

“TWO DAYS TO VEGAS”

“Doesn't work like that? What do you mean it doesn't work like that?”

Jared shifts in the passenger seat, stretching her legs. She casts her eyes about the vehicle, turning away from the driver's seat to pretend not to listen in to the phone conversation occurring a foot away.

Machines sit in the backseat, parts strewn across the faux-leather like children without car seats. Metal pieces scrape against each other in high pitched wails at every bump in the road. In the trunk, just visible peeking over the backseat, is the handle of a massive black case.

“So-- no, you go. Okay. Yeah. Okay. So-- so even if I have a clear record you need me to meet with the kid for months?”

There's something so familiar about the woman in the driver's seat, the way the deep, tired lines of her face carve into a scowl. Her hands grip the expensive looking phone, mismatched to the peeling interior of the rental. Her hair falls in dark coils over her shoulders, shaking with her movements as she seethes into the receiver.

“I'd provide for the rest of the kids life, sure, it can have all my money. What? Am I nurturing? You're not joking.”

Jared fixes the driver with another nervous glance. Her fingers tap her thigh, and she clutches at her duffel bag as they make a sharp swerve back between the yellow lines. She reaches for the water bottle on the floor and sips from it, grateful to be out of the sun after hours of walking, thumb out, with her flannel wrapped around her head.

All things considered it could be worse. Could be a rapist or a killer. Though she can't be sure, this woman seems like neither-- The woman hasn't so much as looked at Jared since she got in the car.

“That's your point? Lady, I'm telling you I'll give this kid billions of dollars-- Let me adopt 'em for a few weeks, I'll give 'em back afterward. Hello? Hello?”

The driver tosses the phone to the side with a snarl and grabs the steering wheel with white knuckled hands. Jared opens her mouth to say something, but just as she gets up the courage, the phone rings again. The driver makes a strangled noise and picks up.

“You change your mind about the kid?” The driver pauses, listening. “Oh. Just you. I don't have an attitude! I'm on my way. The next day. Uh, the jet, no-- I'm, uh... driving. Mhm. I have them. You think the little fuckers build themselves?” She tosses a look into the backseat. “I don't mean that. No, I'm not gonna say that at the address, I-- hold on--”

The driver launches into a coughing fit that lasts a full minute, and then she shakes herself and continues.

“I'll make it to the conference. Trust me. Just got some stuff to take care of on the way.”

The metal in the backseat clangs against the side again and Jared cringes at the sound. She's seen this woman before, some plane of her face that just shouts that they've met. It's an absurd notion, so far from home.

"Stop yelling. Maybe I just wanted to drive this time instead of fly? Security? No reason. No, no, no, I would not hide something from the whole fucking committee. With the stuff I've got I'd be dead within a week, I won't lose it. Hey, don't 'but Lawrence' me."

It's that name that sparks Jared's memory.

"You're Lawrence Betulli," Jared blurts.

The driver's eyes flicker to her for just a moment, as if she had only just noticed Jared was still in the car, and she turns away, phone curled to her ear.

"It's no one. I'm in a tunnel, you're breaking up-- I-- can't--" Dr. Betulli hangs up unceremoniously.

Jared clears her throat, hoping her outburst hadn't somehow ruined what already sounded like a tense phone call.

"I... I'm a big fan. You actually saved my dad's life with your neural amyloid detector."

"Yeah, I'm the greatest there is. Sure." Dr. Betulli waves her off. "How old are you, kid?"

"Nineteen."

Dr. Betulli grunts as if personally disappointed by that fact.

"Too old to adopt, then. You married?"

"...No."

"Looking to be? You fall in love pretty quick?"

"Um... I kinda have somebody already."

"Just my luck. Well, I've got you now. Where do you need to be dropped?"

"Las Vegas?" The uptick in her voice seems to give her away, and she clears her throat. "I know it's a ways, so like, I don't need you to take me the whole way, I'm just, like, meeting someone there."

"I'll drop you. I've got a thing out that way."

"The International Robotics conference," Jared says. She had never stopped following the headlines.

“Yeah. That,” clips Dr. Betulli.

“Wow, I, like, can’t believe this is happening. Y-- you said you had a speech prepared, could I hear it?”

“No,” Dr. Betulli says firmly.

“It might help you to practice. I always do mine in the mirror before speech class and it helps so much.”

“You’re still in school?” Dr. Betulli glances at her, and she feels the abrupt urge to hide her face, the zits and baby fat belying her age.

