach has faded, as if her body's given up on nudging her to find sustenance. She's tired, far too tired to care that the tingle's back. Bird has just flown into the kitchen and made himself comfortable atop a light fixture, probably debating whether to swoop down and stab her eyes out with his beak. Perhaps he's simply here to watch her die all on her own, just for fun. Not that she'd blame him. The poor bird had seemed so genuinely betrayed after her attack that she now doubts his conversational passion was survival-driven at all.

*(Maybe distrust is birthed by hunger, not innate. Though he's still an idiot if he actually trusted me...)*

What Bird says next fills Beast with shock so energizing that it probably extends her diminishing lifespan, if only by a little.

"All of this is our owner's fault. Bastard's fault. So no hard feelings. I double checked the house, by the way, and you're right. No escapes that I noticed."

Beast says nothing, wondering what Bird could possibly hope to achieve by coming here and extending her the pointless lovechild of an olive branch and a status

update. In typical Bird fashion, Bird interprets her stunned silence as an invitation to continue talking.

“Before you helped me out of my cage—”

*(“Helped him out,” that’s a generous description.)*

“—I was saying something about Bastard, how he used to look at colorful pictures on that box in his room. They moved, the pictures. I saw a lot of what he watched, and even though they were meaningless to me then... I remembered one of the things I saw, and I think it could help you.”

He shifts, as if unsure of what to say next. “Help us both, actually. Have you gotten any of those kinds of random memories?”

*(What on Earth... but he just said he couldn’t find any escapes...)*

Beast’s left leg twitches in discontent. She was fading away rather peacefully before—now, she has to humor a bird who holds conversations instead of grudges. Still, in spite of herself, she wants to hear what he has to say, so she answers.

“I have. A memory taught me how to get out of here, but I couldn’t find anything that would allow me to do it.”

Bird flutters from the light fixture to the countertop within Beast’s reach, probably aware that Beast is too fatigued to rush him again, and picks up a stray piece of butcher’s twine with his beak.

“I felt the same way in my cage—aware of how to escape in theory, yet unable to bring my plan to fruition. Thankfully, I think this memory will be slightly more useful.”

He hops from the counter to the fridge, the sight of which rekindles Beast’s earlier frustration, and settles onto its handle.

“Through Bastard’s colorful box, I saw a different box, a white one like this. It had food in it, and people accessed food inside it by pulling on this handle. I don’t have the strength for it, and you don’t have the height, but...”

He loops the twine around the handle as he speaks, then drops the end of it so roughly half hangs off each side of the handle. Both ends drop to Beast’s height. She’s intrigued now. Bird hasn’t even finished his proposition, but Beast fills in the blanks. She almost manages to stop herself from interrupting.

“—I got it.”

She takes the twine in her mouth—the first thing to touch her tongue since the Lucky Charms kibble—and slowly, as if she’s peeling wrapping paper off a present box, she pulls the fridge door open.

Then... her heart nearly stops at the near-endless sight of food. Good food, human food. Saliva begins to coat every crevice in her mouth. Bird graciously shuts up, allowing Beast to take the sight in, before knocking food items to the ground at random for Beast to tear into.

Soon after the first item clatters against the floor, Beast’s soul is received by Valhalla.

She rips open a package of chicken salad first. The first bite, creamy and tart, is so good that Beast almost sheds tears of relief. Every bite that proceeds blurs by, each one gnashed up and gulped in quicker succession than the last, until all that’s left of the meal is its plastic encasing. Then, she moves onto a pool of chili that seeps out of shattered tupperware, sucking it up faster than Bastard’s vacuum could ever hope to.

Micro-shards of glass prickle her throat a bit, but she’s too consumed by gluttonous gratitude to really notice, let alone feel bothered. She moves from food item to food item with the swift determination of a lonely speed-dater—a half-eaten turkey sub, a baggie of pungent shredded cheese, moldy slices of pepperoni pizza, spilled half-open beer. Beast decides she loves it all. As far as she’s concerned, every bite is life-saving.

Once she’s eaten enough to think about anything other than food—she’s still eating, of course, but she’s gorged enough to return to reality—her thoughts naturally gravitate towards her savior. Bird. She decides she’s too touched, too indebted, to keep them in.

