

The Khaki Project: Recouping

Soaked to the bone Isaac climbs up the hilly side of the beach, the further he gets away from the water, the better he feels, an almost serene calm wafting over him, till he looks back at the waterfront where his stomach twists and turns into knots, "I should get to my car... Now where did I park?" he mutters to himself, shoes squishing, kicking water with every step, "It was..., right by the docks, so where are the docks?"

He lets out a loud yawn, the aching desire for the devil's blood, "I feel like I've been up all night... shit, was I?" he mutters, rubbing the back of his head, looking at the desolate urban landscape before him, the foreboding road before him, that separates the rocky worn beach and the warehouses before him. A truck moves down the road, which he waves to, but the truck passes him by, spraying a mist of water which makes him jump.

"Liquid death..." The creature within him current thoughts were not so much words but sensations, feelings, listening and reaching out to the world through his host, taking the moment to ensure its survival the best he can.

Isaac shudders, "Bleh," he remarks, shaking some of the water off of him, "This day is just going great. I'm going to have to get an extra booster of life juice today," he sighs, running across the road, calling out for some help and after several minutes a black furred feline with a white puff on his chest responds to his calls.

"Hey, who are you and what are you doing here?" he asks, approaching, stopping, nostrils wiggling, "Geez you look like shit, what the fuck happened to you?"

He takes a moment to look at his battered ripped clothes, with a layer of sand clinging to various parts of his body, his shirt is a torn mess, which only clings to his body due to how wet it is, "At this point I just want to know where unloading docks A are and the local parking."

"That's five minutes that way," he says pointing up the street, "Are you okay? Do you need me to call someone?"

He shakes his head, "No, unless you know someone to call to retrieve my phone. Lost it..." he looks over to the water, "Somewhere..." he says with a deep sigh, "Once I get to my car I'll be alright."

The feline approaches, his fur standing up on edge, a visible shiver running through him, "Are you sure? It looks like you survived a shipwreck or something."

"You know there is one thing I could use if you have it."

"What?"

"A cup of coffee?"

He visibly relaxes, "Yeah I can get you a cup, and a ride to your car."

"I don't want to be too much trouble."

"Look, I've seen some crazy shit here at these docks, and you're the most battered living person I've seen show up. Did you uh... get in trouble with the avian mafia?"

"What? Oh heck no, I'd never... wait, is the avian mafia an actual thing?"

“Yeah, they’re no joke, and not because I’m a cat. You work at the docks long enough you see and hear things that you don’t want to.”

“I can a hundred percent assure you that I have nothing to do with the avian mafia.”

“And if you did, I prefer you not tell me. The less I know the better,” he says, ushering him over, taking him into a small office, offering him a cup of black gold with hazelnut creamy delight.

He takes the cup into hand, taking a long, delightful sip, feeling the devil warmth flow into him, senses sparking, the haze over him being gently blown free from his mind, “That’s the stuff. I appreciate the help. Cats are always good people.”

He smirks, “You’re a cat person, aren’t you?”

He takes a long-drawn-out sip, “Yeah... how did you know?”

“Humans who have cats, have a tell you know?”

“I don’t know actually.”

“It’s difficult to explain if I’m to be honest,” he says, giving the human a few minutes to recuperate before taking him to his truck.

“Either way I appreciate the assistance. What’s your name?”

“I don’t think my name is needed here,” he replies, looking over at him one last time, “I’m sure you understand the saying about cats and curiosity.”

“Yeah, but I’m the one asking.”

“The less you know and the less I know the safer we’d both be.”

He takes a deep breath, finishing off the reprieve of reality, his body feeling strange, like there’s a weight on his chest, in his stomach, yet anytime he focuses on it, it disappears, leaving a lingering sensation that something was there.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” he asks, the feline’s nose wiggling, shifting his whiskers.

“I believe so.”

“And you’ll be able to make it home just fine?” he asks.

“Yeah, in a way I don’t think I’ve felt better, if that makes any sense.”

“It really fucking doesn’t, but I recommend getting yourself checked. You never know what could have happened. A concussion is no laughing matter.”

The thought getting checked in by the hospital flashes in the back of his mind.

“Heal. Danger. See.”

“I don’t think I have... there’s my car,” he says, pointing to it.

“Move, quick, thing.”

“This is where we’ll part. Stay safe, and don’t get into any more trouble than you already have.”

“I don’t think I got into any trouble.”

“Sure, whatever you say,” he says, driving off.

Isaac takes a moment to watch him leave, turning to his car, his heart thumping, “Oh crap my keys. My keys!” he scrambles, trying to find them, digging into his pockets, pulling out some algae in one.

“Access. Concern. Fear.”

A moment later he feels something metallic yanking out his keys, brushing the gunk off, a sense of relief coming over him, “Oh thank God. I'd have been up shits creek without a paddle if I lost these along with my phone.”

“Relief. Relaxation.”

He starts up the car with the news playing, “Today’s traffic is...”

“I don’t need that right now,” he mutters, changing the station, noticing the time, heart racing, “Oh shit I have to get back. What was that traffic again?” he asks himself, switching to the news station, jacking up the heat to the max, turning the fans down to his feet.

“Concern. Mating. Time...”

He drives back into the city, further away from the other half of the creature now residing hidden within him. A strange sensation coming over Isaac, “Did I forget something? Well I lost my phone but... why do I feel like I’m forgetting something?” he mutters, rushing back to his apartment, the bit of fuel he got from the friendly feline quickly running dry.

He sneaks past Bailey’s apartment, thinking, *“Don’t open the door, please don’t open it...”* a sense of relief coming over him as he slips right in, “I made it in good time. Let's get fixed up and then I can get some sweet release from this mortal limitation,” he mutters, taking no more than two steps when he hears a long drawn-out growl from his big fat black furred feline house pet. “Axel... I’m sorry I was late. I got dragged away... literally, I think. Let me get a shower and I can get you some food.”

The feline hisses, running off when he approaches.

“Concern, worry, love.”

He rubs the back of his head, “Get a little late on your feeding and you get all pissy with me,” he says with a long sigh, “Once I get you some food you’ll perk right up, but I don’t think even you want sand in your breakfast,” he chuckles, sliding off his shoes which have become mostly dry by now.

“Have to hurry. If she waits too long for me, it will show that I don’t care about her time, which will in turn means I don’t care about her... but what if I am too early? It’s not that early right now, but what if it's her early? Then I’d look desperate, and women don’t like a guy who looks desperate... Ah fuck me,” he grunts, gathering his things, stepping into the bathroom, turning on the shower.

“Liquid Death.”