“Just graduated,” Jared says. “Please? I read all your papers but I’ve never been able to go to any events--”

“Maybe because they’re invite only because some of the information shared at them is so classified it would blow your brains out to hear it.”

“Yeah, that!” Jared looks at her hopefully.

Dr. Betulli begins in a bored drawl. “Welcome everyone, to the annual robotics conference. I’m honored to be here presenting my years of research. Lunch is provided. Let’s begin the conference.”

“...That’s it?”

“What do you want, standup comedy? I’ve got my research presentation, but you wouldn’t understand it anyway.”

“Sure I would. I was in robotics club.”

“Don’t ask to hear it. It’s seriously hours long.”

“But we’re ages away from Las Vegas,” Jared whines.

“It’s two days’ drive if we’re reasonable,” Dr. Betulli says. “Let’s shut up and listen to the radio.”

Dr. Betulli turns it to a pop station, and some singer croons a syrupy love song, the words all broken up by static. Jared concedes, for the time being, still sneaking looks once in a while at Dr. Betulli. She lifts her phone to take a photo just once, and Dr. Betulli shakes her head.

“Don’t even, kid.”

Jared sighs. She opens her messages and goes to Cassie’s. The last one still sits stagnant, sent from her own phone.

Can't wait to see you.

Jared's mind drifts to Rob, still on his New York trip, and she squirms against the seatbelt, suddenly feeling stifled in its confines.

Jared shakes it off. No time for guilt. She's in the car with *the* Dr. Betulli. Her fingers hesitate over the screen. She could tap out a message to Cassie, telling him to guess who she's just met. Or to Rob telling him... telling him...

Jared closes out of the messages. She doesn't have any signal here anyway, it wouldn't go through.

"Why are you driving a rental car all this way? Aren't you... really... rich?"

Dr. Betulli is silent for a long moment, and then she speaks.

"You heard of Phantellienism?"

"The religion?"

"Yeah. The chain link religion."

Jared winces. She hadn't been going to say it. It's pejorative, even she knows that, with her knowledge of Phantellienism being limited to what she learned in small-town social studies in Virginia. It's a religion of family and friendship, the textbook had said. Members are religiously required to have a family, links in the religious chain, which makes it necessary to proselytize.

Jared wouldn't have thought someone as smart as Dr. Betulli would fall for something like that. Her interviews in the magazines were always so logical and scientific, talking fervently about engineering. Jared would never have thought she was *religious*.

"When we die, we do last rites," says Dr. Betulli. "Nothing crazy. Someone in my chain just says the prayers over my body, and touches my forehead with each prayer. When one link dies you do it for them, and the next link does it for you. There's not supposed to be a last link in the chain," explains Dr. Betulli. "So, see, since I'm dying--"

"You're what?! But you're only forty one!"

"You really are a fan, huh? Creep," says Dr. Betulli impassively. "Yeah, I have a lung thing. I knew it would get me, just didn't know it would get me so fast 'til they broke the news a week ago. I'm the last link in my chain. No family, no loved ones."

"But you're Lawrence Betulli. Everyone loves you." She's in tons of textbooks, magazines, the news, she's absolutely everywhere.

"No loved ones," Dr. Betulli repeats.

"Have you looked into, like, ancestr--"

“Everyone in the tree is dead. I need to find somebody new. There’s a reason that instead of taking my private jet, I’m driving and picking random hitchhikers up off the road, and it isn’t out of charity.” She glances over at Jared. “No offense.”

“What about the robots! Couldn’t you program them to do the rites?”

“Smart thought, but they don’t have consciousness. I know the chemicals it takes to make us feel different things, dopamine, oxytocin, norepinephrine... Still, I couldn’t program it into them. It would be pointless to make one that said the words to the rites if there wasn’t intent behind it. You can’t get to heaven on a technicality.” She chuckles. “Can you imagine, though? Robot heaven?”

Jared thinks about an afterlife for a robot like the ones in the backseat. Some cold metal place, where things ran on code and electricity. Nothing like the endless comfort and love of her own idea of an ideal afterlife. Not that she believes in that. Once you’re dead, you’re nowhere, it’s only logical.

“You might be able to pay someone to pretend to be family, and–”

“Technicality again. It’s got to be real, either blood-wise or love-wise. Can’t fake it to God, you know that.”

“I do?” Jared blinks.

“You’re a Christian, aren’t you? I saw your cross necklace.”

Jared looks down. She’d forgotten she was wearing it when she left, just after her parents dragged her to the service. Everything’s been so frantic since then.

“Yes. No.. Sort of. I mean, my family is, so...”