“Thank you,” Beast starts. “You didn’t have to do that. I wouldn’t have done that. You’re very kind.”

Bird, who’s been helping himself to some peach cups a mere three feet away from her, pulls his beak out of the plastic film he’s punctured.

“I did it for myself,” he quips. “Now you won’t eat me.”

Beast can’t help but crack a smile. It widens with the realization that it’s the first smile she’s cracked in ages.

After the two stuff themselves, they dance to the lively tempo of enthused conversation—the type that’s beautifully free of deceptive subtext—and now, unbridled

by hunger, Beast is able to contribute more actively. She recounts her day, detailing her starvation, her initial escape thought process, and the mixed feelings she'd experienced during Bird's pre-attempted murder chatter—particularly how Bird had aroused her curiosity as much as he had her suspicion. She's finally able to captivate Bird for a change, which makes her chest swell with triumph.

"It's really not as exciting outside as you'd think," Beast explains in response to Bird's barrage of questions about the outside world and trees and other birds and weather and everything in between. "I've chased other birds—sorry, I was a bit of an asshole. It can be beautiful, though. You'll see, when you go outside, that there's rain, lakes, freshly cut grass—"

"What's rain? What are lakes? What's grass?"

"Rain is water that falls from the sky. Lakes are—"

"Oh, I've seen that through the window! And on the colorful box. I've always wanted to fly in it... well, fly in general..."

Beast doesn't mind the interruption. Bird reminds her of when she'd been a puppy, endlessly eager to explore the world around her. At least until Bastard had beaten her inner adventurer into dormancy. When Bird finishes his long-winded point, Beast releases the burning question that's been festering in her mind ever since Bird's fridge stunt.

"Why did you help me? Really, why?"

Bird pauses contemplatively. He maintains eye contact with Beast, but his gaze—his stare—seems to transfix onto something that extends far beyond her. "Talking to you was the most fun I've had in... well, forever. You've added fun to my life."

Beast is unsure how to navigate the sudden, visceral surge of endearment that floods over her. "Yeah, same. Bastard's no fun, obviously, and I can't say any encounters I've had with other dogs have been that great, either."

"Other dogs! What's it like meeting others like you? How were you different from them? How—"

Bird's friendly interrogation is interrupted by something that reeks with the stench of deep familiarity. Bird doesn't notice the smell of alcohol and mildewy body odor itself, but when Beast props herself upright into a guarded stance, Bird terminates the interview.



“Hide,” Beast urges. “Go.”

Bird obliges without question, flying into an inconspicuous gap between a couch and its adjacent wall. Bird’s escape is well-timed—as soon as his last feather disappears into the shadows, Bastard stumbles into the room.

His rancid breath begins to pollute the air all three of them share, beckoning Beast to relinquish her unauthorized breakfast. Drunk Bastard is stupid, perhaps too stupid to realize Beast has ransacked the fridge, but he makes up for his idiocy with indiscriminate violence. If he somehow manages to overcome his brain cell deficit and piece together what Beast’s done, she’s dead. Period. She’s tempted to get a goodbye out to Bird just in case, but she fears Bastard would hear her. Would that be the worst thing ever? Maybe talking to Bastard would get him to humanize his pets, and maybe he’d take better care of them. Or maybe he’d get worse, altering not his treatment of them, but his level of surveillance over them instead.

Bastard is a pitiful sight, his lips failing to break contact from his bottle of vodka as he teeters from side to side. He’s in a Dallas Cowboys shirt, which is adorned with splotches of vomit and terrible at securing the rolls of fat that hang underneath its bottom hem. His pants have escaped him, exposing off-white underwear that’s undoubtedly experienced war crimes. His face is just as unsightly as his body—patchy beard, pedostache, and scruffy, vomit-plastered locks that skirt a bald scalp top. Probably the cleanest surface on the guy. Beast once regarded this man as a pure tyrant. Though he’s still a tyrant, Beast now realizes that he’s also a friendless, disgusting, pathetic waste of space. Beast’s fear evolves into guarded rage, which only crescendos at the fact that this man, this creature, has tormented her endlessly while being this. She and Bird had once been lower status than this.

