

THE HALO CLUB

Halo Club. Top boys. Top girls. The nerve center. But something bad has happened, signals running to phantom limbs, phantom kids.

They don't meet in the camp anymore. They go to an abandoned restroom in the park. Inside a stall, there is a hole in the floor instead of a toilet, breathing warmly.

This is how they accessed the first layer of the DarkAtoll.

The tunnel branches into a maze of corridors. All the corridors are similarly grimy, with broken tiles and puddles of bloody algae. The air is buzzing with flies, a living fog that limits their vision. The only variation from the corridors is a room you can reach after about ten minutes of walking, which is long enough to feel lost, like they lost track of a turn and due to the similar and perhaps infinite nature of the corridors they have been trapped forever by a single mistake. If they leave a mark to guide them, whatever else is down here might see it, and that would be the worst. To know you had made something aware of you, but not when, or where, or what it might do. So they draw maps of it. Trembleuse's diagram is efficient, laid out with ruler and pen. Cancer's map is messy marker, leaking like corruption through the paper. All of them center around the room.

The room is a safe room. They know this because the flies can't enter. So the flies stick to the outside of the door like a thick black blanket. When you turn the doorknob, they don't scatter. They let you crush them. Cancer retches at the living handle, squeezing it as fast as he can and pulling the door open. Until he can wipe them off, it feels like the crushed bodies are still moving, legs and antennae waving...



There is a fountain in the room, dry and blackened with dust. It makes him think of a huge ashtray. There are old chairs and tables, and on the wall in huge letters someone wrote DAAT, in what seemed like dried blood but smelled like something else. So they knew someone was down here once, a long time ago. Or maybe not. They have to be careful about time down here.

Someone sets a timer.

MEETING START

Cancer's smile is huge and bright. His voice is a burst of sugar, a controlled ring to keep his speech impediment from coming through. Air leaks through the roof of his mouth, weakening certain sounds. He knows just how loud and fast to speak, and which words to dance around, and which words to seize, eliminating all ambiguity.

He's lucky. He could be really, really visibly deformed. No one knows he's a fetal

alcohol baby, but the illusion is always on the verge of breaking. Only a complete act of focus and willpower applied to the entire surface of his body prevents everyone from seeing what he is.

Look around the room. The face cards of your scout pack. Your clean uniforms, buttoned up to the gushing throat of your ribbon. Socks stretched over eugenic calves. Bangs like trimmed trash bags, redeemed by peroxide, demelanized streaks of blond.

Your peers. Peerless. Peering. Empty sockets. Metamorphosing into adults, adulterated power test-deployed in settings such as these. They give you a little power like a scrap of raw meat to tug at. But now the club is off-grid, and the meat is radioactive.

They discuss the laying of traps. Suspicious adults. Recent superstitions for attracting entities to their cause. Plans for descending to the second layer. The sharpening of knives.



A knife is a boy's best friend. A knife is a dependable object that deals a variable but trustworthy amount of damage to wooden objects and strange men that spawn at night, cloned from foreign nations, or begat of the decision, deep in the womb, to be an impoverished scrounger. A knife is for family-friendly pursuits like whittling, firestarting, or dressing game.

IRIDESCENT KNIFE
The color of angels.

His knees tremble just below the table, still shivering from the release of cutting himself. The tropical shorts force him to cut into the shadows of his legs, into the upper inner thighs. He tries to cut where he won't chafe, but it's always rubbing against something, that's what makes it hidden.

The welt on his wrist is almost gone. Maybe what disturbed him so much about it, was that it felt like the spark of cutting himself, a sensation that had been private until now. But unlike the cuts on his legs, the welt belongs to someone else. A hematomic territory.

[NAME] didn't show up today.

They got him.

From now on, don't go anywhere alone. Not at night.

Maybe he found an angel, Susancai says. She's the daughter of an eastern shipping

executive who fled embezzlement charges on one of his own ships, and she never forgot the month of gray silence in a shipping container stacked with cash, her family sitting dignified like a portrait framed by orange steel.



The Angel Badge

◆ *This badge doesn't exist.*



They all had the same sickness. And in that fever, they saw the same thing.

Total darkness levels of the world increasing.

The Sevenever is in peril.

A looping fever dream that conveyed deeply the loss of something, and how inescapable the consequences of that loss would be. They would not be able to leave the atoll, or perhaps it was that there would be nothing to escape to. The recurring hallucination of missing the last plane off the atoll, or the last container for leaving this planet or universe behind. A starship, an elevator, a refrigerator.

And finally, a hole. The hole, simultaneously at the start and end of the loop, had the feeling of death, certain death, or life, desperate life.

The Halo Club was already secretive, and used to meting out private judgment. It was obvious that only they could save the atoll. They are too young to buy guns, so the next best thing is summoning angels.

No one has succeeded.



In the

OLD DAYS

Scouts would wander the park and hope to be contacted by angels. In their hunger and dehydration, they sometimes saw them, often in the most traditional and final way. Thus it was forbidden. And it is, after all, only a piece of mythology for the introduction to the ScoutManual, right?

Trembleuse encountered a porcelain angel, perfectly pale and smooth and creamy like white chocolate, sweating from the tropical heat, or weeping from every inch.

He was able to describe it so clearly, as if it was seared into his eyes, or their whites were two scoops of that same material and he was becoming part of it. He is confident he can tame it, with the proper emptiness of stomach and dropped glucose levels. An angel would never bind itself to someone with half a cheeseburger in their stomach.

OH MY GOD THAT'S AMAZING, Cancer giggled, his teeth turning into white chocolate as well, and melting terribly.

Why you and not me?

It would have been bearable if it was anyone else. His foster brother pulling ahead of him, blond and perfect, feels like dying.



The plan is to catch the pseud as it moves through the corridors. They've stockpiled lighter fluid from the camp. But the only thing they've encountered so far is thick swarms of flies. This absence feels like something watching. This absence feels like an invisible line waiting to be crossed. This absence feels like a trap.

If they are trapped here, they will die. The DaAt makes you sick. Only the safe room is safe, but the fountain inside is dry and empty, which feels like a bad sign to them. Something broken, an incomplete form of protection. So they always stay for exactly thirty minutes, then leave. If they walk fast, no one throws up. But if they do, Cancer is the first, like those bats that miners would put in cages to check for gas leaks.

Speaking of minors and cages, Riparian smells Cancer's reentry to the world like the moon coming out. But he can't do anything because Cancer is walking down the street with his friends and they're all very alert, electric with risk and fresh air. None of them see the car parked in the night fog, windows like steaming facets of obsidian.



Cancer looks forward to these expeditions, despite how scared he gets. He gets to spend time with his foster brother. Back at home, Trembleuse has retreated from him and he doesn't know why. It hurts so much.

On their way out of the tunnel, he slowed down to tie his hiking boot. And when Trembleuse looked back at him, always responsible, Cancer asked, what's your problem with me?

A kind of rage at being asked that, at being forced to confront what should have been unspoken, another foster fuckup. But:

TREMBLEUSE When they adopted you. They split their love in half.

CANCER

No...

TREMBLEUSE

They told me. Don't think of you as a foster. Think of you as a half-brother. Because we're all part of God's family.

If you're my half-brother. I'm their half-son.

Cancer didn't know what to say to that. He wanted to say something, but the tunnel was making them sick and they had to walk fast, out of breath. Irrationally he wanted to stay and throw up, show Trembleuse how sick this made him. But it would just have reminded him of the good times.