

GRADIENT

“...Four, A, nine, nine, two, C, two, F, F, F, F.”

There is radio silence for a moment, and then the flight controller’s voice responds: “Authorization code recognized. You are granted permission to approach, Grey Liger. Welcome to Nesoi 12.”

“Acknowledged. Thank you kindly.”

I ease the throttle forward, beginning my final approach to the scrappy water-covered moon. As we transition into the pull of the gravity, I put a steadying hand on Aleksey, who is lying down in the copilot’s seat. He licks his lips, and remains lying down.

After consulting one of the sticky notes that line the top of the windshield, I punch in the coordinates of my drop-off location; on my compass indicator, a green vertical line begins to glow, showing me my direction. In the vastness of space I don’t mind using the holos on the windshield, but as soon as I have gravity, something about the holos always unsettles me and I move to the more archaic systems.

I fly along under the clouds. It is daytime on this side of the moon right now. As we cruise, Aleksey gets down from the copilot’s seat and walks a lap around the cockpit, sniffing here and there; he relieves himself into the holovent in the corner, and then lays down beside the hatch to the exterior.

When I hear a chime from the dash, I sit upright and squint out into the ocean below. When I spot my landing platform, I’m already on course to overshoot it by a mile. I curse and lay off

the throttle, apologize to Aleksey for the sudden adjustment, then start bringing it around for another easier approach. I punch the auto-hail. Seconds later, a sequence of digital tones comes through my radio that tells me the hail is acknowledged.

As I re-approach the platform—this time considerably slower—I key over a series of toggles, switching out Grey Liger’s terrestrial flight apparatus for the hover apparatus. Even in the isolation of the cockpit, I can hear a hiss of wind that outside would be deafening. I lower the landing gear, make touch-down, and begin the sequence of keying off the engines. As I do, the platform begins to lower, and I am slowly taken down through a tube into a shipping bay in Nesoi 12’s submerged colony.

When the platform I’m on stops moving, I run a check on the pressure differentials and air quality outside of the cockpit. Seeing nothing that would kill me or Aleksey outright, I pop the hatch on the cockpit. I clumsily step down onto the shipping bay’s platform, finding my legs again after the long flight. Aleksey remains in the cockpit, standing and wagging his tail as he sticks his head out of the hatch and sniffs the air.

“Valorie Johannes?” asks a woman in a black pantsuit, her hair in a tight bun, her face looking down at a clipboard.

“Val is fine,” I say, and extend a hand.

“Val-or-ie, Jo-hann-es,” she says to herself, filling out fields on her clipboard, never looking up.

I lower my hand, suppressing my monumental level of disappointment: I have a tattoo of a fly on the webbing between my thumb and pointer finger and it usually gets people.

“Got the cargo?” she asks.

“I do.”

I retrieve a remote from my grey jumpsuit and press a button. The rear cargo hatch of Grey Liger lowers, showing a crate inside, a cube in shape, about the same height as my chest.

She looks up at it, points a remote reader at it, hears the reader beep, and then presents me with a slip of paper representing enough credits to buy a small house on your average terrestrial body. If someone is going through me instead of a freighter, they want something fast or they want something hush-hush. I don’t ask.

“Thank youuu,” she says, walking past me while her eyes remain on her clipboard, flipping to a new page and filling out more fields. She is joined by another woman—black hoodie and blue jeans, feathered hair down to about her shoulders. The two of them begin walking up the cargo ramp to retrieve the crate. I walk up with them and remove all of the straps keeping the crate secure.

Before they begin to move it, the woman with the clipboard stands at a corner of the small cargo hull, finishing her paperwork. The woman in the hoodie leans over the crate, resting her elbows on it, smiling up at me. She extends a hand out in my direction. “Nina.”

“Val,” I say, and we shake—instead of letting go of my hand afterwards, she keeps hold of it and stands up straight in front of me, holding my hand up close to her eyes, squinting at the details of my fly tattoo.

“I love it,” she says.

“*Thank you!*”

“Your dog is very well behaved. Can I meet them?”

“Yeah, c’mon around.” We exit the cargo hull, and come back around to the cockpit hatch. On the way over I mention that his name is Aleksey. Half German Shepherd, maybe half Labrador.

At the hatch, Aleksey wags and sniffs intently out towards Nina. Nina says hello to him in a high friendly voice, and shows him her hands. He sniffs them, and then licks. She comes in fully and hugs him, petting down his back, already fast friends, apparently.

From the cargo hull, the woman with the clipboard calls Nina’s name.