*(Not anymore.)*

Bastard stumbles about for a bit, muttering to himself and groping the faded, peeling kitchen walls for stability. Beast tries to remain alert of his unpredictability while she continues to take the sight of him in (all while trying her best to block the smell of him out). His eyes are glazed over, seemingly unaware of anything other than his own intoxication. If even.

Then, his gaze migrates to Beast.

**“What are you doing in the KITCHEN, you BASTARD? What have you DONE?”**

His thundering voice, combined with the foot he plants to the ground hard enough to rattle the still open fridge door, petrifies Beast to her core. Suddenly, the Enlightenment doesn't seem to matter much anymore—augmented or not, her mind cannot defend against what's to come. She prepares for the worst, bracing herself against the foot she expects will pulverize her face.

Then, the day yet again proves it has no shortage of surprises up in store for her.

Bastard gently scoops her up. His fingers run across her fur tenderly, almost lovingly, and Beast stiffens more with every caress. It's the first time he's acted truly unpredictably—Beast can't fathom what's prompted this alien behavior, which stuns her into the most acute state of helplessness she's ever experienced. Was this a test of some sort? Why does she find herself wishing Bastard would just hurt her already instead of subjecting her to these... mind games? The delicacy of Bastard's touch angers her as much as his usual temperament, if not more. It feels like a cheap, remorseless plea for undeserved forgiveness, a blatant unwillingness to acknowledge the obvious or accept accountability.

*(Because he thinks I'm a stupid dog who doesn't care or remember.)* If Bird is watching, she cannot imagine what he must be thinking right now.

**“You're my superstar, Beast, I can't stay mad at you. Good girl,”**  
Bastard cooes. Cradling Beast in both arms, Bastard exits the kitchen, making his way back towards the front door.

**“Damn dogs ain't fighting each other no more... but I told 'em I had the meanest one around. You're gonna make daddy a LOT of money, sweet girl.”**

Though Beast can't understand anything beyond her own name, she knows whatever he's just said to her can't be good. Every single conceivable event, even the spontaneous implosion of the sun, is infinitely more probable than Bastard turning a new leaf and taking her out to play a game of fetch. She considers sinking her teeth into his neck and ending her (and Bird's) suffering right here, right now, but... she doesn't want to find out how Bastard would react if he were to survive the attack.

So she continues to be a good girl, all the way out the front door.

*(Bird...)*

All the way into Bastard's pickup truck, its back seats still stiff and crusty with her dried urine.

*(Does Bastard usually get honked at every three seconds?)*

One hazardous five minute drive later, all the way into the hands of another.

A tall, brawny man in a wife beater takes Beast from Bastard and hands him a substantial pile of bills in exchange. They're outside now, three feet away from Bastard's horizontally-parked truck, and a ton of people—some who look more like this new man, others who may as well be carbon copies of Bastard—crowd around something Beast can't see.

**“You won't regret her, this one. She's all bark and all bite. Mauled a toddler to death a year ago,”** Bastard exclaims, hands flailing empathically as they gesture in support.

The man holding Beast sighs. **“I'd better not, Dave. Lotta money on the line here, more than your ass will ever see.”**

---

If pain tolerance is an art, Bird's cage stunt has refined him into a maestro. For the past ten minutes, Bird's been thrashing against the walls of the pickup truck's bed—needless to say, the thrashing's unintentional this time. He tries to dig his claws into something, anything, to stabilize himself, but everything soft enough to anchor into is also too light to be a good anchor. Random debris ranging from beer cans to empty boxes launches from wall to wall right alongside Bird (thankfully, never into him) as Bastard swerves carelessly on straight roads and makes turns sharper than he'll ever be, abusing half the subdivision's curbs in the process.

Bird doesn't know this, of course. He's barely even begun to process the concept of a vehicle, which he imagines would be easier if he weren't on the brink of getting motion sickness. He's barely begun to process anything about the world outside Bastard's room. The cold, unceasing wind that filters through his feathers and chills him to his core. The air itself, a delicacy so crisp and odorless that Bird hungrily inhales lungful after lungful. Vibrant flashes of color, their hues accentuated by the muted

sunlight—Bird's traveling too quickly to piece the swatches together, but he does his best to encode baby blue, hot pink, yellow-orange, and a mosaic of greens into his memory.