“Ah. So no.”

“Well...”

“Come on. I could see the look on your face when I mentioned Phantellienism, you think it’s all a crock, or a cult. It’s fine, we get it from all sides.”

“Okay, fine,” Jared says, “I don’t buy the organized religion thing, it’s illogical. How can we decide we understand what God thinks is right? Rites and words and stuff might mean nothing to God. Because... who can understand *God*? If there *was* a God at all, maybe God talks a language no human would know.”

“Would God not know every language, though?”

“Sure, but like, his... like his native language.”

The phone rings again, the sharp ring cutting the conversation in two. Dr. Betulli looks down at the caller ID and the car swerves into the other lane. She sighs, and picks up.

“Hi. No, nothing is wrong, I was calling earlier to see if you’re good. Hey, and while we’re at it, wanted to see if you wanted to get married again...? Okay, fair. Adopted then--? I just said nothing is wrong!” Dr. Betulli is silent as the person on the other end speaks, loud and frantic. Jared doesn’t catch the words, but she understands that the person is furious. “I see. Yeah. Loud and clear. Give my regards to Beck and the kids.”

She hangs up, expressionless.

“Who was that?” asks Jared.

“Old flame. Never get married...”

“Weren’t you just asking me to get married?” Jared asks, curling her fingers protectively over her ring.

“Yeah, but I’m only doing it under duress. It’s nothing but trouble.”

“Maybe it’s worth it. For some people.”

Dr. Betulli looks over at Jared, really looks at her for the first time. The car drifts into the center as Dr. Betulli’s eyes flicker to the ring, and she groans.

“Fuck me, you’re running away to *elope*.”

“How did--”

“A teenager hitchhiking to Vegas to ‘meet somebody?’ Just graduated? How old are you, actually?”

Jared’s silent, not confirming anything.

“Where’s the guy?”

“...He’s already there. We met online--”

“He mailed you a ring, I suppose,” Dr. Betulli gestures to the ring on Jared’s finger.

Jared purses her lips, and regrets it as it tugs at her sunburnt skin. “That’s, um... not his. I have a fiance already. Back home.”

Rob doesn’t even know she’s gone. It’s not like she can call him to tell him she’s all out of money on the side of the road, twenty hours from where she started. She can only imagine the lecture.

“Kid.”

“I know! I know! It’s just, everyone wants me to marry Rob, we’ve known each other since we were little, but Rob’s not... and this guy, he’s...”

“‘This guy,’ do you even know his name?”

“His username is Cassie-123.”

“Oh, his *username*.”

Jared pouts at her tone. “I know how it sounds. I didn’t mean for it to happen, it just happened. I love him,” she says, trying and failing not to sound petulant.

“What’s it feel like?” asks Dr. Betulli.

“It feels.... I don’t know. I don’t really have the words for it.”

“Well, fuck, how do you know you love him then?”

“I just know,” Jared says. “I’ve gotten the speech before, young love never lasts, and all that.”

“Okay, okay,” says Dr. Betulli, raising her hands in supplication. The car drifts toward the other lane again, and she grabs at the wheel. “Just trying to get an idea. I gotta figure out this love stuff in two weeks, get somebody for myself before I go out. I’m just doing research.”

Dr. Betulli’s gaze is focused on the road again, cutting a smooth path across the sloping desert.

Jared deflates. “Right,” she says. “Sorry. Just, you’re not gonna tell, are you, and make me go home?”

It wouldn’t be hard. She could call the police. Jared wouldn’t say a word about who she is, but they’d surely figure it out and make her go back.

“No. But if you get there and it’s not what you think, if you need to turn around--”

“It won’t. I can’t.”

“Then I won’t keep asking. Not my business.”

In the ensuing silence, Jared opens her messages again. She scrolls through the months of conversation that she has archived in her mind like a museum. Their first hello’s, the long paragraphs they’d spent talking about this and that. She looks at a photo of her own face with a big, bright grin. She had felt so brave sending him a picture.

She wonders if Cassie will look the same in person. If the two of them will talk the same way, or if it'll be different than talking over text.

Finally, she reaches the bottom, the last text she had sent.

Can't wait to see you.

There could be any number of reasons why Cassie hasn't replied. It's probably just a bad signal, is all. Maybe it didn't even deliver. Or maybe the lack of response is a response. It always has been with Rob, after all. It means "stop talking."

My girl's got such a big heart, he always said. She feels her big heart when she lugs it around, like a duffel bag dragging on the ground, carrying everything.