Nina turns and sits on the edge of the hatch, Aleksey poking his head over her shoulder, her wrapping an arm up around his neck to pet him. “Got any plans while you’re here?”

I shrug. “Maybe if there’s a bar you’d recommend.”

“I’ll try to do you one better,” she says, and takes a slip of paper out of her pocket. With a pen she jots something onto it and then hands it to me. Then she stands, gives Aleksey a final hug and a rub, and goes to help with the crate. “See you tonight maybe!”

I look down at the slip of paper. It is an invitation to something called The Cerberus Gallery. On it, in stunningly fancy handwriting, is written, *Val + Aleksey*.

Nina and the other woman have departed with the cargo before I can ask any questions. I go and set the invitation on the dash under a paper weight, then close the hatch, pet Aleksey, and sit back down in the pilot's seat. With the wheels of the landing gear and with light propulsion from the hover apparatus, I follow the directions of folks in neon vests with glowing batons, and park Grey Liger in a compact hangar.

With the ship settled, I clip Aleksey onto a leash, and the two of us go for a walk through the colony's tunnels; many of them are made of glass, and we can see all of the sea creatures outside. The sea creatures are not aliens—presumably, they were brought on the same ships that humans came over on—but I have not been to many submerged colonies, and neither has Aleksey, and so seeing all of the weird fish is still very neat to us.

When we've stretched our legs and done a good amount of exploring, we return back to the hangar. The next few hours are spent exhaustively checking the ship for anything that needs maintenance. Aleksey keeps me company. I don't have reason to think the ship is in disrepair, but the majority of time I spend inside of Grey Liger is spent in the vacuum of space, so it pays to be over-vigilant.

After finishing the search, all systems are green. I wipe the sweat from my brow, go into Grey Liger's small cabin suite, and take a long, pleasant shower.

When I'm finished, I glance at the local time, and then glance at the invitation to The Cerberus Gallery that is sitting on my dashboard. Whatever I've been invited to, it's starting in half an hour. I put on a black dress, do my makeup, grab my purse, and then Aleksey and I head out.

Thankfully, the invitation does contain an address, and this colony does make addresses easy enough to navigate to. We make our way into a district under a vast glass dome that's made to look like an archaic town square, with asphalt streets, brick buildings, and concrete statues of tall men with beards; it's a very thorough aesthetic.

Aleksey and I step into a doorway, make our way down a hall past a restaurant on either side, and proceed up a set of stairs. Coming to the second floor, Aleksey and I are met with a small waiting room. I present my invitation to the man behind the desk. He welcomes us, stands, and uses a key to unlock the door behind him and let us in.

Inside is an art gallery, and many folks milling about and looking at the pieces. A light hum of quiet conversations fills the air, as do the pleasant smells of the restaurants below. Classical music plays faintly through hidden speakers.

Even at a glance, the theme of the gallery seems clear enough: all of the paintings on the walls are of dogs. Some are more abstract, some are quite realistic, but I begin to amuse myself by wondering if Aleksey is a guest or an exhibit. The others do seem very interested in him, though they are polite and don't crowd around.

As I'm wandering through, I find myself looking at an exhibit that strikes me as out of place. On a rectangular plinth, atop five little supports, there are five opaque ping-pong balls.

Beside me, I hear a pleasant voice say, "You came!"

I turn to see Nina, and smile. "Much more interesting than a bar," I say in agreement with her.

She crouches down to greet Aleksey for a second, and then she and I stand beside each other, facing the exhibit with the ping-pong balls.

"I love this piece," she tells me. Then she asks, "Did you know this was the piece you delivered here today?"

"Oh!" I did not know that. I continue to look at it for a few seconds, and then tell her, "I admit, I don't get this one."

She stands with her hands clasped together, swaying slightly back and forth. "The plaque on this one helps, I think."

I glance down at the plinth, and indeed, there is a little plaque. I crouch down and give it a read, idly petting Aleksey while I'm down here.

Blindness

Within one of these balls is an explosive payload powerful enough to atomize this room and all of its occupants.

Within one of these balls is a film negative of a Husky named Kim.

Within one of these balls is a flash drive containing an encyclopedia on dogs.

Within one of these balls is a distal phalanx – a fingertip bone from a human hand – its donor unknown.

Within one of these balls is nothing.

“Oh. Oh wow.”

Nina sways more intently. Glancing down at Aleksey, she says, “Guarantee you he knows which is which. Heck, he probably knew what you were shipping since you picked it up. Their noses are just...” She trails off, and then shakes her head, and stops swaying. “I’ll leave you to wander some more! We’re showing a movie in the theater across the hall in about ten minutes. Dogs are allowed in.”