The more Bird tries to ease the mental turbulence by making sense of it, the more careless he grows about bracing himself against its physical counterpart. The more Bird tries to stifle nonessential thought, the stronger the sensory overload grows. He suspects there's a balance to be struck, but finding it is about as possible as flying after the truck with wings that pulsate achingly.

*(Beast)*

Bird catches the relevant thought mid-flight. He does his best to stay with it, hoping it'll serve as a better anchor than plastic utensils.

*(Don't lose her.)*

He desperately searches the air for the tingle, hoping to assure Beast of his presence, but his efforts yield nothing. Either the tingle's been blocked off because of the physical barrier or Bird's not in the right state of mind to access it... no, even when he'd been figuring out how to channel his voice through it, he'd still felt it. Now, all he feels is the throb of its gaping absence. It may as well be a phantom limb.

By the time the truck pulls to a sloppy stop and its doors pop open, Bird's lying motionlessly amidst the truck bed litter. He's been battered into catatonia. His muscles and thoughts are frozen in place, refusing to thaw until his mind and body reach a sufficient level of recovery. A convenient defense mechanism, sure, but a damning obstacle in Bird's time-sensitive quest to retrieve Beast from a monster.

Once Bird's strength has replenished ten minutes later, he lazily peels one eye open after another, briefly and blissfully unaware of his situation. Then, he jolts back into reality.

*(No way did I just take a nap... while somehow remaining awake...?)*

After giving his wings a stretch (and wincing at the pain that ensues), Bird uses them to propel himself directly upwards. He commands the air to lift him higher, higher, even higher, all while refusing to care about whether or not he's spotted by anyone. Then, he's hit with a humbling sight that nearly shocks him back into catatonia.

The sheer novelty and dynamism and limitlessness of the visual buffet that greets him are almost as jarring as the Enlightenment itself. The individual colors he'd tucked away in his memory engulf the panoramic canvas of his surroundings, infusing

everything with more life than he's ever encountered throughout his own. Baby blue meets the calm, brooding sky, beckoning Bird to explore it now that he's unfettered by a ceiling for the first time. Tufts of cloud are strewn across it, taking on an incalculable number of shapes, and sunlight—oh, sweet, real sunlight, not the off-brand dilution of it Bird had felt from behind glass—trickles through them into the green. Closer to Bird, members of the green mosaic emulsify into structures and patterns, forming trees, grass, and leaves that yearn to touch the sun as much as he does.

And the people, who seem to be in constant motion. They move with an even blend of chaos and intentionality, each movement as effortless and graceful... dare Bird think beautiful... as it is deliberate. Dozens of men and a handful of women flail their arms about, laugh heartily, and squirm in place, and together, they form one large circular swarm that surrounds an octagonal wooden fence. The fence itself encloses what appears to be a pit about a meter deep, and inside the pit—

*(Beast.)*

*(And... another dog?)*

Ten feet under Bird, Beast faces a dog identical to her aside from a large white spot that covers half of its back. Both assume defensive stances, glaring at each other as they launch into orbit around the pit's center, and Bird's heart sinks as he realizes they're positioned to fight. They're being forced to fight. Though both Beast and her opponent are as ready for battle as possible, their actions are guided not by aggression or genuine bloodlust, but fear. Both dogs' paws drag across the dirt in reluctance as they circle the pit slowly, maintaining the largest possible distance from one another by clinging to its edges.

A mutual refusal to strike first hangs in the air, which prompts the audience to begin goading instead of cheering. Suddenly, the joviality has morphed into hostility. Laughs evolve into groans of agitation and indignant shouts, all directed towards two "foes" attempting to stall the inevitable indefinitely. One man chucks an empty beer can at Beast, startling her as the projectile bounces off her side.

**"Get moving! I didn't pay for more of this same bullsh—where the fuck did Dave go?"**

**"Find him, Bruce, or get these dogs to stop being pussies. Killed a toddler my ass."**

Suddenly, Bird realizes the people he's been admiring, *revering*, even, are the scum of the Earth. The event they await so impatiently is designed to hurt—probably kill. Just as Bird lusts after the sky, these creatures crave the sight of two innocent dogs tearing each other apart, their desires fueled by a frighteningly sadistic hunger that Bird's simultaneously all too familiar with and incapable of understanding. He's proud of being incapable of understanding it.

