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## The Eating

"I got water."

Roget hears her whisper before he becomes aware of the bent old asian woman standing against the corner. Moments later, he's standing in a bathroom door with her, looking oversized in her crowded home.

She's one of the few in this neighborhood who can still afford their water bill, and let folks pay to wash. She offers him this used tubful of water to wash in, he gives her a precious dollar. He is free now, he needs to get home, and in order to do that he needs to be clean.

With the door closed behind him, Roget puts aside his thoughts of how many people have used this water already, and he scrubs quickly at his dark skin, seeing the new dirt catch in the low light before becoming part of the grey water.

While he is in her bathroom, his host is smiling and singing quietly to herself a song half-prayer, half-dirge as she ties metallic thread to her bedpost. The rest of the bed is already covered in plastic sheet. Doors open and shut and she pauses – her nephew walks in, too scrawny. She doesn't turn to look at him as she says, "got food."

With the trap set she tiptoes back to the bathroom and leans her head against the door, listening with a predator's ear.

Hearing nothing, she throws the door wide. The window is open, and no sign of the bather.

Her face crumbles; she is weeping as she slides to the floor.

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Roget slips and slides through the streets of the walled city, the damp closer than his clothes. He remembers when this was a white neighborhood, but now there's no whiteness anywhere, though at a glance, asians seem to be occupying the old idea of whiteness – the majority, broadcasting superiority and privilege.

He comes to a block of fields covered with asian students in uniforms playing tennis behind barbed wire and gates. There are some dogs fighting each other violently at the end of the courts. The dogs and the students suddenly perk up as they sense him.

He slips down the first ally as an avoidance tactic, coming through onto a busy city street, a more familiar view as many races walk by.

Roget stalks past a heated conversation taking place over a dead man's body, pale blue flesh like a drowned man, telltale missing body parts – thighs, buttocks,

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belly. A little further down the street is a dead woman on a pile of garbage, blue-black with rotting edges where her breasts, buttocks and sections of arm and leg are missing.

“Van’s full.” Two men stand in combat between the bodies and a city van. The one in a dirty t-shirt and full beard is blocking the van with his body, arms crossed.

“I don’t care if the van’s full, we cannot leave these out here!” Snobbery tilts the voice of a tall black man who is clearly disgusted by the bodies in front of his venue.

“What do you suggest!?! They already layered inside. No where to put ‘em.”

“Tie them to the back! Just get them out of here.”

Roget looks away as the driver opens his van and the smoke of cold air pours out between the bodies stacked inside. He grabs a length of rope from a case in the back and begins stringing the male body to the back bumper.

The victor turns and dashes up the stairs on the side of an old theatre and disappears into a door with a different sort of smoke pouring out, along with laughter and light.

Roget, following discreetly, takes one step up the stairs. Suddenly, a woman he recognizes appears at the top of the stair, pulling on her jacket. He spins to make it look like he's leaving. This familiar, a fantastically dressed slender thai beauty, calls out to him by name, and starts coming quickly down the stairs to give chase.

He darts around the corner and into a lower door into the same building, silently closing the door and slipping through dark covered shapes within. By the time she turns the corner there’s no sign of him, and she shuts her eyes with disappointment. Friends catch up to her and she shrugs, apologizing: "still see him everywhere." They pat her with sympathy and lead her off into the night.

Roget embodies silence in the dark, trying to remember her name, aware that he has been made to forget a lot in the past few months – though not what they wanted him to forget.

Romance and work have never complemented each other in Roget’s lives, but tonight of all nights he is not here to cross paths with old lovers, he can face the devastation of lost names another time.

He is the only living scientstuntu, he is newly escaped, and he is on the run.

In the dark, he feels his way around large hard shapes, finds stairs heading upwards, and follows them. Soon he is pressed up to another door, breathless,

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meditating briefly to privatize his anxiety...tuning into the rhythm and pitch of the party beyond.

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She's tall, curvy, clothes in disarray, her skin a cool grey-brown. He's groping, drunk, shorter and erect. They are in the bathroom of an otherwise elegant party, feverishly grabbing at each other and kissing.

"Stop Grove, I have to show my face out there."

He pulls a roll of bills out of his pocket and stuffs them into her dress, then pushes his blue-black hand up between her legs forcefully. This is the furthest she ever lets him go; his other hand pulls at himself rapidly. She rolls her eyes at her mirror image, barely aware of the dark parts in movement; faux gasping, she parts her legs, sinks down onto his fingers and pulls his head down onto her breast.

Outside the bathroom is a line of people smoking and laughing in a tight hallway that opens up on a room full of small tables, darkness and music from a corner stage with a singer and a djtician.

Roget is making his way across the dance floor, morphing in with the crowd though he's not quite dancing. He slips through the sweating and grinding loudness, slips into the hallway outside the bathroom, smiling a bit at walls, nothing enough to be noticed. At the door he slows, leans against the handle and pushes it open. He's inside before folks on either side know the door has opened.

The groping couple look at him, his stubby hand still inside her as her jaw drops...

"Roget?"

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Roget easily knocks the unfortunate man to the ground where he lays, peaceful, mouth open in a drool.

The woman is messy and melted and golden now, her emotions showing in randomized shifts of skin color, Roget's only flesh-chameleon lover. She is apologizing while quietly touching his chest and arms and trying to hold him. Roget's face grows more and more still.

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“Where have you been? I didn’t know, I didn’t know you were *alive* I didn’t know you would come back, but I kept your place, I kept everything – I was just hungry baby please.”

Roget’s jaw tightens like a fist.

“Where are my keys.”

“I didn’t know who you were babe, I didn’t you’re a genius...Rog?”