Cassie's going to be there, and the two of them are going to make it work. It would be totally illogical for him to call it off after they'd talked about running away for so long.

They pull into the parking lot of a dingy Motel 6. Dr. Betulli gets out, and hacks up something on the ground while Jared politely pretends not to notice.

"I can help grab some of the machines." Jared gestures to the backseat. She's helpful, always hauls her mom's groceries in for her before she even asks. Dr. Betulli would probably appreciate that.

"The *machines* are in the trunk. That stuff's just spare parts."

The trunk opens with a clunk, and Dr. Betulli hauls out the overly large black case. Jared watches eagerly. The last time she had seen a robot was in college robotics. The ones in the case are probably revolutionary, and she's bringing them into a Motel 6 unguarded like it's nothing. Jared doesn't understand at all.

"You married?" Dr. Betulli asks the room attendant coming by with a cleaning cart. The woman doesn't respond. "Young enough to be adopted? I swear I'll take good care of you."

The room attendant walks on, her cart clicking on the ground.

"Maybe she didn't speak the language or something," mutters Dr. Betulli. Jared shrugs, a little embarrassed at the doctor's forwardness to the general public.

They check in, and Jared hides her face in her flannel, as if the desk clerk would somehow recognize her so far from home, and tell her parents where she had gone so they could drag her back and make her marry the right man. It seems unlikely, but based on today, she knows that you never know who you might recognize far from home.

The desk clerk taps the card machine. Jared turns to Dr. Betulli.

"I," Jared starts, not wanting to burden the doctor any more than she already has, "don't have any..."

Dr. Betulli waves her off. She opens her purse and Jared's eyes widen at the stacks of hundreds that pad the inside. For anonymity, maybe, cash is less traceable, but does she need to be that anonymous?

"Two rooms."

Jared is grateful for her own room, but disappointed; she had hoped to spend more time talking with the doctor tonight, and maybe getting some more questions answered.

Dr. Betullis' big black case rolls obediently behind her, the handle grasped so loosely in her fingers it may as well have followed on its own volition.

Jared can't drag her eyes away from the thing, her curiosity building and building. They reach the door with the key number, 220. Jared is next door, 218.

"We'll head out early tomorrow. If I sleep past seven, come knock loud."

"Okay, yeah. I mean, I'm a sleep-in person but I'll set a bunch of alarms on my phone so I, like, don't sleep in, and--" she pauses, because she rambles, and she needs to get a hold on it so Cassie won't think she's annoying when they meet. "So yeah."

"Night," says Dr. Betulli.

Jared lingers. She needs to just go to bed and stop bothering Dr. Betulli, but she can't. She's just so curious, and Jared can't control herself.

"What?" asks Dr. Betulli, irritated.

"You think I could come in for a second and.... See?" Jared gestures to the black case.

"It's classified."

"Please, please please please? Who would I tell?"

Dr. Betulli seems to wrestle with herself, and finally, she shrugs.

Dr. Betulli walks inside and leaves the door open behind her. Jared follows as Dr. Betulli sits on the bed and opens the case. Several strange machines sit there, padded by cut foam on all sides.

The first one is a sort of box with wires extending out from all directions and tubes folding over each other. The doctor removes it gently from its packaging and holds it in her palm.

"This one is going to be a hit. Medical technology is what they're pressing me for lately."

She says it with an air of annoyance, like it's inconvenient that people want their lives saved. Jared stifles her thoughts at that, because this whole thing feels like a fragile trance that will break if she pushes a little too hard.

"This one can decipher brainwaves into language and even movement, which we can use to make more efficient designs for prosthetics and assistance technology. It's the A0012-B model. I call it Garbo, 'cos it's sort of garbage at the moment."

"Like, it doesn't work?"

"No, it works. I just don't care too much about it. I'm tired of working on it all the time, but they fund me, so."

"You can't say no to a project, then."

"I just do what I do," Dr. Betulli says vaguely. Jared studies the thing, clenching and unclenching her hands to keep from reaching out to touch it.

"It looks like a brain," Jared says.

"Very good." Dr. Betulli nods. Jared preens at that. "It functions similarly to one, electromagnetically speaking, so I borrowed both form and function in some ways. Worked with some brain surgeons."

Dr. Betulli sets it back in the case, and takes out another machine, sleek and small. It's an irregular oval shape emanating light into strange shapes in the air.

"This is military stuff. I've perfected this for seven years now. Model A-00400-D. It's A.I., in the corporate sense of the word; develops strategies based on past experiences. It wouldn't be a replacement for human work, but it will make modeling a lot easier. Especially since it will be pulling from classified enemy databases. I had to work hard, but it can pull from virtually anything, civilian or government, and predict what they'll do in the future based on past tracking."