Without waiting for comment, she slips away and begins talking to someone else she knows, who is standing and looking at a minimalist painting of a Saint Bernard.

Aleksey and I look around the gallery a little longer, and then make our way over to the theater. There, an attendant greets us, saying, “Val and Aleksey, if I may presume?” I tell them that that presumption is correct, and they lead us to a pair of seats adjacent to the aisle, so that Aleksey can take a seat or lay on the floor, or I can let him off leash to wander around, even. I thank the attendant, and, given how friendly and polite everyone has been about having Aleksey around already, I do let him off the leash. Anyone he goes up to is happy to interact with him a bit before he wanders off to go see the next person.

The seats fill in, with each group seated in their own little cluster, and empty seats between. I am left alone, until I hear a voice beside me. “Mind if I sit here?”

“Please.”

Nina takes the seat beside me, and sits on top of it with her legs crossed, hands in her lap.

The lights dim, and any folks who are talking quickly wrap up their conversations. When the theater is quiet, the movie begins.

It's a 2D-animated film, featuring a cast of primarily dogs, and some other animals, and no humans or words to be found. It is remarkably captivating.

Midway through the movie, Nina taps a button on the armrest between us, which causes a subtle holofield to appear around our two seats, blocking outgoing sound so that we can talk without bothering anyone. Leaning over to me, she says, "I need your thoughts on this next part. Do you know what rotoscoping is?"

"I do, actually." Creating a 2D animation by tracing over actual video, frame by frame.

"I can't tell if this next part is rotoscoped or just *really* lovingly faked."

I keep my eyes out. The scene in question shows a dog asleep. The dog begins to dream, barking under her breath, twitching her paws in a run. In abstract space around the dog, the same dog is shown bounding in a full sprint and barking at the top of her voice. I can see what Nina means: the paw-twitching of the sleeping dog is dead-on, yet at the same time, the view pans around and around the sleeping dog, sweeps fully under and over her, in a way that might be difficult to film with an actual sleeping dog and an actual camera, at least at the ancient time when this film was made. Then, as the camera swoops under her again, I catch a stylistic jump from one frame to the next.

"Rotoscoped," I say. "But not when it swoops under. Watch the hind legs: animated here, then it cuts back to rotoscoped... now."

"Holy *shit*."

I snicker.

"Are you a movie person?"

Using the holographics on top of the windshield, one can get a knack for when hyper-reality and actual reality don't quite line up perfectly. "Kind of a pilot thing. Difficult to explain."

Nina reaches over, runs her hand down my arm, and takes my hand in hers. I look over at her. She looks down at our hands, then up at me, and asks, "Is this alright?"

I give her hand a light squeeze, keep hold of it, and push the armrest between us up into the seat backs. We both scooch

towards each other, and sit leaning against each other for the rest of the movie.

As the credits begin, she plants a kiss on my neck. I nuzzle my cheek over the top of her head, but I know that at this point there's something I'm going to have to be up front about. Here in our own private holofield seems like the ideal place for it.

"I have to tell you now, I'm not entirely cis."

"Oh word?"

I snicker. "Yeah."

"What are your pronouns?"

"She-her."

"Whatcha packin'?"

I make extra sure the holofield is still up around us. It is. "Penis that I was born with. Very convincing fake breasts."

"Wanna go up to my room and tell me more or maybe show me or give a demonstration?"

I nuzzle in with her again, and give her a kiss on the cheek. "Sure. You lead the way."

We stand, fizzling out the holofield. I clip Aleksey onto his leash, and the three of us exit the theater and head up another set of stairs. Nina unlocks the door to her apartment, lets us in, and locks the door behind us.

Nina interlocks her fingers behind my neck and hangs from me. "My bedroom is over there. Aleksey can like, I don't mind either way, whether he's out or in, or we could keep the door open if that's better for him, like—"

"He won't mind waiting out here."

"Yeah okay."

Nina and I head into her bedroom, and I close the door behind us. The two of us fool around on her bed, and afterwards, Nina is straddling my stomach, squeezing my left and right breasts back and forth.

"Can you feel this?"

"Yes." I might low-key be in love with this weirdo.

"How long have you had them?"

"I got them as soon as I could afford them. Had them... four years now."

"How much were they?"

I name the price.

She whistles. "Is that why you still have..."

I sit upright and she slides down my chest, so that the fronts of our hips are touching. "I don't mind it."

"Seriously, augmentations are a specialty of this moon. If the issue is the cost, name the price, I'll get you the credits."

"I like having it," I tell her. "It's fun. Deep voice, facial hair, flat chest, I was *very* happy to get rid of all those. This one..." I shrug. "I still like it."