Bird's veins convulse with boiling hatred.

*(Bastard isn't some anomaly. Some outlier. Some tragic case of human-gone-wrong. They're all Bastards. All the same. All joyous about others getting hurt.)*

He and Beast had just escaped one prison, one Bastard, only to discover that Bastard is merely an infantryman in the entire army of Bastards that makes up the human race. The army of Bastards that's created yet another cage for its subordinates, yet another way to enslave, torment, and harm simply because each of its members derives pleasure from doing so. They're all sick, Bird decides, wired destructively and pervasively cruel by design—a design so inherent to the species that the original Bastard could almost be absolved of his crimes, assuming he'd had no choice but to inherit it. In Bird's mind, Bastard—Bastards—begin to morph from independent agents into insidious cancer cells, as poisonous as they are unaware of their poison.

Bird resolves to save Beast before the poison has the chance to spread to her.

*(But how?)*

He flies close enough to the ring for people in the crowd's outskirts to point and gawk at him. No tingle. He presses forward, too blinded by hatred to care that he's now drawn the attention of every single human onlooker at the venue. Eventually, once he's flown over the fence and now hovers over the pit itself, he finally feels the tingle. It's multidirectional this time, and Bird innately understands that he has the option of talking to Beast or the other dog. No... the tingle pulses in a third direction, too. He can also talk to both at once. Bird only allows himself to become briefly distracted by the discovery before he resumes his mission. Racking his brain for ideas, he links himself to Beast, whose head jerks upwards at the "sound" of him.

"Sit tight," Bird reassures her, eyeing the other dog pitifully. And suspiciously. "Ignore the Bastards. We need to get you out of here. Any ideas?"

“Bird,” Beast exclaims, still dancing around her partner in circles. Bird anxiously waits for the rest, but she says nothing more, and Bird realizes her imminent harm is consuming all of her attention. She can’t exactly afford to do more than vaguely acknowledge him—for all Bird knows, the other dog is waiting for his window of opportunity. The onus to free Beast now rests entirely on Bird. Spontaneously, he decides he must free the other dog in the process—in spite of its immediate goals, it’s just another one of the Bastards’ victims. Besides, it looks far too similar to Beast (and likely is far too similar to Beast) for Bird to be able to neglect. The crowd’s jeers and protests against inaction blur into one singular, indistinct roar that suddenly becomes easy for Bird to tune out.

He extends the link to the other dog, then speaks without hesitation. “I’m saving you both,” he transmits. The novel formation of a tri-linkage captures the attention of both, and their eyes immediately turn away from each other and towards Bird.

“This is my friend Bird,” Beast explains as if she and Dog Number Two have been conversing the entire time. Bird marvels at the label “friend,” its bestowal upon him as satiating as chicken salad had been to Beast only half an hour ago. “Long story.”

“That’s all fine and dandy,” the other dog says at a deeper frequency than Beast’s, “but unless you trust that he’ll get us out of here, and that we somehow won’t get recaptured while trying to escape, one of us is going to have to kill each other. Or we both die.”

Bird, peeved that Dog Number Two hasn’t spoken to him directly, addresses him this time. “What’s your name?”

“My name is shut the fuck up and focus on getting us out of here.”

For all DNT’s callousness, he’s right—now isn’t the time for chitchat, and Bird isn’t entitled to his gratitude until he actually succeeds. Bird scans the pit and his broader surroundings for something, anything, that could aid him in getting two large dogs far, far away from the moat of poison that surrounds them. His peripheral vision catches Beast stiffening in protest.

“You ought to be nicer to your only chance at salvation, Ronan,” she hisses, emphasizing Ronan’s name for Bird’s sake. Bird, on the other hand, is hardly listening to the two bicker. The roar of his skyrocketing despair is nearly deafening. “He’s bought some time. Look, everyone’s looking at him now. He’s keeping attention away from us.”

The fence only has one door, and it's far too heavy for Bird to even dream of opening. A stray piece of rope trailing around the pit's west edge gives Bird a glint of hope—maybe he can reenact the fridge stunt and have Beast pull the door open—before he realizes the door's handle is on the outside, meaning it swings outward, meaning Bird's back to enduring the crushing weight of panicked dejection. Ronan's next comment hardly alleviates the pressure.