"Is that... legal?"

Dr. Betulli shrugs. "They hire me to make things. I make them."

Jared bites her tongue once again, finding it more difficult this time. After all, this stuff could destroy the future, couldn't it? It could change the world.

It's not as if she hadn't known Dr. Betulli was a powerful person. She had designed a great deal of technology. But she had never sat down and thought about what kind of person it would take to make the world change. To make... a machine that could read minds, or a machine that could model future war strategies so that counter-attacks would crush them before they began, or a machine that could pull information off of any device, no matter how well defended. It would need to be someone who didn't think about the differences in things like *can* and *should*.

She wonders if that has something to do with the way Dr. Betulli ended up alone in her final days.

“I used to think I’d grow up and be a robotics engineer,” Jared muses.

It’s a dream she had left behind when she saw the cost of school, and when Rob had started talking about getting married as soon as she graduates this spring, and how she could stay home and raise their kids. It was inevitable, just one of those paths that you can see playing out like an algorithm.

“Wanna know a secret?” Dr. Betulli asks playfully. “I used to want to be a robot.”

Jared giggles.

“No, really. Phantellianist’s believe that human beings have souls, and we have will. Humans want, and they intend. Robots just do what they’re designed to do. They never have to wonder how it’s gonna play out. I never felt a soul inside me.” She frowns. “I wanna change that before the end.”

Dr. Betulli coughs, and Jared pats her back, but she waves her off.

Another little machine sits in the case, at the bottom, packed in that dark foam at an angle, a little less careful than the rest.

“What’s this one?” Jared asks, pointing to the machine. Dr. Betullis eyes follow and she smiles.

“This is Pinnochio. I meant to work on his arm more so it would be flexible and do tasks.”

“What’s that little blue light do?”

“That’s his sensor, it’s a camera.”

“Does the light turn red if it goes evil?” Jared jokes.

“Ha. He wouldn’t know how. He’s... well, it’s embarrassing. I told the board I was working on a language model and gave the institution all these reports on his progress so they’d keep giving me funding. ‘Oh, he’s learning to read, he’s learning to talk, he’s at a second grade level.’ But I made it all up. He-- he doesn’t speak or anything at all,” Dr. Betulli chuckles. “I had such high hopes when I came up with him, but the thing can’t do shit. I mean, look at him. All he can do is reach out with that limp little arm.”

Pinnochio is hideous, even Jared can admit that. All jumbled wires that seem to lead nowhere, and little places where the metal had been picked at and opened up to make edits, leaving welding scars all over. The arm is disproportionately long, making the tiny machine lean over from the weight all resting precariously on its tiny wheels..

“It is... something,” Jared tries. “Are you really going to present it next to the other two?”

Dr. Betulli shakes her head and laughs.

She can picture it, a sort of practical joke, showing Pinnochio and then saying ‘just kidding’ and then showing the other two, the real projects.

Jared takes a look at the little robot again and can’t help it when she joins in, unable to stop laughing at the ridiculous little thing that the world’s greatest creator had built.

“Why,” Jared says, wiping tears from her red face, “Why did you build it, then?”

“Pinnochio is the most selfish thing I’ve ever done,” Dr. Betulli says, picking up the little robot to place it back into the black case. “He’s the only one I made just for...” she trails off.

“What?”

“Fun,” says Dr. Betulli.

“Fun?”

Dr. Betullis’ phone rings, and she doesn’t so much as glance at it, still holding Pinocchio in both hands.

“Aren’t you going to answer?”

Dr. Betulli looks at the clock, at the machines all swaddled in foam. “It’s late. We’ve got a long drive. You’d better get to bed.”

Jared nods. She goes back to her own room, and she lies down on top of the sheets. It’s far too warm for anything else, even with the air conditioner breathing heavily in the corner.

Her head is whirling with what she’s seen today. Those machines.... She doesn’t know who she would trust to hold something so important. She certainly wouldn’t keep them in an unlocked black rolling case in a motel with no security at all. She rolls over and sighs, and goes to sleep to the quiet hum of the bathroom light.

The next morning, her alarm wakes her with a cry. She stretches, and checks her messages. Nothing new. She dresses and decides to go on a walk before the doctor wakes.