A shiver runs down, he stops himself, steam slowly fills the room, “I must be nervous about this date. You can do this Isaac. You’re a Miller. You can do this, it’s Miller time,” he encourages, stepping inside, feeling his skin crawl, but he pushes forward through the heebie jeebies.

“Liquid death? Protection? Liquid death...”

It doesn’t take Isaac long to get ready, shaving, combing, dressing for a simple date with her. But before he goes, he gets the can of wet cat food out, the cracking it open makes the cat rush to him, stop a few feet away and hiss. He sighs, “Come on Axel, this is your favorite, Tuna,

salmon, chicken with a dash of catnip,” he says, putting the food to the ground. The cat eyes him, then rushes over to the food, chowing down.

“There we go, I knew you’d forgive me,” he says, giving the pet a gentle pet, which he responds with a drowned-out growl as he hungrily chows down on his food.

“Tell you what, I’ll bring you something extra special when I come back. I promise. But right now, I have to meet someone. I know. Me going out on a date. Don’t get jealous, you’re still my number one feeling.”

“Fear. Loneliness.”

“You can do this, you’re the man, the man with the high life,” he mutters, knocking on the door. The time that passes between then and any discernible reaction of her on the other side is an eternity. The time between now and never, dragging on, maddening moment, heart thumping ever faster till a shiver runs over his body.

“Excited. Calm.”

He regains his composure, there’s a click, the door creaks open, the white freckled woman stands before him, dressed in a simple dress, her hazel eyes giving him a once over, “Morning Isaac.”

“Morning Bailey. Are you uh, ready for our cup of life’s necessities?”

She chuckles, “I don’t think I’d call it that.”

He gasps, “What? How could you not exist without a good cup of go go juice in the morning.”

“There’s no juice in it.”

“And? There’s chicken in half the fast food’s chicken nuggets, but I’m not complaining.”

“Yeah but… wait, what really?”

“Yeah, so much processed food to make it chicken-like.”

“Which ones? Wait, no, I don’t want to know. I prefer to live in blissful ignorance on that one.”

“Fair enough, so, shall we get going?”

“Give me a minute, I was just quite ready yet. Do you want to come inside?”

“Sure, if you’re offering.”

“I’m offering,” she says as there’s heavy footsteps coming from down the hall.

“Is it Jack again?” she asks, peering down, seeing the long-coated police officer, “Morning Jack, another long night?”

He stops at the door, taking a deep breath, “Yeah.”

Isaac inquires, looking at the cop’s haggard face, “Another bit to be on the nightly news?”

“Not this one,” he says, slinking inside.

“Concern. Worry. Curiosity.”

Bailey looks at him with concern, “What do you think that one was about?”

“I’ve learned that sometimes there are questions you don’t ask, but Jack is a good guy. If it was something that we really had to worry about, he’d let us know.”

“Like the time there was that string of robberies going on with them using the fire escapes. That wasn’t public knowledge, but he let us know.”

“Yeah, also sorry for coming too early,” he says, stepping inside the clean and organized apartment. The smell of flowers linger heavily in the air. He looks around at the well-kept apartment.

“Fear. Doubt. Admiration.”

She waves him off, “It’s alright, I just said in the morning, didn’t say when.”

“Relief.”

He watches her leave, taking a moment to stand in her living room, gazing around at some family pictures, the flat screen television and a few other random nick knacks, books on gardening, “Yeah, we didn’t plan this well,” he says with a chuckle, “Uh, so you like to garden?”

“I have a little one on the windowsill.”

“Really? What do you grow?”

“Mostly herbs, I get the most out of what little room I have,” she yells from the other room.”

“I guess that means you like to cook.”

“No, I just like to grow things,” she responds.

“I see... wait really?”

She pops back into the living room, putting on a pair of earrings, “I guess you might have to come back here and find out, now, don’t you?”

“Are you asking me to have dinner with you later?”

“Maybe, depends how this goes,” she replies, grabbing her purse.

“Anticipation. Anxiety.”

He smiles, offering his hand, “I’ll be sure to make this an unforgettable coffee date.”

“How about you just aim for it to be uneventful,” she replies, walking past him, motioning him to follow.

He lets out a soft sigh, rubbing the back of his head with the outstretched hand, “Right, right.”

She chuckles, “You don’t have to impress my Isaac, just be yourself. I want to see you, so no tricks. Antics, or any kind of ‘show’. I prefer honesty over everything else.”

“Well that’s me. Good ol’ honest Isaac Miller.”

She tilts her head to the side, brushing hair from her eyes, “Why did you say your full name.”

“To be honest... I have no idea.”

She laughs, “That’s what I like to hear. The coffee shop is two stops down the L line.”

“What’s it called?”

“Creamy Raf Coffee.”

“That’s already piquing my interest.”

“Wait till you see who runs it, the cutest couple you ever did see.”

“A mom and pops kind of shop?”

“Yeah. They also have the best sandwiches there; you really have to try their Tea Sandwiches.”

He stops, shooting her a look, “What kind of sacrilegious thing is this, tea at a coffee shop? Are you trying to cast some unholy spell upon me?”

“Come on, it’s just the name, there’s no tea involved.”

He sighs in relief, “Woo, and here I thought I was going to be in trouble with lower powers to be.”

She laughs, “Your view on coffee is... unique, I’ll give you that.”

“When we sign our contract with the devil, I sign it with cursive style.”

She gives him a friendly smile, grabbing his hand, “There is certainly something devilish about you. Now hurry, I want to get there not long after they open.”

The coffee shop is near one of the smaller stops, with a highway overpass hanging over a set of small shops. The quaint little shop has signs of their cultural heritage with reds, whites, and blues. They step inside as they are hit with an aroma of the heavenly brew that tickles Isaac’s senses.

Bailey smiles and waves to a large anthropomorphic brown bear, “Morning Miss Kalashnik.”

The brown bear waves back, dressed in a dainty dress with a black hairnet around her head, gives this biggest smile one could imagine, “Miss Bailey! How good to see you, welcome, welcome, oh and who’s with you today?” she asks with a foreign accent.

“Isaac is someone from my apartment complex and when I told him about how good your coffee and sandwiches are, we just had to come.”

“Well...” she puffs out her chest, “My husband is currently finishing up making some fresh sourdough bread, if you just wait another moment, they’ll be ready.”

“That sounds delicious. Let me go with the Bird’s Milk Raf Coffee,” she says, after looking over the menu for that’s placed behind the bear for only a moment.

“Having something sweet today? I’ll get that done right up, and for your friend?” Miss Kalashnik asks.

Isaac gives the most inquisitive look, “*I did not know how one could make the cursed juice sound even more cursed but here I am...*”

“Isaac?” asks Bailey drawing his attention.

