

CLASS ACT

Riparian emerges from the restroom and there is a man standing across from him, at the edge of the canopy's shadow.

Only the sky itself is enough to dilute the stink of Riparian's fear. A blond man in a dark uniform, with good bones and a scar across his nose. Duelist culture. Military background. Probably navy, if he ended up here. The armada succeeded, at long last, in breaking the xrafstar tyranny. But when you break something, it shatters into little pieces, and they get everywhere. Sand in the pussy of empire.

He's scanning your face. When the dueling officers came to the atoll, their scars gained a new prestige. A xrafstar can't scar. Is that a pommel lurking in the dapples of his oiled jacket? They started carrying swords with hooked ends, so that when they pierce your belly, they drag the parasite out...

But more importantly, you are an adult male coming out of the boy's bathroom at a private institution. You've really done it this time. God has finally, personally ruined your existence. And while confirmation of your importance and centrality to the cosmos is delightful—how could you be so stupid?

Riparian thinks of spitting in the man's face, but he's downwind of him. And you can't solve every problem in the world by spitting in a man's face. Only most of them.

The man says, I found you.

Riparian looks to the treeline. How fast could he run for it? How many bullets could he take before the pain took him down? Knowing that it was not his body that had failed, but his mind? Nerves regrowing, incapable of being severed...

An animal reflex tells him to bolt back into the restroom. Idiomatic, pointless, dead end, but cover yourself, conceal, by any means—

The man says, quite the night last night.

Yes, Riparian says. Easy and calm, but not cold. A yes that could fit anywhere. As long as the listener assigns meaning to it. Mimicry.

They walk, Riparian doesn't know where. They fell in easily together, as if they do it all the time.

- I never asked.

Riparian waits for the man to ask what he never asked.

- Did you enjoy it?

Hmm?

- Your vacation.

It was fine.

- You look invigorated from your travels. In high color.

Riparian sees his car, and considers running again. This is the eternal impulse of his terror. Find a new body. Shed all the annoying entanglements that stick to a person. The people who think they know you. The appointments, schedules, friends and family, debts, owed and to be collected. The diseases and complaints you have to remember you have, even though you've never felt healthier. And the vast, hungry hole you can never show anyone.

They pass through an obsidian arch, and there is a table with a pump jug of clear liquid, and a bottle of standardized alcohol, and agents in dark skinsuits, and a poster says, *A SCOUT IS CLEAN*. This is a trap.

The blond man sticks his hands out for a squirt of sanitizer, then rubs them together with a smile. Hello, scoutmaster, an agent says, handing him a small paper cup of spirits. The blond man transforms in a masculine exhalation of ethanol, air tingling with antiseptic.

And then it's Riparian's turn.

The agent works the pump. It's almost empty, so the tube goes up and down building pressure, trying to get that last glob. And another agent is pouring him a paper shot of alcohol and Riparian is soaked and sagging like that cup will be if he doesn't drink it. Exactly now is when he's supposed to hold his hands out. He shouldn't even be thinking about it. He has to run—

The scoutmaster places a hand on his shoulder and says, I drank with him yesterday. He's still working through the hangover.

It's a miracle. He has time to slip away now. But first he needs to find a restroom and wipe his pits off before someone smells the fresh stink of his terror.

The scoutmaster whispers, drinking early today, are we?

Guilty grin.

- It's a good, clean habit, in a place like this. But you want to be clear for your class.

That's why he took this body. Because it works here. ANOTHER GENIUS MOVE ON HIS PART. ONE OF MANY TO COME. WATCH THIS SPACE.

He is only a shadow. He cannot be examined too closely. Giving a lecture to these brats will instantly expose him.

Just a moment, he says, slipping through the door of the first restroom he sees. Hands sweep his hair back and they smell like all the bad things he ever did, oily and defying the water he sprays on them. He tries to open the window, and it teaches him how weak this body is.

The scoutmaster is waiting outside. So polite. Again this forced, intuitive following. Really need to have you over for dinner, and other pleasantries, and Riparian is looking for an exit, and suddenly, enjoy your class, and Riparian's legs march into a classroom.

Naked on the firing range. Their teen eyes are slow bullets. He can't even remember what year this is or if the sky still has a sun or his name(name(name(name))) and now he has to teach a class he knows nothing about.

He turns to the chalkboard and the lines of white death say

PSEUD



The Xrafstar Badge

- ◆ *Identify your local xrafstar types.*
- ◆ *Why must the pseud be feared?*



Riparian is alone with the primates. Scouts in black shorts and white button-ups and pink ribbons tied around their necks. Those with darker hair have blond dye burnt in. And in one of them, this radiance spills down the face, lambent with microbes—

Not here.

He runs his tongue across his already-yellowing teeth, trying to find a chunk of memory stuck in his smile. What comes naturally to the tongue. Pick up the chalk. Mnemonic aid. Look at the slits of their mouths, and their eyes like little traps, the dilation of their pupils, their arousal levels, what they expect of you.