The streets here are so different from back home. Nothing here is green, it’s all warm shades of brown, and even in the early morning it’s so dry she can feel her lips cracking. There’s a rock jutting on the horizon like something on an alien planet, and in the atmospheric haze, she has no idea if that horizon is an hour away or a day, or a week...

Abruptly, Jared feels very foolish.

Her mom is home right now, likely cooking breakfast and sipping coffee, thinking she’s at Robs. Her friends think she’s out of school sick. Rob thinks she’s with her parents.

She's two thousand miles away. Cassie hasn't even messaged her back.

She had always thought of herself as so smart.

Jared turns around, and walks back to the motel. As she's returning, she runs into Dr. Betulli getting into the car.

"You're leaving without me?" she asks, indignant despite knowing that the doctor really has no obligation to take her along the rest of the way.

"I knocked on your door but you didn't answer. I'm going to the temple, I'll be back in an hour."

"Oh. Can I come?" Jared doesn't really want to be alone with the desert right now.

Dr. Betulli gives a put upon sigh, but does not stop her as she gets into the car. They don't have to drive long. The little white building sits with a crooked spire. The temples of Phantellienism are everywhere.

Jared thinks of Rob.

It's not like she doesn't love Rob. Of course she does. She had loved doing things for him, and loved listening to him speak. When Rob wanted something, she would always do it. It's not like she doesn't love Rob. She had always loved doing things for him, and loved listening to him speak. But she loved him like a little machine that you put quarters into and it dispenses affection. Not like someone real. She certainly feels real now, reality pulling down like curtains choking her with the gravity of what she's done by running away two thousand miles from home.

They pull into the lot, and Jared knows one thing for certain: she has to help the doctor.

Dr. Betulli goes to step out of the car, and Jared glances at her back, then down to her expensive phone, sitting on the seat unlocked. Jared reaches over to the car seat and tucks the phone into her pocket.

The two step inside, and are immediately greeted by a man in gray robes.

"My child, my mother, my sister," says the Friend, reaching out for a handshake.

"My child, my father, my brother," says Dr. Betulli. "I'm here to ask for some advice on a situation."

"What ails you?"

"I'm an unknown, and I was given two weeks, more or less, to live. I want to talk about my options."

"I see." The Friend turns to Jared. "Will you be joining our discussion, my Friend?"

"No, I gotta, uh, bathroom?" says Jared smoothly.

The Friend nods kindly. "It's down that way."

Jared ducks around the corner. She takes the phone from her pocket and hits redial. It rings twice, and then a voice comes through the other end.

"Hello?"

"Are you Dr. Betullis' ex husband? She's dying," Jared says quickly.

"What?" There's a clattering sound at the other end of the line. "Are you one of her doctors?"

"No, I'm a friend."

"She wrecked her car? Okay, what hospital--"

"We aren't at the hospital. Listen, we don't have much time. She doesn't have any links in her chain. Do you still love her? Will you take her back, please?"

"I can come there and be there for her, but..."

"But what?" Jared demands. She has given up everything for love, and this man won't even take back the one he loves to save her whole hypothetical afterlife?

"I have a family," he says.

"But you love her!"

"It's not that simple." He says something to someone on the other end and she can hear quick footsteps as he walks somewhere quieter. "There's practicalities. We divorced years ago, and I'm remarried. I have kids, she's got her work... When we were together, she was only doing it because our religion dictates it. Everything was so measured. It's not just that she needs someone to *love her*. For the rites to work, she would have to love me *back*."

"Oh," says Jared. The whole venture seems a lot more dire when she thinks about it that way. "Right."

"I'll come to say goodbye. Where are you?" asks the man on the other end of the line.

"I'm--"

Footsteps sound in the hall, and Jared hangs up just as Dr. Betulli rounds the corner, a strange expression across her face.

They walk silently to the car. Dr. Betulli seems to be in a haze of a mood, distracted and silent, and Jared is easily able to slide the phone back between the seats unseen. The landscape moves by in the reds and oranges and browns of age-old rock

weathered down to reveal its insides. The low desert is speckled with buildings and cars moving by. No one here knows the name Jared.

Jared looks at her phone, run down to ten percent. It hadn't charged last night.

Can't wait to see you.

She scrolls back up through their texts, reading them in reverse, and wondering if it's something she said, some point that made him change his mind. Maybe it just got too real for him all of a sudden. Maybe he's already there, after all, he's coming from Northern California, a lot closer than where she came from. He could have lost his phone on the way, or run out of data. Why hadn't she asked if he had unlimited data before she left? Stupid.

"Hey," says Dr. Betulli. She pulls into a drive through window behind several other cars. "I'm getting a breakfast burrito. Do you want anything?"