“Oh, sorry, I never heard of that before.”

“We have coffees made like back home in the old country. Along with a few other regional favorites,” she responds, her foreign accent growing a little thicker.

“Ah... let me see,” she says, looking over at the different coffee types, one catching his attention in an odd way, “Yesterday’s Brew? Is that what I think it is?”

The bear chuckles, “I think not. It’s made with an espresso shot, pomegranate juice and a little mint for an extra kick.”

“*Tired? Exhausted? Disgusted?*”

A shiver runs down his spine, “Ah, I think I’ll pass on that one, what about…Bulletproof Coffee. Now that sounds like something I could use to perk me up for the day,” he says, adding a hint of confidence to his voice, pulling out his wallet, “I’ll cover this,” he says, cracking the wallet open, pulling out wet bills.

“Show of Strength. Prowess. Embarrassment.”

“Oh, sorry about that that, let me put it on my card.”

“That’ll be an extra five percent charge, is that alright?”

“Totally fine,” he replies.

“I’ll get that served you both right up.”

Bailey adds in, “And we’ll both have a tea sandwich.”

“Sure thing,” the bear replies, no more than a moment later does a much larger anthropomorphic brown bear of at least seven and some inches tall comes in from the back, with a baker’s dress on, with a tray of fresh cooked bread that wafts over them, that makes their stomachs growl.

“Hunger. Sustenance. Existence.”

“Just in time, we have two teas to make love,” says Miss Kalashnik.

“Ah, I’ll have that right up,” he says, putting the tray down onto a table.

“Morning Mr. Kalashnik,” says Bailey with a smile.

The bear’s gruff demeanor lightens up, “Morning to you Miss.”

Miss Kalashnik remarks, “She brought a friend today, dear.”

He grins, getting to work slicing through the steaming bread, “Like our sandwiches and coffee that much, you brought a date here?”

Bailey remarks, “When I told Isaac about your place and how much he loves coffee, I just had to bring him. This is the most underrated coffee shop in town.”

Isaac replies, “I’ve always been open to new experiences, and trying a new type of jitter juice is one way to start a weekend right.”

Mr. Kalashnik says in his deep booming voice, “It’s a pleasure to have you, and if you like our shop, tell people to come, and if you don’t? Say nothing, or else,” he chuckles.

Miss Kalashnik playfully reaches up and smacks him in the back of the head, “Don’t scare the customers.”

“I was only joking,” he responds.

A few moments later the food is prepared, the chocolatey coffee for Bailey and cinnamon and other unique flavors for Isaac with an open face sandwich on sourdough bread with kielbasa cheese, topped with slices of cucumbers, “Here you go, enjoy,” Miss Kalashnik says cheerfully.

“Thank you,” says Bailey, taking her food to a small booth with Isaac, “I told you, this place is just so heartwarming and lovely, isn’t it?”

“It’s certainly a morning experience I was not expecting today,” he says, taking a sip of his forbidden drink enjoying the mixed flavors, taking a bite of the sandwich, the fresh ingredients really making the breakfast pop.

“Food. Stimuli. Relaxation.”

“I’m glad to give you something different. You being the real coffee connoisseur, I figured you’d have had almost every coffee under the sun, so I needed to dig deep to find something to surprise you.”

He smiles, taking another long sip, admiring the shop as an anthropomorphic brown bear comes in, to order, “I’m not an expert in the devil’s craft. I mostly buy the store brand dirt, or order whatever has the most caffeine in it to get me through my long days and nights. The devil never sleeps, and his blood proves it.”

“You have a lot of sayings for coffee, don’t you?”

“About the addictive dirt? The demon’s delight? There’s much to be said about it, but there’s one thing that is always true.”

“What’s that?”

“That I can’t get enough of it,” he responds with a big slug of his drink, “I think I’ll have another of these.”

“Stimulus. Alertness.”

“I’m good with my one,” she says, nursing on her drink, “You were going to tell me about a conspiracy theory that you’d really like?”

“I was? Oh, right, yes, I was, wasn’t I?”

“That’s the whole point of this little get together, to talk about those spiracy theories.”

“My favorites are the ones that are proven to be true, though I would say my most loved is the live prey eating of sergals.”

“What’s a sergal?”

“How to explain a sergal…” he says, leaning back in his chair.

“Unsure. Thinking. Sex.”

“Toys-4-U!”

She shoots him a most confused look, “What about the adult toy store?”

“They sell sergal toys. And you said you know of them, yes?”

“Oh, those very tall lanky angular headed people?”

“Yeah, those are sergals. Well not actual sergals, real sergals aren’t made out of rubber. But that is how they look.”

“So, what’s the conspiracy theory about them?”

“That they love to eat things alive and whole, with a voracious appetite.”

She crinkles her nose, raising her eyebrow, “Really? That something people believe?”

“Oh yeah.”

“And it’s completely false?”

“Sort of. They do eat some foods alive and whole but it’s more of a food specialty, more so for the rich and wealthy and occasionally a special type of meal to be had on rare occasions among the common folk.”

“So, they do eat animals alive and whole.”

“Small animals, but it’s more of a delicacy. It’s akin to saying all humans eat caviar.”

She nods along, taking a sip of her drink, “That makes sense. So the conspiracy about sergals is true, just not in the way people think it is. A little bit of truth with a whole lot of fluff.”

“Which is the heart of most conspiracy theories. There’s a bit of a truth or at least perceived truth. Like flat world believers. They see the world around them, it looks flat, and they build everything from that bit of perceptive truth. Unfortunately, when people get that entrenched in such thoughts you can’t convince them, you can only provide them the tools to convenience themselves and hope for the best. For that saying, ‘If you get flak, you are over target’ can work with a bit of truth or a falsehood.”

“So that’s the point of your channel, to give people the tools to convince themselves.”

“I try to. I don’t belittle those who believe them, that will make them go into the defensive. I simply provide information that is contrary to the information, never any person.”

“That’s a lot of work. Running that channel probably does keep you up at night. Speaking of which, weren’t you going to have a post last night?”

Isaac stiffens, “*Oh my god... she was paying attention to my channel. Keeping an interest in it.*”

“*Judging. Concern. Worry.*”

“I was doing a bit of investigation last night, and I discovered that the warehouse that had that drug bust, where all those exotic animals were?”

“I remember hearing something about it.”

“I checked it out and found out there was a hidden passageway that led to a sewer system that was going Dynamic Defense.”

“The company that has the big national defense contracts?”

“Yes, them.”

She leans in, “Then what happened?” she asks in a hushed voice.

