

II

(Tapes spin behind Y's head. Wall-mounted tape decks, black plastic backdrop.)

(Y removes the cartridge from his fountain pen. It looks like a spent glow stick. He slides the new cartridge inside until the plastic is punctured and the ink flows. He screws the handle shut, cartridge locked and bleeding inside.)

(VEAU leans back in his seat, soothed by the hissing of the tapes, and Y's calm rituals.)

Y What's that you have there?

VEAU *(amiable)* Oh, just my pet rock.

(He grips it in times of stress. He takes it out for air. He protects it from erosion.)



TECHNICIAN We can go up to sixteen on this one.
Y That would be ideal.
 Considering the objective.

Sixteen is when he feels most violent, most capable of killing the target. But it makes him awkward, suspicious, difficult to blend in. At such a low dose of the cocktail, he can hear his other body. Helpless, tense, a ball of muscle, adult testosterone raining between his ears. Lobster cracking puberty.

If they compensate with a higher dose, he will seem blunted, mechanical, or years out of alignment, too young for the body. Sometimes a heavy dose can be justified with a retarded backstory. A lot of the targets like that. But more and more rasts want to have a conversation first, regardless of their predilections. To make sure, by folk wisdom and pederastic superstition, that he is a real boy.



(Black mold ice. A wall of rust. Out back, on his smog break.)

(He closes his eyes and inhales.)

(Electric guitar from a passing car. Melancholic grime.

Closer.

Behind his head.

Sixteen.

The hands.

To the kitchen.

Find what you need.

He opens his eyes. The fog is an unhealthy white. Milky and flat. The appearance of sick air.)



(shriek of drinking, glasses, laughter, all in a single second)

TECHNICIAN What would you do if you weren't working for INNOCENT?

The unspoken goal of everyone who works in the boylike program is to be promoted to another body. Manlikes are a coveted position and almost impossible to get. Those jobs go to the most prestigious agents and friends of the ruling family. It's not even the same facility, but another on the other side of the city. And they use a modified jacuzzi. Warm, organic, celebratory, masculine, not cold, metallic, domestic, and feminine like the laundromat.



(They walk back from the bar. Slot machines scream like cop cars in the UFO gambling temple loophole. They come to a crosswalk and Y starts shivering.)

Y Damn.

VEAU What?

Y Forgot my jacket.

(sound of rustling fabric)

VEAU Ordinarily you forget your jacket.
 But it is I who have remembered my jacket.
 And can now lend it to you.

Y *(takes it with a smile)*

 Veau geste.



Kore is a skilled pilot. She uses a different washing machine, of course. And they never work on the same day. But he sees her at times of alcohol, or in the staff lounge.

She used to wear the bodies of men, until she was disgraced and kicked down for unknown reasons. Now she wears children, and some say she wears animals. A dog can reach special places. If the program becomes more well-known, people will start shooting dogs.

She has a female handler. Her handler touches her like an animal. He must be imagining it. It would be bad if it went beyond the mindless social grooming that women initiate automatically, without pleasure.

They are very discreet. It seems to him that he is the only one they expose their small indiscretions to. Unconcerned by his presence. As if they were animals. Or he were something else.

Kore is playing darts against her handler. Every time she loses, a dart turns back at her. The ruby drops on her arm are like his cherry angioma, but alive and glistening. He feels infested with growths, dead growths. As if the tiny tumors studding his skin were not random extrusions of excess capillary, but were eating into him from the outside, and would slowly turn all his blood vessels into the same dead matter.

Did she catch him looking? He couldn't have been standing there long with the drink in his hand. But he can never tell when the drug has entirely eliminated itself from his system. Time is a hungry dream, especially when he's been sipping on frothy sugared egg wine.

KORE Come play darts with us.

(VEAU gratefully comes over and plays darts with them.)

(A lull between games. As he leans over to sip his egg wine, he can tell another secret is transpiring just behind him. It is beautiful and painful, but so small, a second later he cannot remember what it was. There is only pain without a mark, like the prick of a dart.)



(Y clicks a cassette into his tape player wall.)

(He goes to his desk and sits down.)

(He arranges his pens.)

(VEAU comes into his office, hair wet from the showers.)

Y Yes, Veau?

VEAU We should make the boys the size of a skyscraper. And go on an indiscriminate rampage.

Y I'll pass that along.

VEAU *(panicking)* You probably shouldn't.

Y Don't worry. I won't.

VEAU *(offended)* ...



He's a girl this time, to his surprise.