"Get me one too," Jared says distractedly.

"Want a coffee with it?"

"Nah."

"You sure?"

"Totally." She puts her feet up and closes her messages. The engine makes low rumbles, like the car is purring, like the metal could feel her feet up on the dash.

"Hey, Dr. Betulli?" asks Jared.

"Yeah? You do want a coffee?"

"What if I did the rites?"

To her surprise, Dr. Betulli shakes her head immediately.

"No."

"But I don't have to be a believer, do I? I just have to love you."

Dr. Betulli turns back to the ordering window. "Give us just a second," she says, and the speaker gives a garbled response.

Jared continues. "And, well, I do love you."

"Kid," Dr. Betulli cuts her off. "You don't love me."

“But I always have,” Jared says, gathering steam. “I mean even since I was a little kid I read your books, I did my science reports on you and I kept up with everything you made. I always wanted to be just like you. They have adult adoptions, or, hell, I’ll marry you for a week, I could be your chain link, I--”

“It won’t work,” says Dr. Betulli.

“Seriously,” says Jared. “This is exactly what you been looking for, the reason you even picked me up, and I’m literally offering to--”

“I was thinking about it, talked with the Friend, realized it won’t work. You love that I helped you, and that you got to meet a celebrity. You love that I’m a genius, because you wish you were a genius, because everyone wishes that. By that logic, *everyone* falls in love with me. What’s that mean to me, huh? I’m supposed to be flattered? Hell, you’re running to elope with somebody you’ve never even met, I barely believe you love *that* guy--”

“Hey!”

“And you-- you say you love *me* after a day? It would have to go both ways, don’t you understand?”

“Couldn’t you?” Jared blurts. “We’ve sat and talked, you know a lot about me. I’m not that bad. I’m good looking, and Rob says my cooking is pretty good... We even both like... robots,” she says.

Dr. Betulli taps the windowsill, long suffering. “Somebody else could. Definitely could. Just not me.”

“I don’t understand how you can’t just *feel* it.”

“Course not, you’re a teenager, all you do is feel. I’m a researcher. If it isn’t on paper, can’t be explained, it doesn’t exist to me. The way *you* explain love really doesn’t make any fuckin’ sense.”

“But can you just--”

“You’re not hearing me.”

Someone honks at them in the drive through. The voice of the worker comes through the speaker, garbled noise.

“You’re going to get to Vegas and meet this person. Elope. Then what? What next? I change the world all the time with the shit I make, and it’s made me a lot of money. Look at you, you’ve worn the same clothes this whole time, you been hitchhiking, and you’re broke... what exactly is gonna change because you’re in *love*?”

“It’s supposed to feel good. The love is what makes me feel better about this whole thing.”

“Food when you’re hungry makes you feel better. A cool cloth on a burn makes you feel better. From where I’m looking at, love has fucked you every which way. My phone’s ringing off the hook, but it’s silence in the passenger seat. Where’s all these

loved ones, huh? Your fiance hasn't called you, your little affair boyfriend hasn't texted you, don't think I haven't noticed you checking, and let me say, the fact that you're *clearly* in like tenth grade and your parents haven't called even *once*--"

"That's none of your business!"

"But now you're getting in my business. So here we are. All in each other's businesses."

"Least I have my whole rest of *my* life to figure it out," Jared mumbles, just to be cruel.

"That's what I thought too." Dr. Betulli sighs. "I was always lukewarm at this stuff. I go to the temple every week but it feels like... like you said. Like it's some language I don't know. I talked to the Friend and he was encouraging but I could tell he didn't think-- I don't think it's gonna happen for me. Not within two weeks. I'm calling it quits."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Go to the conference. Then... I don't know." Dr. Betulli turns back to the ordering window. "Two coffees, two breakfast burritos. And, hey, are you married, or-- Wait, no. Sorry. Habit."

They drive in silence all day long, to the occasional sound of the tinny radio of the rental car. Jared has lost her desire to ask questions as her dread grows and grows. When the sun goes down, the doctor parks them at another motel.

"Night," Dr. Betulli grunts as she reaches her door. Room 14 this time, and Jared is 15.

"Wait. Here," Jared says, digging through her pockets frantically, because she does not want to feel the fear she had felt this morning again, "Take my second keycard. If I don't wake up and answer the door, you can just come in and shake me."

"Good idea. Yeah, here, take mine too. If I oversleep they will be pissed, these military guys are the 'on the dot' type," Dr. Betulli mutters.