“Then there was this rush of water and...”

“*Liquid death... water?*”

Isaac stands up, knocking his chair over, heart racing, the world slows for a moment as he looks over his hands, checking over his body.

Bailey rushes over to him, “Isaac what is it?” she asks, grabbing his hand, “Something wrong?”

“*Excitement. Discovery. Calm. Calm. Calm.*”

He pants, looking at her, looking around the cafe as a few sets of eyes are on him, “Ah, my phone. I realized I lost my phone.” A sense of relaxation coming over him, the weight of just how tired he is hitting him.

She takes a deep breath, a sigh of relief following, “Don’t scare me like that. Do you know where it is?”

“It’s gone. Slipped out of my pocket in the heavy rain and got washed away along with any evidence of what I found,” he says, thinking, “*Oh shit, oh shit was what I saw real? That feeling... sensation? Or was it from how tired I was. Maybe I should get some...*” He stumbles a bit, fumbling with picking up his chair.

“Are you alright?” she asks with concern in her voice.

“Yeah, it was just odd to have it hit me all at once? It was a long night. I need another cup of the devil’s brew.”

Miss Kalashnik growls, “Our coffee is made with God and love.”

Bailey waves her off, “It’s alright. He doesn’t mean anything about it. It’s a quirk of his when he talks about coffee.”

Isaac nods, “I meant no disrespect ma’am. I wouldn’t get a second cup if I didn’t like it.”

“Try not to cause a ruckus.”

“Sorry,” he says, picking up the chair, “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

When he returns with another cup he takes a big swig, drinking a third of it, “Ah, I needed that go go juice,” he remarks, sitting back down, “Now where were we?”

“You were talking about what you found and how you lost your phone.”

“Right, right. A whole night of snooping gone.”

“Could you go back and pick up where you left off?”

“Ah... let’s just say that,” he says, bringing the cup to his lips, quickly muttering, “My breaking and entering trick won’t work a second time.”

She leans in closer, “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“What you said?”

“What I said? I said what.”

“No before that.”

“Was?”

She sighs, “Before that.”

“What?”

“You know what you said.”

“Ahhh, I do, but I shouldn’t have said that in the first place. I can’t give away my trade secrets as I follow a lead.”

She eyes him, finishing off her sandwich, “You could have said that in the first place.”

“But you have to admit the back-and-forth banter was amusing.”

She giggles, sighing, “Uh, no. But I appreciate you were eventually honest.”

“I was always honest; I just may happen to leave out a few things for some plausible deniability.”

“Concern. Worry. Anxiety, Angst.”

She finishes her coffee, “Is that so?”

“Yup, doing it for you.”

“My *hero*,” she says sarcastically.

“Ah...” his fingers drum across the table, “This is a nice hidden gem. I appreciate you taking me here. I think I might come here again in the very near future. There’s a lot of other

heavenly brews that I have to try,” he says, looking over to see the bear, who gives an approving nod to him. He shudders.

“What is it?”

“That’s the nicest thing I’ve ever said about the stuff. I feel somehow dirty.”

“Is that so?”

“As far as I recall. Overall, this place is nice, ten out of ten.”

“Ten out of ten, huh?”

He smiles, feeling a warmth in his cheeks, heart racing, “Well, I give a couple of extra points due to the company I get to experience it with.”

“If I didn’t know better, Isaac, I’d say you were trying to charm me.”

“Is it working?” he asks with a nervous chuckle, but then his body calms.

“Calm, focus. Alertness.”

“Where’s the fun if I just told you.”

“Perhaps you can tell me then for an afternoon meal?”

“How about my place this Tuesday.”

“Your place? Why not my place?”

“Forgive me, but I’ve seen too many bachelor pads to know that I prefer not to force you to spend the weekend cleaning your apartment just to please me.”

He holds up his hand as if to say something but stops himself.

She leans in close, “Am I wrong?”

“At this moment I am not at liberty to say.”

“Take your time cleaning it up. Invite me when you’re ready, not before. We both live busy lives, Isaac. We can make time when time is there to be made.”

“Isn’t that the truth? Thank you, Bailey, I appreciate it.”

“I appreciate the company. It’s been rather... nice.”

“Better than terrible,” he replies with a nervous chuckle.

“Success? Courtship? Mating?”

A tingle runs through Isaac, something going through his mind, unsure what it was but increased the nagging concern in the back of his mind, *“I have to get back to my apartment and check this out. There has to be more... was that a dream or was it... relax. Relax. Focus on this first, then that. One thing at a time.”*

“Is everything okay? You seem lost in thought,” she asks, grabbing his hand as they walk back to the train station.

“Mostly. I have a lot on my mind from work and what happened yesterday has left me a little shaken?”

“You want to talk about it?”

“I need to process what happened first. I don’t want to walk back on anything I’ve said.

She gently squeezes his hand, “Okay. You have my contact, right?”

“I do.”

“Send me a ping if you want to talk. I’ll try to get back to you.”

He smiles, feeling a warmth in his cheeks, “Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind,” he says, the trip back uneventful, soon reaching their apartments.

Bailey smiles, unlocking her door, “I had a lovely time. And I’m awake now to tackle the day and my job.”

“Work on a weekend? I remember those days. It feels like it happened to me last week... right it did,” he says with a chuckle.

“See you next time Isaac,” she says, heading inside.

He slowly walks backward toward his door, “See you,” he responds, giving a little salute. He stops and looks at himself, “*Why did I salute?*” he wonders, entering his apartment, locking it. “Axel? Kitty, kitty, kitty?” he says making mouth noises, the black cat rushing to him stopping short, looking a little agitated.

“You sense something, don’t you Axel?”

He hisses in response, backing away.

With a defeated sigh he heads to the bathroom, checking himself over, “Nothing, visible... I think?” he says, checking over his form, getting onto the weight scale, his eyes widening, “Twenty pounds? I’m up twenty pounds? That is not...” his heart races, “Unless there’s something inside me. Infecting me...” he gasps.

“Fear. Dread. Anxiety.”

“It was some kind of creature... it wrapped around me, and now...” he hyperventilates, a tingle running down his spine, stomach tensing, “I could be infected. I could have infected her when we touched hands. What if... Oh shit I need to...” he says, reaching for his phone, “I lost my phone... Fuck. I need to get a new one and go with the cloud backup. Fucking cloud... Love you, hate you. Completely ruined, the old man yells at cloud jokes.”