She gives me a tight hug. Up close in my ear, she whispers, "I'm jealous of you. You have no idea."

I rest my head against hers. "Oh?"

In an even fainter whisper, she says, "I'm... I'm not entirely cis either."

"Oh! What are... would you tell me about it?"

She continues to hug me, but stays silent on that question. She seems very focused on forcing her breathing to remain steady, taking strong, timed inhales and exhales.

I give her a gentle, understanding squeeze as we sit there, hugging. "It's alright if you don't."

Her tight hug on me tightens even more. She constricts me as though actually trying to suffocate me. Finally, she whispers as faint as could be, hardly more than a breath, one word of an answer. "...Dog."

Huh. I continue to hug her, to hold her. With one of my hands, I begin petting down her back. She begins to sob, still holding me. I stop petting, but she insists, "Keep doing that. Please." and so I do keep petting her. I lie back, she lays on top of me, and I pet her.

After a while, she is no longer crying, and instead rests with her forehead buried against my chest. After a while longer, she tells me, "You can stop now. Thank you."

I lock my hands together behind her, still holding her as she lays on top of me.

"If I went to get augmented with dog ears, would you come with me and hold my hand?"

Without a doubt I would, and I tell her so. "If they tell you no I'll kick their butts."

She smiles at that. “Augmentations are this moon’s specialty, like I said. It’s why I moved here. I just haven’t been brave enough to...”

I pull a blanket over us.

The next morning, Nina insists on taking us out to breakfast. She knows places that are dog friendly, where Aleksey can sit and even get something to eat too. It’s a lovely cafe, with a window across an entire wall showing the ocean outside.

When the waiter leaves after giving Aleksey his dish, we watch Aleksey begin to eat, and then I ask Nina, “Why don’t you have a dog?”

She glances out of the window and shrugs. “I feel weird about the whole ‘ownership’ thing. I get that it doesn’t have to be like that, but, it’s just weird to me.”

I give an approving hm, and have some of my toast.

“Is it weird to you that I fully identify as a dog?” she asks.

I shrug, and finish chewing. “To be honest, not really. Should it be weird to me?”

She shrugs. “What if I started eating out of a bowl and barking at things? Like really?”

“That sounds adorable.”

Satisfied with this answer, she begins eating her fish. “It’s just like... I feel like you *don’t* feel the same way about me that you feel about Aleksey.”

I give a contemplative hm, and think about that, looking out of the window. She’s not wrong at all. I do not think of Aleksey that way. Eventually I tell her, “You’re right, and I don’t have a perfectly good answer to that, other than that when I met Aleksey I was looking for a friend, a companion for the long flights, and I met you as a cute so-and-so who was coming onto me pretty hard. So, I don’t feel the same way about you and Aleksey, but I don’t feel the same way about all humans categorically either.”

“Hey, works for me.”

We finish our meals. As we’re getting ready to head out, I ask Nina where these famous augmentation experts are at, and she tells me that they are in the next district over. I tell her to lead the way. We take a walk through one of the tubes connecting the

two domes. I hold her hand as we go. She has nervous jitters, but she is happy.

“This isn’t a scheme to steal Aleksey’s ears, is it?”

She blows a raspberry at me. “Everything they make is all synthetic. No harvesting required.”

We proceed through tunnels and white halls, talk to a receptionist, wait a while, proceed through more white halls, and then Nina and I and Aleksey are in a small office, speaking with a doctor, who is pleased and fascinated; he has heard that The Cerberus Gallery is lovely. Nina gives him an invitation to the gallery, and the doctor gives us an appointment to come back tomorrow for the procedure. In the meantime he takes blood samples, measurements, and scans, goes over Nina’s preferences for the augmentation, and then sends us on our way.

Back in the reception area, Nina and I hug.

“Where to now?” I ask. “Got any other plans today?”

“Another showing tonight. Nothing until then. Can I see your spaceship?”

I lead the way. When we arrive, I give her the tour. When we arrive at the bed, she is insistent on taking it for a test drive; I am persuaded, and tell Aleksey to go wait in the cockpit for a bit. As we have our fun this time, I think about this apparent dog in front of me; it has not changed that she is perfectly adorable; I kiss her, and she licks my face from mouth to eyeball, and shortly thereafter I finish; we cuddle on the bed afterwards for a while, and then I take advantage of being back in my abode by taking a shower and changing back into my usual terrestrial wear—cargo pants, members only jacket.