Jared takes it hesitantly, unsure if she deserves the level of trust being placed in her, with the valuables living in Dr. Betulli's room. She pockets the card, and goes to her own room to collapse onto the sheets. The motel is eerily identical to the last, as if through all their hours of driving they've ended up exactly where they were, the same scratchy sheets and buzzing light fixtures. The same endless desert.

Jared lies awake for quite some time, wondering how to convince Dr. Betulli to let her say the rites after all. To call her ex husband back again and beg. To find someone that the doctor loves, both ways, to prove that it's real, and they're not just chasing down something that never even existed.

There's a quick, loud buzz, and Jared startles at the sound. It's her phone.

It's probably a message from her parents wondering where she is, or from Rob, checking up on how things are going. She readies the lie as she reaches for her phone, but when she picks it up, she stops.

One unread message from Cassie.

She hovers her thumb over it, dread pooling in her stomach. The little icon stares her down. She locks her phone, only to unlock it again, and then she changes her mind again and locks it.

The logical thing to do would be to open the message, and whatever it says will tell her what she needs to do next. That's the logical thing to do. She would know once and for all.

Jared's thumb hovers. She closes the phone and rolls over to sleep.

Jared finally manages to doze off after some time, a restless sleep with strange dreams.

She wakes after the third alarm. The clock reads 6:25. They'll need to drive the last few hours, but they should get there in plenty of time for Jared to be dropped off before the conference starts. She goes about brushing her teeth and hair, the phone and its unread message burning a hole in her pocket as she goes.

Jared gathers her things and puts them in the duffel. She walks outside and squints into the emerging sun, lighting the parking lot in blue, careful tones, like it's trying not to wake the sleeping guests just yet.

She steps to door 14 and knocks. There's no answer. No light shows through under the door.

"Dr. Betulli?" she calls out. The car is still in the parking lot, she couldn't have gone anywhere far.

Jared remembers then that she has the doctor's second keycard. She slips it in the slot and opens the door quietly, trying not to alarm her companion.

"Dr. Betulli?" Jared calls quietly. "It's time to get up and go."

There is no response. Jared steps into the room, just past the doorway, and stops. A hand peeks from around the corner, limp on the carpet.

"Oh my God," Jared whispers.

Dr. Betulli lies unbreathing on the floor, a shattered coffee mug beside her still form.

Jared fumbles her phone from her pocket. As she dials 911, something catches the corner of her vision.

The black case is open, one of the foam slots empty. Pinnochio sits utterly still on two tiny wheels. Its sensor glows blue, a doleful light against the early morning gray. Its little hand reaches out, touching the doctor's messy curls. It does not say the words for the rites. It does not say words at all.

Jared slowly puts her phone back in her pocket.

Jared steps further into the room and retrieves Dr. Betulli's purse. She takes the car keys from the bedside table.

"I was gonna say thank you today, once you dropped me off," Jared says into the silence.

Jared looks again to Pinocchio on the floor. She could take that one, too, and sell it for a price that would change her life forever. It's just a product, after all. And Dr. Betulli is just a body.

"And I was gonna ask for your phone number. I still had a lot of stuff I wanted to ask you."

She feels something in the air this morning. It isn't love. It's something there isn't a word for, not just yet. At least, not in a language any human would know.

Jared thinks of that cold heaven she'd imagined for the machines, following their inalterable paths.

"I guess I should've just asked, huh?"

Dr. Betulli doesn't answer.

Jared closes the black rolling case and grasps the handle loosely, dragging it over the doorway bump with care so as not to jostle the machines.

"Bye, Doctor," Jared says. She pauses. "Bye, Pinocchio."

Neither of them move. Neither of them hear her. Jared shuts the door behind her.

She leaves the keys in the drop box and steps out front with the case following behind her, and her small duffel back weighing heavy on her shoulder.

Jared sits in the driver's seat and taps the steering wheel. She drives slowly, feet getting used to the pedals. She doesn't actually have her license yet, but she has her permit, so it's fine as long as she isn't pulled over.

It's three hours to the city. Cassie might be waiting there, at the castle casino on the strip, like they promised. Maybe Cassie will look different than he said. Maybe he's actually a woman, or an old man. Maybe he isn't there at all, and never planned to be.

Then again, it's thirty hours home, and there's enough money here to make it all the way and then some. She could go back, and when Rob gets home, she could kiss him and listen to him talk about his trip, and he would never even know she had gone away. Everything could stay just the way it was.

But it doesn't work like that.

Jared turns onto the highway, and she heads for Las Vegas.