“Sure, but for how long? Why are we humoring this... charade?”

Bird's the freest he's ever been, yet he feels like he's back in his cage.

“Because you believe in the charade. If you don't, if you're so convinced one of us must die, why haven't you killed me?”

His eyes see an octagonal puzzle, and his mind sees nothing.

“I... I can't.”

Something about Ronan's admission strikes Bird as uncannily familiar. Just as Ronan believes himself incapable of murder, Bird had believed himself incapable of escaping his former cage, yet he had anyway. Beliefs do not define ability. Ronan can kill Beast, he's just cemented in the belief that he can't—a limitation of ability Bird is thankful for, but a limitation all the same. The clouds begin to part, allowing the sun to bathe Bird in the warmth of optimism anew. Individual pieces of his surroundings begin to meet each other and interlock, and suddenly, Bird is further humbled by his temporary inability to see what are now painfully obvious relationships. He's birthed his most ambitious idea yet, one that puts everything the Enlightenment's taught him to the ultimate test.

Bird lays the plan out for Beast and Ronan, explaining each step in excruciating detail and asking for confirmation of everyone's understanding more times than necessary. It's a shit idea, one with a low likelihood of success, but since this likelihood directly hinges on how convincing Beast and Ronan find the plan, Bird decides to keep the realism to himself. Debris from the crowd begins to rain down on Beast and Ronan again—time is running out. Bird brings the debrief to a screeching halt.

“Action,” Bird commands after orchestrating a sequence of events unlike anything ever witnessed by the human eye.

At once, Beast and Ronan lunge for the rope—about ten feet long—and firmly bite down on each of its ends. It's slightly longer than the inner diameter of the fence, as Bird



had anticipated, so they both inch their bites towards the rope's center and finally settle at a comfortable six foot distance from one another. If their initial orbit had been Jupiter's slow, lumbering planetary journey around the sun, what they launch into next is Mercurial—significantly closer to the pit's center than they'd been before, the dogs tug at the rope with all their might, then launch into a clockwise spin. The momentum of the spin heightens the force they're able to pull at the rope with, which increases the momentum of the spin, a beautiful positive feedback loop not unlike Bird's cage swinging a little higher with his every additional bout of bodily assault. Soon, the dogs spin in a blur, and Bird's unable to tell them apart.

The next stage of Bird's plan is one of the many absolute crapshoots that litter it. Once Beast and Ronan reach a certain speed, Ronan's in charge of leveraging the momentum to leap over the fence, which—combined with the depth of the pit—will make for a jump that's slightly less high than Bird's cage had hung off the ground. Though Bird knows (well, thinks based on nearly nothing) that Beast could make the jump with the momentum, he'd decided to hedge his bets a bit and delegate the task to the slightly lengthier dog. Bird belatedly realizes that Ronan's relative lengthiness likely means relative heaviness as well, which he ponders nervously as he watches the blurry circle of dog lose even more distinction.

Finally, Ronan releases the rope, abandons his circular route, and launches himself into the air. He spirals towards the fence in a straight line—to Bird's delight, only slightly west of the door—and, once his paw meets the upper edge of the fence, he secures his grip, clumsily pulls himself upwards (probably recovering from the vertigo), and begins to scramble to the other side. Bird wastes no time playing his part: during Ronan's escapades, he swoops down, plucks the now abandoned rope up out of the dirt, and heaves it over to the door. The job's a lot more laborious than it'd been with the twine, but like any artist, Bird embraces the challenge without wavering. He's motivated by the fact that crapshoot condition two has been satisfied: the moat of poison has begun to widen. The crowd recedes, its members backing away from what they believe to be the work of the devil, which leaves Bird and Ronan blissfully free to work.

Bird threads an edge of the rope through the door's handle, and right on cue, Ronan's jaw clenches against both ends of the rope. Ronan runs to his left, intending to pull the door open—

“It won’t budge,” Ronan pleads, stupidly transmitting across the tri-linkage and panicking Beast instead of directly telling Bird. Bird forces himself to think before allowing the I can’t to consume him, and within moments, he realizes the door has a sliding lock. How perfect.