“Being a genius just means everything seems to come easy to you. Where are my damn keys Ginger.”

“I got ‘em baby, they’re always with me.” She was trying to stall.

“Now, Ginger.”

Ginger’s hand slips along the counter to her purse, her other hand still trying to pull herself together from those fingers and the shame and the shock of joy that Roget is alive in front of her. She pulls out a keychain with a dozen points of light on it.

As she begins to tug a light off, she keeps speaking in a murmur: “Everything’s gotten so bad since you went away,” nervous giggle, “remember we thought it couldn’t and you swore it would. They find bodies every day...and you can’t even talk to other races if you’re pure, I morph ALL the time. And it’s everyone doing it. I mean not me, I never, no matter how bad. Everything now is precaution, it’s so fucking scary Roget.”

Roget watches the light come off the keychain. Someone bangs on the bathroom door followed by a muffled yell. Ginger places the light in his hand and for a moment his face is overrun with emotions – relief, primarily – and just as quickly recomposed.

The light disappears onto his body and the banging at the door intensifies, someone jiggles with the handle.

Roget grabs the back of Ginger’s hair and one thigh and lifts her up onto the covered, useless sink, opens his pants and is inside of her before she truly gets out a gasp of surprise. He pounds at her, avoiding her eyes and her attempted kisses, as the pounding at the door increases. He comes inside of her without a sound. As the door opens, he zips up his pants and slips out past would-be voyeurs.

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Ginger seems to hang in mid-air for a second, a mixture of love and arousal and grief filling her, before stumbling out over the shoes of her passed out floor-faced fingerfuck.

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Roget nearly jogs down a street with few working streetlights now that dusk has fallen, passing people in clusters of three or more. This used to be a city of work, there are signs of past commerce everywhere, closed down, bus stops decrepit, windows smashed in on most buildings. Of all the walled cities in the world, this was supposed to be the most magnificent, farmland in the city limits, with access to tons of fresh water. Roget couldn't remember before the walls were built, can't remember if this is a safe part of city or not.

He has no safety net, and his memories won't make the street familiar again. He walks closer and closer to the walls of the city, as if he wants to disappear in multiple ways.

In a breath, he's gone.

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A door slides open and he is standing on the other side, key in hand. He passes a hand over a screen near the entrance and lights come on. He steps inside the room and goes quickly to various closets, cabinets, flipping the bed, spinning the kitchen until he is sure the room is clear. Someone has kept the place clean, but nothing is gone.

Roget stands inside the door, now closed, and exhales hard. He then trembles, leans his back on the door and slides down it, sobbing, bent at the waist and trying to cover his face.

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On the television there's a talknews show, hosted by a woman with asian features under a massive afro, sparely dressed.

"Tonight we will be talking with Jack Xi-Gomali, lead scientist in the effort against the Eating phenom. Jack, welcome to my show."

"Thank you – all my friends were so excited that I am on the Gloria Wu show! I am of course a huge fan of your work here. Glad you're on our side..." – at this the camera comes up close on the slimy smile of Xi-Gomali.

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“Well what’s on everyone’s mind is what to do about the Eatings? You know I said it here first,” Wu looks into the camera, “that this was not a race crime, not a gender crime, but a poverty crime! This is hungry people – of every race – acting in desperation. But this will break down our society beyond all repair. Sir Xi-Gomali, what are your recommendations?”

“Thank you Gloria, for understanding the complexity of this...problem. We *don’t* want to judge the hunger people have, but we want to highlight the risks of eating our own species as a behavior...trusting ourselves to eat down the food chain is a fundamental solidarity that effects our ability to survive. It’s an agreement with existence.

My recommendation is that we increase our research into protein and fat alternatives, not penalize the poor victims in this case.”

“And what are the...negative health impacts?”

Xi-Gomali’s eyes narrow and in a flicker he seems to bare his teeth at Wu. Then he softens into a smile.

“Well, the positive impact is the protein and fat...our systems long for large and regular infusions of those, even if the food cycle crisis has left us with few cows, chicken, pigs, horses or other large mammals to meet that need. The negative effects are primarily mental, but physically it creates a shock to the system to have the protein, and immediately makes other options less satisfying.”

“Does eating across race lines enhance the...benefit?”

“No. Dear godless no. No, it just seems to make it more comfortable for people to hunt—or rather, consume - outside their race. Statistically we’re seeing that visibly race-mixed individuals are the safest in this environment, because there are more people who see mixed people as at least part...of their own kind.”

Wu and Xi-Gomali briefly smile at each other with the ease of the lucky ones.

“And what about the ops that say United Americas’ government is encouraging the Eating as a strategy for the population problem?”

This time Xi-Gomali starts, an off-screen hand balling up as if to punch Wu. She flinches briefly before as he recovers himself, they laugh it off uncomfortably.

“Conspiracy theories are so much more intriguing than boring truth, don’t you know? But they put that sciencsuntzu away, put his mind away you know – he was that batty. His ideas of some racialized government conspiracy, they just aren’t based in this world – in *this* world, we need people to take responsibility for not eating their fellow humans.”

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“But shouldn’t we also then demand our government give us other viable options for consumption, Dr.?”

Roget stands in front of the screen, completely at attention.

“I can’t speak to the reality or proximity of that dream, Gloria, but I hope we figure out how to stop it soon.”

“More facts, more questions – I thank you, Dr Xi-Gomali, for your time today.”

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Glossary:

djtician – dj electrician, makes music to accompany parties and/or artists out of the electric currents in whatever space they’re in.

scientificist – explicitly anti-war scientist, one who refuses to do research that will lead to creation/support of weapons of any sort.

scientsuntzu – a scientist who accepts the necessity of battle but seeks evolution rather than domination.