Some kind of biology instructor. Specializing in xrafstarology. I'll be your substitute

teacher for the day.

Let your voice come out. People repeat themselves, the same stories and tics and self-effacements, they're fragile meat recordings and you just need to hit play.



I tell them about myself.

I tell them we are a parasite that wears humans.



There's something different about Cancer's instructor today. Is it the way he holds his chalk, flicking the dust from it like ash? Or is it the gloves? Wearing gloves is considered good atoll hygiene, but his teacher rarely wore them except when driving.

Something coy or coiled, spring-loaded hips, considering each point with a certain posture. The stringy black hair is sharpened to wires.



CANCER Can a pseud fly?

A pseud can't fly.

The chalk snaps, turning into a cigarette. He watches smoke waft from the tip, then settle as white dust. There is pain. He observes it until it grows cold.

There was a time they were known as fairies. Even after they lost their wings. It was the most beautiful thing they were ever called. And it was probably some angel into whose folklore they had crawled, a parasite of language as well as flesh.

CANCER But they can change...

They can display exciting new plumage when aroused in some way. Antennae. Coloration. But not wings.



I tell them about our disease. It breaks their minds. It turns them into an extension of our digestive tract. Your intestines, our leash.

I tell them this disease can be spread by any bodily fluid.

If you catch their disease, they have access to your memories. To the vital secrets a scout is trusted with...

The pseud calls this augury. Opening up your guts.

Do we? As a joke, maybe. What we really call it, can only be said by your face when twisted to the limit—

Your body has a dermal reaction. A rash around the throat, like a collar. Recognize the signs. Not dissimilar to poison ivy, but quicker acting. Immediately remove your clothes and clean yourself with running water—

His tongue seems to be moving in fast forward. Sunk deep within himself, he is almost hypnotized by his own voice, the fly whine of this useless carcass.

—saliva is easiest to be contaminated by. It comes from face level, and can be turned into a projectile—or spat into your drink. The bad odor is weaker, and can go undetected in many settings. But the control is also weaker, and wears off faster. Feces are the most potent, of course.

Some of them lean forward. He can tell he's never been this explicit before, and their attention hits him like a summer breeze. Don't lose your cadence, your gravitas, brass tacks and heart attacks.

Fecal hypnotism. Salivary mesmerism. As you'll recall from kindergarten: If it's clear, little fear. If it's brown, wear a frown.

Too much attention. Dial it down. Regurgitate what they already know.

Pseud.

Pseudobezoar.

Bezoar. A wad of something in the digestive tract. Hairball. Fruit pits. Girlish disease of swallowed stones. A trophy of the insides. From the Zand word for antidote.

The pseud cannot be poisoned. It cannot be anything.

They call it parasite, but it is synthetic. Have you seen a picture? Black and shiny. They made it out of something. That is why it is a pseudobezoar.

Pseud.

Faker. Liar. Imitator.

Riparian sniffs. A drop of sweat, rolling down his nose. He turns to the board and catches the drop with his other hand, licking it back into his body. The bad smell crossfades into the body odor of the classroom, and the musk of jasmine wafting through the window.

A pseud is a type of xrafstar. "Evil animal". Those created by Ahriman from a disgusting act of auto-sodomy—

—they tend to run hot. But we live in a tropical climate. Everyone runs a little hot. There was a regrettable panic during the dysentery hysteria of...

Cancer loses interest as his teacher drones. It was very interesting at first, but here comes the same boring story. Don't adults realize how repetitive they are? What a waste of time slots. He's running out of time to sell this chocolate. The voice turns to black tape. It spins. It entertains. It drains.

The knife at his waist is so dry. He digs it into the underside of the desk, carving scatology. He never understood the way others talked about boredom—for him, it is an itch so intense as to be painful, aggressive as a disease. He rubs faster and faster, scratching himself into the wood—

Pain explodes in his hand, the one on his desk. On the other side, the knife scrapes in a sudden loss of control. Shavings spurt between his legs, curling and sticking to inches of sweaty thigh, the tanned band between black shorts and socks.

Riparian lifts the ruler. Please pay attention, he says. But he's smiling, like nothing happened. Sudden and unremarkable as the slap of a fly.

Cancer is shocked. He never expected it from this instructor. An apathetic swat is common, when someone acts up. But this was a sting. He feels ambushed. And he didn't even realize what he was doing. Not really. Did he? Memory distorts at the exact moment when punishment enters the world. His brain shivers like sediment, sieving intent from the act until he doesn't even recognize the Cancer of ten seconds ago. His memories have always been divided between "found out and punished" or "got away with it". Like those experiments with the cat in the box, it's always possible to dream until the lid is off. Then you're either guilty, or innocent.

His hand trembles, flushed and tingling, as if broken.