I move from the cabin to the cockpit and find Nina and Aleksey sitting together on the floor, her petting him, him contented. I reach down and give Aleksey a rub on the head. “Good boy.” I also give Nina a rub on the head. “Good girl.”

The next day, Aleksey and I accompany Nina, and sit in a waiting room as her procedure is done. I make a solid dent in the waiting room’s months and months of accumulated magazines. As I’m reading an article about honey bees, I hear a voice right behind me say, “Woof.”

I wheel around, see Nina, and gasp. “They’re beautiful.” Nina now has dog ears, the kind that flop down. They come down to about her jaw line, and match her feathered hair. The fur on them is brown. “Can I touch them?”

“Please do,” she says.

I reach out, cup her head in both of my hands, and run my hands along the soft fur on the outside of each ear. Gently, I turn her head and lift one ear up. Peering inside, it looks just like the inside of a dog’s ear. “Woah.”

She flinches back at that, and I let go of her. She snickers. “That was loud, coming directly into the ear.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re good.” She hugs me. “You’re great. Thank you.”

I hug her back, and as we hug, I stroke one of the ears.

“I need a tail next for all of the times I want to wag around you.”

“Aw.”

We get lunch, and then she shows me around some more. That night, there is another showing at the gallery. I stand beside Nina as she goes from excited conversation to excited conversation, everyone fascinated by her augmentation, happy for her, telling her it looks great, which it does. That night as she and I are going at it on her bed, she asks me to stroke her ears; she doesn’t have to ask me twice—they feel nice.

In the morning I happen to wake up early, and decide to take advantage of it by making breakfast for us instead of us going out yet again, and this is when I learn that all of Nina’s cupboards are literally empty. I leave Aleksey in Nina’s good care, get my ship moved from the hangar to long-term storage, and go grocery shopping. Nina and I talk as I’m cooking breakfast—fish—and I learn that she always goes out to eat because she is lazy—her words—and also because she is fabulously rich due to her fabulously rich parents, who would consider life on this moon to be slumming it.

I finish cooking our breakfast. I gather myself for a moment, and then I reach a hand into one of the shopping bags from my expedition earlier. Holding my hand inside the bag, I warn Nina, “I’m not trying to be weird about this.”

“Okay?”

“I saw you don’t have any dishes.”

She nods.

From the bag, I pull out some human plates with one hand, and then with the other hand I pull out a dog bowl. “Preference?”

She snatches the dog bowl and holds it to her chest. “I kind of love you a lot. This one.”

We sit across from each other at her dining room table, her eating from her dog bowl, me eating from my plate—both of us do use forks. I also mix some of the fish in with Aleksey’s food, and set his bowl on the ground beside the table, and he eats with us too.

A week passes. Nina does get a tail next. I don’t even know she’s arranged to have it done until she’s missing for most of a day, and then she comes into the apartment wagging. I scratch her butt through her jeans, and she wags; I kiss her and she wags; I talk to her, and sometimes if I say the right thing she wags, and her ears move a bit depending on what I’m saying and how she feels about it. I get her a collar, and I hardly ever see her without it from then on.

The next week, she enters the apartment and slams a pill bottle on the dining room table. She looks at me expectantly—I can tell she is looking at me expectantly by the way her tail wags back and forth, but only slightly, very metered; almost always, I look to her tail and ears to gauge her feelings before I’ll look at her face.

In reference to the pills, I ask, “Whatcha got there?”

“Hormones.”

“*Oh*. Are those a thing for this?” I realize it’s a stupid question, seeing as she has them.

“I want the nose next,” she tells me.

I am actually disappointed, but I try not to show it—her face as-is is utterly perfect; I adore her; it feels strange to see someone want to improve on what looks like perfection, but as someone who has made changes to her own body as well that would seem counterintuitive to some, I remind myself to practice empathy.

Nina goes on, about wanting the dog nose next: “And a dog’s nose, it’s... well, first of all, it’s remarkable. But second, it’s not

something that you can just slap on and expect all the wires to connect properly with a human brain. And that's—I resent this, but—I *do have* a human brain."

"And the hormones help?"

"Well. They are a little feistier than just hormones, apparently." She gives the bottle a shake. "Even as someone who's ostensibly fully developed, these will stimulate development in the regions of the brain that are more developed in dogs than humans. So, after a few months of this, when they put on a nose, it would be a heck of a lot more than just cosmetic. It would be... I've heard it described as a religious experience, to know the world by scent for the first time."

I nod for a moment. I ask, "Any side effects?"

She quickly twists off the top of the bottle and takes a pill, then smiles mischievously at me, and says, "There are effects-effects. A lot of the canine behavior that I've had inhibitions about expressing before will probably start to manifest: barking at noises outside, communicating with body language over talking, humping the furniture, y'know."