He stops, “Should I go out? What if me going out infects other people? Shit, shit. I need to think this through. I need to get a new phone, but I don’t want to spread this to other people... if I do spread it. Who is to say I am spreading it? Who is to say that I’m not... Skin contact? Let’s assume that’s it... Bailey! Shit, shit, shit... I’ll have to ask her about it... warn her? No, no. I can’t jump to conclusions... except for the fact I am now infested by some kind of alien. That has to be the logical answer. There’s nothing on this planet that just infests a person like this. I didn’t just suddenly get twenty pounds of virus or bacteria overnight. Or drink that much black gold. I need to...”

“Calm. Relax. Alertness. Need.”

With the cool air filling his lungs a calm comes over him, his ability to focus, the lingering tiredness within him that no amount of coffee should wash away, “Phone first then I’ll search the net. Perhaps there is something about this. People talk, and sometimes there are nuggets of gold buried in all that BS,” he says, regaining his focus, “If it is transmitted via skin. I’ll wear gloves. Easy enough, then I’ll get to research.”

“Calm good. Alertness good. Need more.”

With the newest model of phone in hand and back at home, he sits down in front of his computer, clearing away for his work, “Let’s start with the alien forums...” he mutters going

through, trying to find anything that gives hint of alien host, infection, hours pass finding some similarities but nothing exactly it.

“Learn box. Box... search. Learn.”

“Perhaps if I sign in under an assumed name, yeah that could work. Perhaps there is something someone doesn’t want to say but when they see someone pose the question. They’ll send me a DM and can get to talking. Yeah, that will work,” he says, entering the information.

“Name... Isaac.”

“Now that’s done. I should do more research on where I was... maybe perhaps Dynamic Defense has something to do with it. Holding aliens for their biological benefit. If it is them... don’t make assumptions Isaac! That’s the first rule. Follow the evidence and let it speak for itself. Don’t look for evidence to follow your idea,” he says, taking a deep breath, feeling off, remaining relaxed, alert, continuing his search.

“Device. Input. Search. Learn.”

As the day turns to night, Isaac finds himself typing in map directions from his location to an area near the dynamic defense building, “Huh? When did I do that?” he grumbles the first time, rubbing the back of his head.

“Direction. Search. Find. Find. Must Find.”

He returns to his work, having a few more cups of devil’s juice throughout it. Stopping himself when he does the search again, “Uh... okay, I must be getting tired, how did I do this search again?” he says, staring at the location.

“Find. Go. Must go. Must...”

Isaac suddenly gets the heebie jeebies, causing him leap back out of his chair, “Okay, yes, that’s...” he looks at the time, seeing how late it is, “Shit, I should get some sleep,” he says yet feels the opposite, “Damn you devil. Are you going to make me pay up what’s been owed? I withdrew too much from your blackened vaults?” he grumbles, heading to the bathroom checking over his body and face, looking at the weight, “Still twenty pounds or so over what is normal... But I don’t look like it,” he remarks.

“Find. Go. Must go.”

He presses his hand into his gut, feeling a pressure back, a movement that makes him jump, “Shit, shit, what was that?” he exclaims, feeling the spot again, feeling nothing.

“Hide. Must hide.”

He burbs, stomach feeling off, the nausea leaving as quickly as it returned, “Was that me? Or am I...” he says, checking the spot again, “Nothing... Could it be me? Or... I need rest. Maybe all the stress is getting to me. Or the alien is doing something to me... what if I lose control of myself when I sleep? Or my body has been snatched?” he mutters, feeling strangely calm throughout his idea mutterings, taking a moment to look through his room, “*No pods.*”

“Paranoia. Concern. Safety. Desire.”

He takes a deep breath, sitting on the bed, checking over himself one last time, “It’ll be fine. We’ll get some rest, and then we can tackle this with fresh eyes,” he slips into bed muttering to himself, “But I don’t feel that tired,” he says, feeling the weight behind his eyes, the

soft ache yet he feels as if he's ready to tackle the day. *"Go to sleep, go to sleep,"* he thinks, closing his eyes, not moving.

"Curious. Not moving. Not well?"

Minutes pass by like hours as he tosses and turns in bed. Checking his clock every so often, looking at the steady crawl of time while sleep continues to evade him. His head and eyes ache yet he feels like he just slept, *"Come on. Sleep. I want to sleep. It couldn't be the devil's juice. No matter how infernal it is I could find respite when I needed to sleep regardless of how much I've taken..."*

His mind is a battleground of thoughts, ideas, tossing, turning, changing positions, having a random snack, as one-hour bleeds into the next, *"Come on sleep."*

"Curious. Learn. Search. Box."

Isaac stares at his computer during one of the now early morning snacks, "I should get some sleep, but I don't feel tired... yet also exhausted, it's so weird," he huffs, having a big snack before slinking back into the long tossing in bed.

"Need. A need?"

By noon though his efforts were in vain, he slinks out of bed for the final time, "I can't spend the day trying to sleep... shit this is the weirdest thing," he grumbles, rubbing his face, feeling the facial stubble, "I should shave." He goes through the motions, cleaning himself off, about to take the shower when that rush comes through him.

"Liquid death."

"Is that me or..." he wonders, taking a shower, relaxing and easing himself, to start the day.

"Liquid death... water? Water good and bad, needed."

Once out of the shower he makes a decent sized lunch, turning on his coffee maker, eyeing the hang in there kitty poster, "For once kitty, you have it easy," he remarks, starting up his coffee maker, hearing the dribble of the black juice, the aroma of the civilization sustaining nectar, "I should be tired..." he sighs, filling his cup, giving a nice wet meal to Axel which he runs over, to hungrily feed upon.

He chuckles, "Not that agitated not to come to me for food," he remarks.

Axel doesn't even pay attention, hungrily purring and scarfing down the food, only letting out a deep throat growl when he takes a moment to pet him.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he says with a sigh, slinking back to this computer, "I have to figure out if anything has been picked up. Some other searches might work," he mutters, renewing his search.

"Learning. Searching. Curious. Must locate..."

He looks through the forums, finding nothing of note, the few private messages he received were more about inquiries about this alien organism within him at best. Some time passes when suddenly he stops, looking at his screen, "This again? How in the world... That's too many times to be a coincidence. It must be trying to control me!" he exclaims get up,

stammering back from the computer, “But then... why is it trying to get me to look over there,” he says, panting, “Or am I just so tired and not realizing it... damn it.”

“Fear, concern. Worry, anxiety. Confusion. Thinking. Failing. Sleep?”

“Fucking damn it... keep your focus Isaac, you can do this. It's your time. It's Miller time,” he says with a deep sigh, sitting back down, resuming his work. Stopping again when he discovers he's randomly looking up the nature of sleep, “What the hell? Come on fingers, do what I tell you to do.”