“All prisons are the same,” Bird remarks as he slides the latch to the left with his claws. “Now try.”

Ronan gives the door another generous tug, and sure enough, it opens with little resistance.

“Door’s op—” Bird starts, but he doesn’t need to finish. Beast is already outside the ring, still hyperactive from running in more circles than she’d ever run chasing her own tail as a puppy. The moat has dispersed, with most onlookers maintaining a healthy distance from all three animals while struggling to comprehend what they’ve just seen.

Most onlookers.

A tall, muscular man in a wife beater emerges from a pickup truck with a shotgun. Before Bird’s able to notice, let alone process, react to, and warn his companions of his presence, an ear-splitting CRACK shoots through the air. Ronan crumples to the ground, and for a moment, Bird doesn’t connect the dots.

**“Go back to hell.”**

*(Ronan, no way you’re this dizzy. Come on, let’s go.)*

CRACK.

The second bullet barely misses Beast, piercing the wood directly above her instead. When Ronan’s white spot blooms with red, Bird realizes that the tri-linkage no longer exists. Dread shoots up his spine.

“Beast. Run. NOW.”

Beast sprints away, wisely circling the fence and putting it in between herself and the gun. Bird launches himself into the air and follows Beast from above, going as high as he possibly can without losing the tingle. He frantically scours the area for hiding spots, areas with good cover, anything, all while glancing at Beast every two seconds to ensure she’s still running.

“Go. Go. Go.” Bird knows Beast doesn’t need to be told this, but he doesn’t care. He needs her to know he’s with her. That he hasn’t abandoned her. “There are a bunch of trees not far from you. Just keep going.”

CRACK.

Bird glances back at the fence, and to his dismay, the man with the gun is pursuing Beast—pursuing them—at full force. Beast says nothing, of course, her energy fully channeled into running, running, running, running—

“Almost there,” Bird pushes. “Go. Go. Go. Go—”

CRACK.

Beast doesn’t crumple like Ronan had—instead, she limps, trudging ahead at a quarter of the speed and with as much vigor.

“GO!” Bird begs her, and then he begins screaming at her to just run ad nauseam, to just be faster, to run like she’s starving and sees a moldy pizza on the horizon. “You CAN run. We can do anything. We’ve proven that. Please. Please, Beast.” He wants to beg her to say something, anything, but the request carries a degree of finality that he’s unwilling to accept. He’s barely acknowledged, let alone accepted, what the limp means.

Beast obliges, and somehow, her limp-run actually accelerates.

Then, another crack brings her race to a halt.

When the tingle fades, the mirage of denial Bird’s been using to veil himself from reality vanishes.

(No.)

The lead that’s shot through Beast’s skull may as well have shot down one of Bird’s wings. He staggers in midair, simultaneously gasping for breath and wanting his body to reject it so he can fade into nothingness. Nothingness sounds better than the hell that is reality to him right now. Nothing sounds worse than the hell that is reality to him right now.

Bird could feel thankful to be alive, perhaps should, but all he feels is the acute pain of loss. His emotional continuum has undergone an Enlightenment of its own, morphing into a plane, then a cube, then a near-empty tesseract devoid of everything but grief. He now knows that loss converts loneliness from a flat, monotone numbness into multidimensional anguish, the new dimension being murky grief that flows, increases with every recollection of Beast, and refuses to ebb even a bit. As Bird flies onwards, now directionlessly, he realizes he’s failed to realize his original goal in equal parts. He has neither fully escaped nor fully died—both states have only been half achieved.

As much as Bird now wants to fully die, he knows that if he does, Beast fully dies, too. She now resides in his memory and his memory alone, which is a form of aliveness. It has to be. That makes Bird's only viable option full escape. As he flies aimlessly, feeling shackled to the foul Earth with every push of his wings, he mulls over what makes an escape true. What makes him still feel confined by something... someone. It can't be Beast, he wants Beast with him... what he doesn't want are the shackles. The weight. How can he feel so heavy and so hollow at the same time?

The shackles pull him towards the ground. Or maybe it's his adamant refusal to fly onwards without her. The air around him grows warmer as he lets gravity overtake him and splash lands in a birdbath.