"As long as you don't make a mess on the floor."

She sticks her tongue out. "It's okay, I think I'm house trained." We do have a holovent in the corner for Aleksey, and I have caught Nina using it a handful of times already—one day when I caught her and made it known that I could see her, she only became more flagrant about it afterwards.

That night in the afterglow, as Nina and I lie together snuggled up under a blanket, I ask her, "Nina?"

"Hm?"

"Honest question: with the nose, is that a full snout? Will you be able to talk afterwards?"

She licks my forehead a few times, and then answers, "If the hormones have taken well enough, I'm getting the whole face done."

"Oh."

She gives me another lick. "I'll still be able to talk. They're modeling my voice; when they do the face, part of that will include implanting a pair of micro speakers kinda in the cheeks, which I'll be able to talk through as though it was my old human mouth. Apparently it's not even weird-feeling."

I kiss the top of one of her ears, where it meets the head. We make out a long while, and I do my best to appreciate her lovely face while it's here, but I really am happy for her, if she decides she'd rather have something else.

A few weeks pass. One morning we visit a shop that specializes in antiques, and then that afternoon I order delivery for us; Nina and I are sitting on the couch, me reading an archaic book about vampires, her fidgeting around with a hacky sack, squishing it between her fingers, tossing it up and catching it; when the delivery man knocks, Aleksey and Nina roar out a string of barks at the exact same moment, and both of them shoot up to their feet; Aleksey walks to the door wagging, and sniffs around the door to smell through and know who is outside; Nina stands stock still in front of the couch, staring blankly forward.

"Y'okay?" I ask. She tells me, "That was *really* satisfying? Like... maybe how like a good sneeze is satisfying? Natural? Understated but also a lot?"

I stand, kiss her on an ear, and go pay the delivery man and retrieve our food; we sit at the dining room table, and she puts her food into her bowl, and I love this goofy dog across from me. After dinner, I figure out the archaic CD speaker box that we got, and put on one of the records; the two of us listen, Nina with her head tilted, one ear raised; one of the CD's has soothing music, and we make love to it on the couch; from across the room Aleksey watches, always curious about the two of us.

On the morning of, I give her one last kiss on her human lips before she goes in for her augmentation. They are doing the full face, and she will have to stay overnight. She would also like time the next day to herself at first, to process everything.

Aleksey and I go to a dog park. We go to The Cerberus Gallery in the off hours, and I admire all of the pieces; many of them are the same pieces that were here the first time I visited, though the gallery makes sure to keep new ones coming in here and there; I spend a long while at *Blindness*, the one with the five ping-pong balls; I spend a long while staring at a ten-foot-tall portrait painting of a Beagle's face. I go down into long term storage, where Grey Liger sits derelict, and I sit in the cockpit, and Aleksey hops up onto the copilot's seat beside me like old

times, and we reminisce, and I thank him for all of the time he's kept me company, and how intelligent and polite he is around others, and how I would never be here without him; I tell him that I love him, which is utterly true in the platonic sense of the word, and I don't say it to him often enough.

The next night is the first time I will see Nina's new face: she is revealing it at the gallery. Aleksey and I mill about that night, discussing the pieces here and there with others, until it is time; everyone makes their way across the hall, into the theater. The lights are on as people find their seats. There on the stage at the front stands Nina, wearing a brown dress, with a pale green veil over her head; the veil is supported with wires internally, such that it looks like a cube suspended around her head, so as not to reveal the shape or dimensions of her augmentation. I sit front and center, and Aleksey sits at my feet, and I pet him. As the others in the theater settle, he lies down.

When everyone has found their seats, the lights in the theater fade off. Then, a spotlight shines down on Nina. With no further ceremony, she lifts off her veil like a fighter pilot taking off her helmet; underneath, above the human body of Nina, framed in Nina's familiar feathered hair and soft brown ears, is the face of a Chocolate Lab. The audience begins clapping; Nina turns her face slowly to the left and to the right, showing the augmentation off, and the audience gives her a standing ovation. She curtsies. She has changed her appearance, and against my expectations, the change is a lateral move: she is still exactly as beautiful as before; this new face fits her perfectly; in some sense, looking at her now, maybe it fits her even more perfectly, as I see better and better how she feels on the inside and tries to manifest it on the outside.

When the applause has quieted, Nina takes in a breath and then barks. Aleksey perks up, and then stands, and bounds up to the stage. Nina kneels down and pets him; he begins to wrestle with her, and she wrestles back, the two of them swiping hand and paw at each other, until Nina comes in and holds him in a hug, rubbing his back, both of them wagging. "That's a good guy," I hear her voice say through her speakers, though her canine mouth doesn't move as she says it.