“Sleep. Needed. Required,” the creature within him sensing the need and confusion within his host, processing how to approach. Knowing innately that it can't be done right now, not what he wants. It senses itself so far away yet not getting further, *“Connect. Learn. Communicate. Help?”* the thought hits the creature. *“Help. Help... Help...”* it watches and monitors Isaac from within following his senses.

Eventually Isaac notices the time, “Shit... I should get some sleep. Or attempt to. I really hope I can sleep,” he mutters, getting up from his chair... that is the last thing he remembers.

“Help. Sleep. Recover.”

Isaac jerks awake, his body aching, the haze around his mind taking a few seconds to clear, noticing he's half leaning back into his chair, “Did I fall asleep at my desk? It's been so long since I've done that.” The haze washes away, alertness returning uniquely fast, it's then he notices the time, a pit forming in his stomach, “Shit, I'm going to be late for work!” he exclaims, grabbing the gloves, and doing a quick version of his daily routine before heading out the door.

“Worry. Concern? Help. Build trust. Help.”

When he gets to his office, he sneaks the best he can to his desk only to hear the person he was hoping wouldn't notice, “Something happened Mr. Miller? A bit late, eh? Have a little too much fun this weekend, Hmm?”

He stops, stiffening, taking a slow deep breath, “I had trouble sleeping the previous day and my alarm didn't wake me. Things happen Steve. I'm sure you can understand.”

“I can understand, but will the boss?”

He takes a deep breath, tensing, turning to him, “Steve. Not today. I've had a weekend you wouldn't believe and at the moment I want to get through my workday without an issue,” he states, staring him down, getting closer, “So why don't you *please* go to your little cubical and for once do your job.”

“I always do my job, but I can't say the same for you. Difficult to do your work when you aren't here.”

“Conflict. Fight? Help?”

His muscles stiffen, glaring at him, “Not another word Steve or so help me...” he takes a deep breath, feeling something tingle through him, “The same could be said about you standing here and *not* being at your cubical. So, why don't you go back there before I report *you* to the boss for disrupting your fellow employees.”

He takes a step back, “What are you threatening me?”

“I would never threaten you. Unless you find me telling the truth about you is a threat?”

He stares back and after a moment he looks away, “I don’t have time for this, you are bothering me Isaac,” he grumps, walking away.

Murray pops his head up from his cubicle, ears twitching, turning in Steve’s direction, “Oh he didn’t like that one bit.”

He cracks his neck, “He had it coming...”

“Not going to lie, that was damn nice.”

“Thanks, though I prefer not to make it a habit.”

The anthropomorphic fox nods, ears twitching, “What’s with the gloves?”

He looks down at them, “Doing something different today.”

“Huh, really? Any reason?”

“Trying to break out of a little life rut. I heard doing little differences in your normal routine could help build perspective on it.”

“Ah, like taking a little vacation from yourself.”

“Sort of.”

Miss Chhaya enters the conversation with a quick comment, “I could never do that. Not being able to feel the keyboard will feel weird.”

Isaac rubs his hands together, “I didn’t think about that, well something to learn.”

“*Help?*”

“We’re still good for curry for lunch?”

Murray groans, “Why did you have to remind me?”

She cocks her head to the side, “Why? I thought you liked the curry.”

“That’s the problem, I do. And it’s not lunch time yet.”

With a chuckle, Isaac responds, “Yeah, we’re good for curry for lunch. But if you don’t mind, I need to get a cup of Joe and catch up on what I’ve missed.” He heads off, walking past the sleek black rubber drone.

“*Creature? Help?*”

His skin crawls, walking past the faceless automaton, “*Just get your coffee, get to your desk and do this. It’ll be fine. Nothing will go wrong, just a simple day at work,*” he thinks, walking past, body relaxing, “That was strange... And I don’t feel tired at all. Hmm, but good to get the bitter release of life,” he remarks, pouring himself a cup, heading back to his cubicle.

“*Not creature. Not a threat. Drone? Work. Doing work. Observe, help.*”

He takes a long sip, “Ahh, bittersweet love,” he remarks, reaching his cubicle, getting to work, typing away which is slowed by the muffled sensation of his fingertips, “Okay, this was a problem.”

“*Help. Make trust.*”

He continues to work but then feels his fingers working better than they have been, like the gloves weren’t even there, he stops, looking down at his hands, seeing the gloves are still there, “*What the...*” he thinks, typing a bit more, clicking the mouse, “*How am I feeling through*

the gloves like this?” A shiver runs down his spine, making him squirm in his chair. He removes his gloves, the cool air around his hands making his fingers twitch.

Clasping his hands together, tensing, *“Ow... ow...ow.”*

“Pain! Not good! Stop pain.”

Suddenly his hands become numb, feeling like dead weight, yet are able to move just fine, “W-what’s happening?”

Murray pops his head over the wall, “What happened?” he asks with genuine concern but pulls back when Isaac jumps at the sudden intrusion, ears folding back.

His heart races, scrambling to put his gloves back on which he struggles with.

“Are you alright? Sorry that I startled you there Isaac.”

He takes a deep breath, his body quickly relaxes, and calmly he puts the gloves back on, “I-I’m fine. This weekend was rather weird for me.”

“How so?”

“One of my investigation dives didn’t go so well.”

“The one for your channel.”

“Yeah, and then I had a date with my neighbor.”

His ears rise, “You did? How did that go?”

“Well, but I couldn’t sleep the following day, so you know the rest. But I’ll be alright. Thanks for checking up on me,” he says with a smile.

He nods, slinking into the cubicle with him, “That could explain a bit. I know one bad day can lead to several to get back into track, so don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t get too close. Don’t get too close. I don’t want to accidentally infect you.”

Murray stops, “Look, I can sense when something is off. My nose can know,” he points to it, “And you have a sense about you. I don’t normally bring it up with humans as I know it can be off putting but you’re my friend, and I thought I’d let you know.”

“Smell? Senses? Detected?”

A pit forms in the human’s stomach, shifting and turning, making him tense, “A lot of stress I think. But if you keep smelling anything off with me. Let me know, I’d love to have your insight.”

The fox smiles, “Thanks. I’ll only mention it if asked or if it’s really noticeable. So... does that mean the date went poorly?”

He shakes his head, “No, no, no. It went well. We went to a nice little cafe with the cutest bear couple you could have ever seen. They made fresh bread and foreign coffee that just screamed for me to go back there.”

“Ah, I see now why it everything has been so stressful for you.”

He quirks an eyebrow, “You do?”

“Yup. I didn’t know you swung that way Isaac. Don’t feel stressed about it. Love is love, and you shouldn’t be ashamed about it.”