He does a little dance, giddy on Retz. He flits like a sunbeam down the corridor.

(Dry voices in his skull, tickling his sinuses)

There we go.

He's. Yup.

Here comes the groom...

Dun dun dun dun, dun dun...

Felony, felony, felony.



Shaving his body in the shower. Eyes shut, purple UV dew on his lashes. The razor eats his dark hair, flaring with dark strands until he seems to be holding a hairy insect.

A long sweep up his chest. Swathes of government shaving cream, slimy clouds dissolving in his sternum.

Foot on the soap holder so he can reach his legs. Head tucked into his shoulder, chin nesting in his overflowing clavicle. His finger chases the razor, tracing the smooth skin.

Pain. Stinging where the thigh meets the calf. He drops the razor and it breaks apart. He picks up the blade. Water bursts on the stainless steel, eviscerated. He moves the blade down to his groin, holding it between two fingers, and carefully scrapes it through the dark growth. White cream drips down his thighs, streaming between his legs into the drain. The drain catcher fills with hair, and water backs up to his heels. Shower droplets dance.

He touches the freshly shaved skin, the pubic mound speckled with black stubble. The razor presses into his flesh. He closes his eyes and the world shaves itself.



There is a door that is always locked. A medicinal smell and a steady beep.



VEAU's cherry angioma shine under the fluorescent lighting, white dots of specular highlight on the smooth processed bumps of his face. Y is struck by the crimson constellation on that tired skin, uncanny against the office backdrop. Where he comes from, the stars are prophets of doom.

Y Muttermal.

VEAU leans back, mouth open but eyes hooded, surprised by the unfamiliar sound. His brain crudely parses it in several ways, rapidly inventing meaning: onomatopoeic, scatological, a *slur*, what did you just call me, what am I defending against?

Y (*gesturing to the angioma*) The mark of the mother, they call it.

Then what is the mark of the father? What benign tumor has earned that title?

Don't think about it. There's nothing to think about. You're the tumor now. A cherry boy grows into a synthetic, red-dyed, very chewy adult gum, gnash gnash gnash, stick yourself under his desk.

VEAU Do you have any skin defects I should know about?

Y None that you should know about.



VEAU How was your weekend?
Y Good. Very good.
 Yours?
VEAU Good.

(Y always comes back from the weekend with a faint smell, something foodlike or floral. Perhaps that was the source of the initial discomfort.)

Going to a service for a colleague who PASSED AWAY PEACEFULLY. They arrive a little late, and prepare themselves in the stone antechamber, dark and smelling of soil. They scrape off their shoes and check their hair in the reflection of a glass case which contains twelve black boxes.

He watches Y takes off his coat, oddly tight in the shoulders, as if unwilling to surrender an advantage.

When Y's gloves are removed, it's like they were never taken off. Then the fingers come alive, grasping the gloves in one hand and looking for a place to put them down; a classical, refined pose which fills Veau with a swell of pride at his colleague's effectiveness.

Chanting penetrates from deep inside the Translated Ohrmazdic church. Women singing a medieval hymn, harsh but serene like cold rapids over black stones.

Y Can you?
 (holding out the gloves)

(VEAU takes the gloves while Y searches in his coat for something.)

The gloves are midrange pleather, smooth in his bare hands, always forgetful of his own gloves. They are gently erect as if containing the essence of Y's hands. The longer he holds them, the creamier they become, polyurethane butter.

He stares, cherry-eyed, at the swell and thrust of Y's pockets as the man fails to find the speech he prepared. The chanting of the choir is serene and hypnotic. His thumb slips inside the glove, tasting the delicate lining of plush Ultrascine wool, sudden and carnal, this rabbit's hole. His other hand burrows into the other glove, thoughtless and cold. Fitting one finger, then another, into the warm void left by Y's palm. The dark hole of the glove is like a gun from a softer reality. His fingers pulse inside, a deconstructed grip. At the other end of the glove, the dark fingers are trapped under his own.

The glove is a copy of something that had to live and suffer and die and need no longer, a dark substitute that can be endlessly manufactured, not living, and not dying.

He comes to the correct conclusion. It is nice to be paid well and buy useful things, and this is why he does what he does.



Y (*drunker than usual*) The pederast is leading the little boy into the forest.
That's the. The place with trees in it.
Right?
It's very isolating.
And the boy is crying. He's a very sensitive boy. He senses something is
wrong. And he won't stop crying.
And the man says:
Why are you crying? I'm the one who has to walk back alone.

VEAU That is so funny.