She stands, curtsies again, and then exits the stage behind the curtain, Aleksey following after her. As the screen is lowering to project tonight's movie onto, I stand up and sneak off backstage after my dogs.

There in the back, Nina is sitting cross-legged in front of Aleksey, who is sitting on his haunches facing her. She has her hands on his shoulders, and is speaking to him with her human voice, alternating between a boring tone of voice and a playful tone of voice, letting him figure it out; he puts his nose against her muzzle where the speaker must be and sniffs, and barks at her; she keeps talking to him, letting him know it's still her.

I come up and join this meeting, sitting cross-legged as well. As I join, both dogs wag wildly. Nina asks me, "What do you think?"

I bite the bullet and lean in and kiss her on the front of her dog mouth, holding my breath; I gently cup her head in my hands, my palms on her soft ears, and I continue to kiss her, pressing human lip against canine, sliding my tongue over her pointy teeth; she lets me explore this for some seconds before she kisses back, and her immense tongue fills my mouth, and I let her explore me anew for all of a few seconds before I reel back, catching my breath and also laughing and coughing. I tell her in a croaking voice, "I need to get used to that, I don't know what I was expecting; I love you; I'm happy for you; I'm glad that you got to do this, and I'm glad to get to figure it out with you."

Sensing a game, Aleksey licks my mouth. I turn my head up away from him, petting him but letting him know that I'm not interested in that from most dogs, thank you.

Nina and I hug. As the movie plays in the theater, Nina and Aleksey and I sit around with each other in a faux living room of prop furniture backstage, and she tells me all about the day she's had, just walking through the districts under her veil and smelling, lifting the veil to press her nose against something now and then and smell it like she was looking at it under an in-built microscope; it is like having super powers; it is like having super powers that you have always felt should have belonged to you. The three of us leave the backstage through a back door, and sneak around back into the gallery. We go to *Blindness*, and

Nina presses her nose right against each of the five ping-pong balls, inhaling deeply at each one, sometimes taking a few sniffs, other times perfectly satisfied with just the one.

“Do you know?” I ask.

She wags. “I know.”

That night Nina is a freak in bed with her new mouth, and my only complaint is that I cannot get it back up as fast as both of us are keen on each time, though we do kiss whenever we have to wait, either that or she presses her nose against every square inch of my body, exploring me as though for the first time, under a microscope, with super powers. Apparently I am satisfying to her scrutiny. We sleep cuddled up together, and we invite Aleksey in to sleep on the foot of the bed with us, as he usually does, as he usually did back with just me and him in the ship.

A few weeks go by. Very often, I see Nina standing at the window in the living room, sticking her nose out and smelling, wagging; Aleksey stands beside her sometimes, smelling too. Nina will sometimes bark if another dog walks by outside; Aleksey will get excited, but is better behaved, and does not bark at the other dogs. I often see Nina and Aleksey having what I can only describe as conversations. They play with toys together, and she appears to be learning things from him, though I cannot always discern what the lesson is. She often takes him on walks; I often take him on walks; I often take her on walks. She eats out of her dog bowl without silverware now, now that she has the snout.

One day the three of us are in the theater by ourselves, watching an archaic wildlife documentary. Nina and I are cuddled up together. We are talking over the movie, chatting about how well her nose is working out.

I ask her, “Were you thinking about any more augmentations?”

She licks her lips, which in some contexts means Yes.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’m worried you’re not going to like it.”

I feel I know what’s coming. I kiss her dog mouth. “What is it?”

She sighs, which flaps her jowls. “With the hormones—they’re amazing, but lately the dysphoria in... certain areas... has been getting pretty bad. I don’t feel right. Just like, all of this—” She gestures around her chest, her stomach, her genitals. “It just feels wrong, and I’d like to change it.”

This did seem inevitable. I take her hand, rub a thumb along the back of her hand. “First of all, who cares what I think.”

“I care. A lot.”

I kiss the side of her snout, then I go on. “It’s your body, not mine. I’m sure we’ll always find something to do. I like you outside of the sex too, you know; you’re a good dog.”

She licks my mouth, and I kiss her back and pet her head once, then leave my arm around her shoulders.

“Do you know what a dog pussy looks like?” she asks.

Before meeting Nina, the answer would have been no, not really; after meeting Nina, I have called up images of them every now and then, looking at them and wondering if I could. “I have seen pictures.”

She curls up with me conspiratorially, and whispers, “I could show you videos.”