“Uh wha... wait, wait, wait. No. You got the wrong idea. My neighbor is a woman and the cafe with a bear couple are actual anthro bears, not that kind of bears.”

Murray's ears fold back, his black furred hands covering his face, "Now don't I look foolish. I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"I think you ran headfirst into it. You made some poor assumptions. And you know what happens when you assume."

"You make an ass out of you and me."

"Hey, you know that saying too."

"Mom said it."

"Father here."

Murray nods, "Well, I think I made enough of an ass out of the both of us, I'll get back to work."

He chuckles, "You do that. But honestly, thanks. I needed that."

"No problem," he responds, slinking away.

Isaac returns to rubbing his hands together, the sensitivity having returned to normal, "*Okay, this is strange. But keep calm. We don't know anything about what's happening to you yet. Being excitable is not going to help,*" he thinks, getting back to work.

"Help? Companionship."

A couple of hours later he's engrossed in his work, mind for the first time shifting away from pressing thought in the back of his mind, and getting these reports done, he reaches over for his cup of coffee, trying to find it while keeping his eyes glued to the screen.

"Help. Build Trust," the creature things, its essence reaching out from Isaac's fingers, the glove slipped out of his hand the liquid tendrils wrap around the handle of the cup, pulling it into his hand.

"There it is," he mutters, taking a sip, looking into the nearly empty cup, catching an odd color, black and blue where he's expecting a pinkish white. He pulls the cup away from his face looking at his hand that is covered in this glistening shifting liquid that make his soft human fingers end in extended claws. His eyes lock onto the alien substance around his hands, mind trying to piece together what he's seeing, before it hits him making him jump and spill what's left of his coffee, the cup hitting harmlessly on the carpet.

Murray pops his head over the side of the cubicle, "Are you okay?"

With lightning speed, he pulls his hand behind his back, "Yeah, yeah, hand slipped and I spilt my coffee. Good thing it's cooled off."

"Hide. Shock. Fear. Anxiety."

"Maybe you could have gotten a lawsuit," he chuckles.

Chhaya says from behind Isaac, "You know the way that lawsuit went was corporate propaganda, right?" she remarks, making the human's blood run cold.

"She's seen it. She has to... I don't want this thing to go on a rampage..."

His heart races for a few moments but a calm quickly washes over him before he can even complete his turn around to face her, "I know that," he responds, his gaze slowly moving toward his hand.

"I know you do; I was seeing if Murray does."

The fox grins slyly, “Of course I do, I’m just lightening the mood.”

Isaac sees his human hand, nothing strange about it. He moves his fingers, “*Was it my imagination?*” he wonders, looking over to his spill, seeing his glove off to the side, “*No, my glove is off. It wasn’t...*” he thinks, putting the glove back on.

“Sure, you did...” she says, looking over at Isaac, “Need any help?”

“I got it, my mess my clean up.”

“Alright,” she says, sinking back into her cubicle.

“Take it easy man. Don’t get over stressed or you’ll fall apart,” cautions Murray.

He nods along, “I know, and thanks. Only another hourish till lunch at least.”

“Small challenges,” he harrumphs, getting back to work.

“No help. Not now. Wait and help.”

*“I hope this day doesn’t get any worse. Remain calm, don’t freak out. This **thing** could be going off emotions,”* he thinks, getting a new cup of the life sustaining juice with a few extra sugars and cream, and a half dozen napkins. On the way back though the door into the office swings open, raising a few curious heads as a black, red, and white furred sergal in her teens, dressed in a professional business suit.

“Huh...” Isaac mutters, continuing toward his cubicle.

Her amber eyes scour through the room, walking in deeper as muttering fills the room. The sergal’s ears twitching looking around the room when an anthropomorphic lion in a black suit rushes in after her.

“Miss Soulscar, you shouldn’t be in here.”

She growls, ears folding back, looking over her shoulder at him, “If my father is too busy then I can look around and see how the company is run.”

“But people need to work, Miss Soulscar.”

“They can work while I watch, speaking of which,” she says, looking back at all the eyes peering over the cubicle walls, “Get back to work!” she declares, some people jump, but all slink back down.

Isaac continues toward his workspace, eyeing the sergal making her way over to him, “*Really? I thought those cliches happened if you said it not think it,*” he thinks, eyeing the sergal’s approach.

“You!” she exclaims, “What are you doing walking around?”

He stops, “You mean me Miss?” he asks, standing his ground. Part of him feels like he should be panicking, yet he’s cool as a cucumber.

“Who else is walking around right now?” she asks, approaching him, despite her youthful appearance she’s almost as tall as him.

“I was getting a new cup of coffee after I spilt some. I want to clean up my mess?” he says, holding up his handful of napkins.”

“And why didn’t you use one of our drones? I was told that all the menial jobs are done by our drone,” she says, the sergal keeping her left hand in her pocket.

“Q-ball? I didn’t want to rely on it for everything. Keep a sense of independence even if it's something simple as grabbing a cup of coffee.”

Her ear twitches, “Q-ball?”

“It’s what we call the drone.”

Her ear twitched, the amber eyes stare in his, right into his soul, “Do you like working here... what’s your name?”

“Isaac, Isaac Miller Miss. And what do you mean if I like working here? If you’re saying if I enjoy my job. I’ve certainly had worse jobs. I wouldn’t call this terrible by any means,” he says, stopping himself from saying more, “*Why did I say that? I should have just said I enjoyed working here. This is a relative of the big boss...*”

She gets closer, “Do you say you feel fulfilled working here?”

“Ahh...”

“Be honest, I’m not trying to trip you up and get you fired, not yet at least,” she chuckles.

“Could you explain what you mean fulfilled? If you are saying the job helps me meet ends meet and live a life? Yeah, it does it well. I can’t complain, that's for sure.”

“Do you feel that you are making a difference in the world working here?”

“That...” he says, looking around, seeing all eyes are on him yet he feels calm, “It’s hard to say. I work here in my cubicle doing my part to help the company succeed by making the paperwork and orders are in well... order. It’s hard to see the big picture from my little spot in the company.”

“I see... Stick to it... Dillan, this company will be continuing its part to make this world a better place, just you see,” she states, pivoting on her foot, walking away.

“Ah...” he says then muttering, “It’s Miller actually.”

“Miller got it,” she yells from across the room, making him jump.

“Damn that’s good hearing.”

She smirks from the door frame, “I’m a sergal, of course we do,” she states leaving.

Murray and Chhaya rush to him, “Are you alright?” asks Murray.

“That was the CEO’s daughter. I didn’t know she was in the building.”

“Is it bring your daughter to work day?” inquires Isaac.

