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*For Rachel Pollack,
who's been doing this for over forty years*

MEANWHILE,
ELSEWHERE

Control

RACHEL K. ZALL

Marble, glass, steel. Cameras above the doorways. He looked directly up at the old building, one of few left from the early days of the city, and a gargoyle spread its jaws back at him, its granite claws digging into a cornice. Inside its mouth one glass eye stared passively back, a bright red LED drawing in the attentions of anyone who looked up, just to let them know they were watched, to let them know they were safe, to let them know that if they looked up from a crowd of people, someone somewhere was going to look back.

Somewhere, a computer ran the picture of his face through the databases and confirmed that he lived nearby and that his score was acceptable: no outstanding warrants, no criminal records, no radical activities or associations with extremist religions, solid credit, good job. Owner of a luxury condo in the district. That he'd had a name change raised a red flag, but an officially approved doctor's letter on file confirming he was transsexual lowered it. His score was a 96, the computer decided: a good citizen who could be reassured that the cameras were only there to keep him safe.

The woman to his left, on the other hand, was difficult for the eye to interpret. Her hair made scribbles across her face that baffled the software, puffed out like a black and white spray of frizzy spikes and hid her from view. The computer calculated her height as above average and she seemed to be walking with the 96, so it could guess what sex she was assigned at birth from that, but without a clear picture it couldn't determine if she had filed the correct paperwork to even be considered a "she." Her picture was

passed along to a human operator, who took one look at her and knew perfectly well that she didn't live anywhere nearby.

The operator sent a signal out, and a nearby police officer set down his coffee and drove slowly past them. The camera on his car was a next-generation model capable of thwarting the standard ways of avoiding facial recognition software. It had her in seconds. Bad credit, questionable associations, an arrest for soliciting but no conviction, officially male. No outstanding warrants. Claimed legal residence in one of the northern districts, but no lease or utility bill registered in her name to prove she actually lived there.

The officer took into account her companion was a 96 and decided not to stop and frisk her, though he drove slowly past several times as they walked so she would know she'd been noticed. As though she'd had any doubt.

But then they walked north and crossed the line out of his district, into the place where she probably belonged. The officer wondered what a 96 would be doing walking over that line with her—there was no record of drugs or even public intoxication for him, but why else would someone from the district be walking so far north? The officer pulled into a “no parking” zone right near the line and decided to sip his coffee and wait. He notified Central that cameras should keep an eye out for where the 96 re-entered and do a full analysis on his behavior.

Old brick, broken. Weeds like trees waving over their heads from the toothgaps where row houses once stood. Wood panels nailed over windows. He'd never been up this far, but he'd swept through panoramic views online and he knew what the neighborhood looked like. That's why last week he'd demanded she visit his place first.

“Shit,” she'd sighed, slumping into his leather sofa, eyeing the artisan cheeses he'd set out before she arrived, “next time you come visit me, alright? I showed you the way now, you're a grown ass man and you can come up yourself for a Craigslist hookup. I fucking hate going down to the district.”

“Why?” He looked at her. “The district is safe, and it's clean. I like the district.”

She snorted, “Yeah, that's cause they score you good when they see you. When I go down there I gotta get in and get out. You saw that cop circling us, didn't you?”

“They don’t score people! That’s a conspiracy theory,” the 96 laughed. “Most of those cameras probably don’t even do anything.”

Thinking back to that now, she sighed and shook her head. Was she really taking this idiot to her place? She considered sneaking in the back of an abandoned building and slipping away to let the rats scare him back home where he belonged. But then she remembered last week, the hard muscles in his back tensing as he came inside her, her legs wrapped around his tight ass, and he was so damn beautiful with a split lip. She didn’t cum—she was so used to faking it that she didn’t know if she could come from a guy fucking her ass anymore—but she wanted to. At the very least he owed her a blowjob.

So whatever, it wasn’t like she was fucking him for his brains.

She stopped in front of a house with boarded windows and a mushy-looking roof. Vines poured out where some boards had been pried off the upstairs windows. She stepped onto the concrete steps and they crumbled a little under her boots.

“You live here?” He asked, leaning away from the house slightly.

“Fuck you talking about? No one lives here,” she snorted, knocking three times on the door. It fell open and musty air carried a gush of mold into his face. He cringed. “I thought we were going to your apartment,” he said.

“I didn’t say that. My roommate wouldn’t even put up with your ass. I said I’d take you to my *place*—this is it.”

She stepped in, and trying to keep his breath shallow, he followed. Inside was a living room with rotted floorboards and an old couch bulging with moldy wet stuffing. There were cigarette butts and shards of broken glass everywhere. There was a bare wooden staircase with no railing that went up to a closed door with flecks of white paint still lingering on its surface. It was missing two steps. “This was my mom’s place. I got it when she died.” She walked up the stairs and looked back to see if he would follow.

He stepped gingerly onto the first step and it held. At the top of the stairs, by the closed door, she crossed her arms and sighed. He hopped over the missing steps and was pleasantly surprised that the stairs didn’t break and kill him. As he came close to her on the staircase, she turned the old brass knob and opened the door. On the other side was nothing but darkness.

She stepped in.

He called her name, but she didn't respond. He went right up to the threshold but still couldn't see inside. How could it be so dark upstairs with the roof half gone? He felt around with one foot, and grit on the floor crunched under his foot, but the floor seemed firm. He took a step inside. Behind him the door crashed shut and he swiveled in terror. Then he looked up.

"Wait what?" He looked back at the door, then up at the stars overhead; he'd never seen so many. He didn't even know there were so many. The moon was enormous and blue, directly overhead as if it was midnight. The floor was still wood but where the walls should have been it just faded out into a plain of dust that stretched in all directions around them. They had to have been on the second floor, but the space seemed to have no edges. The door still stood behind him, hanging in the air as if it had been pasted in.

"This is my place," she said. "I told you I was taking you to my place, right?" He took a deep breath. The air was pure and cool, like the air by a stream in the woods. In the corner on the floor, just where the dust met the floorboards, was a queen-sized bed with brass rails and a bare, blue-striped mattress. It was so quiet her words didn't even echo. There were red mountains he'd never seen before ringing the horizon. He looked around, expecting to see the lights of the district or even just streetlights, but there was nothing.

"Holy crap," he murmured. "So, um." He looked all around him, as though maybe he'd just missed the city lights on his first pass. Nothing. "What is this? Where are we? I mean... do I get the tour?"

"The tour!" she spat. "I didn't bring you here to be a god damn tour guide. Get over here. Take off your fancy clothes," she said, unbuttoning his dress shirt. "You don't want them to get all covered in dust, do you?"

"I should have brought a broom," he smiled weakly. She didn't smile back, just focused on working each button through its hole. She slid the shirt down his arms, exposing his flat breasts and big shoulders.

"Mmm, those shoulders!" She murmured to herself. "Yeah, now that's what I brought you here for." She gripped the pale muscles of his arms, pulled him in and kissed him violently, and he put his arms around her and squeezed. He tried to ignore the pained, terrifying groan of something somewhere beyond the mountains.

She pulled back and shoved him, and he tumbled into the dust, an explosion of it puffing out from beneath him. Specks sparkled in the moon-