*(Bastards... they're the shackles.)*

*(I want to be unchained. You deserve to be, too.)*

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**“Another,”** David slurs, his fist hammering against the bar countertop incessantly. His outburst summons a bartender whose eyes roll at the familiar nuisance.

**“Sir, I’m not your lapdog. I’ll get you another because it’s my job, but I’ll also tell you to mind your fucking manners because you haven’t tipped a cent.”**

Her words ring loud and clear, but David still manages to block out every syllable. He's pretty good at that. He'd done it earlier when some man in the bar had asked him why he'd chosen to walk instead of driving his truck like usual, given there's nothing around Lone Star Tavern for a couple miles. He'd done it when his friends from town, all equally deadbeat, had begged him to stop abusing his pets before cutting him off. Now, he's uninterested in listening to anything that won't help him exchange what he believes is hard-earned money for more booze.

When the bartender returns with another double shot of whiskey, David practically snatches it from her grasp, downing it immediately after with zero hesitation.

**“Thanks, sugar tits,”** he cooes, unshy about the fact that he's now ogling the woman's breasts. Aside from one defeated glance she casts to a coworker across the bar,

she doesn't gratify David's harassment with a response. David doesn't mind—after all, according to him, women are supposed to be submissive.

The TV mounted above David's head switches from ESPN to the local news. Overcome with curiosity, David tunes in. He's been coming to this bar for twenty years now, and not once have they ever played the news before. Probably because of the sobering effect current events have on most people.

**“Breaking news,”** a wide-eyed reporter announces. **“Multiple spectators of a dogfight have reported witnessing... shocking events. I'd attempt to orate the sequence, but instead, we've decided to play footage of the entire event and commentate as it goes. This was generously provided to us by the dogfight's videographer, who understandably wants to remain anonymous to avoid being associated with an affair that's as illegal as it is inhumane. Trust me, folks, you'll see why I haven't bothered to give you even an inkling of what went down. Show, not tell.”**

**“Boring,”** David mutters to himself, wondering how on Earth the reporter still hasn't managed to get to the point.

Then, as the video starts, David's eyes grow into bulbous disks that nearly erupt from his skull. He's drunk enough that he might just be misunderstanding completely normal, plausible footage... but he's also sober enough to know that he isn't. That's his dog on the TV, that goddamned bastard, refusing to keep the promise David had made on her behalf.

**“As you can see, the pitbulls start off extremely hesitant to even bark at each other, let alone fight. This is already abnormal, since pitbulls are known to be aggressive under agitating conditions. But then—”**

Soon, every pair of eyes in the bar watches the screen intently. What plays out next divides the room. Some insist that the video's some deep fake government scheme designed to distract the masses from real issues. Others argue in favor of its legitimacy, citing the recent abnormal behavior of their own pets as evidence. One couple mourns Beast and Ronan, insisting that their killer ought to be administered a lethal injection, while a different couple marvels over the intricately planned escape. A low murmur drowns out the voice of the reporter, who's getting repetitive now that he's run out of new information. The bar is abuzz with rumors, and soon, a group of what once used to

be the most intelligent animal on the planet surmises that they're not quite alone anymore.

All the while, David sits at the bar, terrified to admit that two of the three animals on the news are his. Were his. Bird... that brainless, dead-eyed bird... how had he pulled that off? Where had he even come from—how'd he escaped the cage? And that bastard, that mangy homicidal mutt, the pet who'd cost him his entire inheritance in hush money—now she decides to be a pacifist? David's desire to drink more shrivels up—just in time, considering he's spent the last of what he'd been paid for Beast—and countless hours later, he trudges back to his truck, starts it up, and drives back home, ignoring the wreckage of his first trip. As he tours his own house through the rare lens of sobriety, hopping over piles of spilled food and giving Bird's former cage a soft kick, he realizes he's now truly, finally alone in the world. Hell, David's been alone for a long time—now it's just official.

As he plops onto his bed and rolls the empty cage between his feet, David abruptly recalls why he drinks. It's a sober truth he's cast three levels below that of conscious thought, one that hasn't resurfaced in years.

He drinks because he has nothing. Is nothing. Will always, and forever, be nothing.

So he drinks, drinks, and drinks some more, and then some, because doing so frees him from himself.