The fox shakes his head, “Not that I know...”

“We’ll talk more at lunch, we don’t want a certain someone to make waves now,” he responds, looking in Steve’s direction.

“Good idea,” he replies, the three getting back to work.

When lunch does come, they sit down with big bowls of curry, the steaming food makes his stomach growl and mouth water, “I never wanted a lunch break so badly before,” he says.

“*Food. Food. Food. Need food. Eat. Help us both.*”

“You and me both,” says Murray, trying a new bowl of curry from last time, “This time I’m picking something up with a little more kick to it.”

Chhaya cautions, “Careful, best not to over do it.”

“Thanks, but I can handle myself” he replies, as he takes a bite, eyes quickly tearing up, slowly swallowing, ears folding back, “Tasty.”

“Ah huh... did you want to switch? I have a milder meal.”

“I’m good,” he quickly responds, taking another bite.

“Don’t have water, but something acidic like lemonade or milk if it gets too hot for you.”

“I can take it. Speaking of taking it, you handled the boss’ daughter like a boss. If I were you, I’d have had my tail between my legs.”

Isaac already halfway through his food responds, “To be fair, I didn’t know how I did it either. Normally I’d be stammering, stuttering, trying to collect my thoughts. In fact, I had to stop talking as I was going in a direction where I thought I would get axed.”

“Boss. Power. Control. Command.”

Murray says, “I thought about where she was going. I never heard much about nor seen the boss’ daughter before. Good thing it wasn’t the case.”

Chhaya remarks, after a long chew of her meal, “I thought I heard something happened to his wife some years ago and she passed away.”

Murray’s ears fold back, “That’s terrible. I wonder if that’s why she was such a bitch. Not having a good Mother figure.”

She gives him a cold stare, “Murray.”

His eyes go wide, “What? It’s a fair assessment after what happened.”

“It’s still not respectful to say.”

“It’s not like I am telling it to her... unless...” he looks around ears folding back, “Her sharp hearing means she can hear us?”

Isaac chuckles, chugging down the latte of life, “Relax. I don’t think she’d be down here to eat with us plebeians.”

“Yeah, you’re right on that...” he says, looking around cautiously, “But what if you aren’t?”

“It’ll be fine. There are worse days one can have at work than accidentally offending the boss’ daughter.”

“Oh yeah, like those two security guards at the central bank, Friday night.”

“What happened?”

“Those AETA jerks, they rubbed a fucking bank. Killed two anthro guards in the process, a gorilla and a female rhino. That’s just terrible!”

Chhaya gasps, “Really? Why would they rob a bank? They only go after animal rights and all that with their over-the-top craziness.”

“I guess when you go crazy your support goes out the window and they are getting desperate for funding. I know they’re mad, but this goes against everything they stand for to hurt anthros.”

“Unfortunately, when desperation hits, morality is often one of the first casualties.”

“Let’s be honest they weren’t that moral in the first place with their hypocritical BS.”

“AETA? Familiar. Escape? Yes...”

Isaac shivers, making him squirm, just finishing his lunch, “Ah, excuse me,” he remarks, getting up.

“Everything okay?” asks Murray.

“Yeah, I just want to get seconds while there’s still time.”

Chhaya remarks, “Seconds? I’ve never seen you eat so much.”

“What can I say, this curry is so good, I can’t help but have seconds.”

“I can’t argue with that logic.”

“It must be the thing inside me. Hungry for nutrients. I better feed it so it doesn’t feed on me... but it hasn’t tried anything since earlier. Is it scared? Or something else?” he wonders, the rest of his work. Yet the concern about it grew with each passing hour, unsure when next it will come out. The expectation that it will just burst and grab others around him, and continue to feed like the blob or something worse... Yet nothing happened. He rushed home once work was over, closing and locking the door behind him, with a soft pant.

Axel greets him but then growls and hisses.

“Yeah, yeah, I love you too. You’ll feel better if I get you some canned food,” he remarks, cracking the metal tin open, Axel rushing back to him, looking up with big hungry eyes, giving a loving meow, “There we go you fat cat. Your love is only exceeded by your stomach,” he says with a chuckle, petting him, “Huh... no growl... does that mean...”

He feels a little rush, running to the bathroom he checks his weight, “I’m not sure to be relieved or concerned that it’s still there,” he sighs, heading back to his computer, “Maybe I got a hit... something... anything?”

The chair creaks under the weight, getting to work, but it wasn’t more than fifteen minutes he finds his fingers doing that same map search again. He clenches his hands into fists, pushing away from the computer, “Okay that’s it! You strange alien creature! Stop messing with my searches. I appreciate you didn’t mess with me at work... much. But now. What is that you want?! Huh? Tell me! Show me!” he huffs, heart racing but then a strange calm comes over him.

“Show. Help,” it thinks, shifting, moving, keeping a layer of calm over Isaac. The black and blue mixed sleek shiny liquid draws out of the human’s chest along his neck, *“Show, help.”*

Isaac’s eyes go wide, seeing that same liquid creature that flashed in his mind back in the sewer, the cup and here now, “What the... fuck...” he mutters, watching the liquid tug at his chest, pulling at his skin, as it congeals and takes shape, till this black- and blue-eyed feline-like creature is staring back at him. Long blue glowing whiskers twitch, with rows of sharp blue teeth that is ready to tear flesh from bone. A strange flash in his mind of it snapping around his neck, ending him... yet he remains calm, collected and, it does happen.

“Ah... well then. Now I understand why Axel doesn’t like you. You’re a cat...” he says with nervous chuckle, but the tenseness of the situation leaves him.

“Y-you’re keeping me calm, aren’t you?”

The liquid head solidifies more, nodding slowly, “Yes,” it says with this feral gravel voice that trails into a growl.

“Good... otherwise I’d thought I’d shit myself and died.”

The face tilts its head, “Help?”

“N-no, not that. I don’t need help with that... no death, please no death. I don’t want to die, please I don’t want to die.”

The creature stares at him, unblinkingly, the long thick strands of black and blue goo latched and rooted into his body, tugging at his chest, yet... *“Is it trying to figure out what to say? Or is it trying to calm me still? Appear not threatening...”*

“No, die. No hurt. Help.”

“Ah... so if I help you, nothing bad will happen?” he asks with another long processing pause that makes time slow with each passing moment.

“Yes. Help?”

“Sure, sure. I’ll try to help. How?” he asks, the alien turning its head toward the computer.

“Help. Find.”

“You want me to help you find something?”

The creature nods, responding, “Yes.”

“Okay... here goes nothing I guess,” he remarks, sliding his chair back to his computer, ready to work with the alien, whether he likes to or not...