I rub her shoulder idly, thinking about it. What the hell; why not. “Let’s see.”

She picks up a laser pointer off of the seat beside her, and shines it up at the ceiling. A holodisplay appears. She navigates through it with the laser pointer, calls up a video, and selects it for projection.

A moment later, Nina and I are curled up together in a theater, watching on the big screen as a veterinarian wearing a pair of blue gloves inserts his lubed fingers into a dog’s vagina, runs his fingers along the outside of the vulva, explains to the viewer what’s what. Nina watches and is extremely aroused; I watch with fascination, but more a fascination like I’m looking at a close up high definition video of some alien creature being shown off.

She calls up another video, which is a male dog mounting and having sex with a female dog; the dogs are shown at a regular angle, then the same act is shown again from the perspective of a different camera, this one zoomed in and focused on the

genitals, and recording in slow motion. I still don't entirely get it, but I also don't entirely not get it.

She calls up a pornographic video starring a male human, a female human, and a female dog; he goes back and forth between the two again and again. I get it. I nuzzle and pinch Nina, and seconds later she is straddling me, and we are going at it as I look at the video of the human penis going back and forth between a human's vagina and a dog's, interchangeably.

She arranges it the next day, and the operation is done a week after. When I see her next, I am coming home from grocery shopping; Aleksey greets me at the door; I go into the bedroom, and see Nina splayed on her back, looking at me and wagging; she has nipples down her pink chest instead of her previous human breasts, and her genitals have been replaced as well; I close the door behind myself, undress, and crawl up onto bed, and give this a try.

Afterwards we lay on our backs, side by side, catching our breath. I lay with my legs straight and flat against the bed; she lays with her knees bent and her legs apart, like a dog on her back.

"How was it?" she asks.

"I don't know why I was worried. You're still amazing."

She wags.

She does the fur next; the procedure involves running a particular machine slowly over the skin as a specialist minds the settings that would cause appropriate fur to grow in that area, and to change the feel of the skin itself somewhat; it is like getting a full-body tattoo; the procedure does not create the fur itself, but begins the process of the fur being able to grow. It looks odd as it's growing in, until one day it doesn't: she has a beautiful paint-brown coat. Hugging her truly does feel like hugging a dog now. Often as I'm going about my day, I find a stray hair of hers on my clothing, and pick it off and look at it, and think warmly of her.

She talks less these days—less with human words, anyways. She and Aleksey play with their toys, go on walks together smelling the air; I play with them, and walk with them. I realize, one day as we're eating dinner, that it's been so long since I

heard her talk at length about anything in the world of art. I ask her, "Do you still like art?"

She looks up from her bowl. She thinks for a moment, and then only answers, "I think I'm moving on. Dull. Meaningless. More art in the scents of a droplet of paint on the head of a pin than in the sights of a full gallery of paintings."

I am surprised. I feel she is leaving a beautiful body of knowledge behind, and I am taken aback by the waste of it; at the same time, I believe her when she says she moves on; I believe she has shed an excess of knowledge and now lives free with an excess of wisdom.

One day soon after, she goes in for a checkup. After some scans, she is taken off of her hormones; she is done. Her brain is indistinguishable from a dog's, as is most of the rest of her physiology, save for her bone structure and the fact she's wired to the speakers implanted in her muzzle. Apparently dogs have a better grasp on human language than I appreciated; if Aleksey had been hooked up to speakers similarly from a young enough age, and had therefore grown up practicing, he would have been able to talk too, apparently.

In the course of knowing Nina, there have been times when I have more strongly felt I am making love to a human who likes dogs, and times when I have more strongly felt I am making love to a dog who was assigned human at birth. The night after her scans show she has the mind of a dog is a night when I feel the latter way; I make love to one dog on the couch, and nudge away another dog with my foot when he comes up to look; I finish with the one dog, and lay with her and pet her, and then after a shower, I lay with the other dog and pet him; I don't think he has any misgivings towards the fact I treat the other dog differently, but I do think that he knows there are two dogs in this pack, and a human who does treat the two of them differently.

One day, I am sitting on the couch reading a book on sheep, and Nina and Aleksey are playing with a rope on the ground, tugging it gently back and forth with their mouths. Aleksey gets up at some point, and walks off to go lay on the bed. Nina gets up, and lays down at my feet. I lean down and pet her a bit, and

then go back to reading. Eventually she sits down beside me, and says, “Val.”

I am startled; it's been so long since I heard my name from her. “What's wrong?”

“I am a dog?”

“Yes.”

She looks down at her hands.

I pet her, and tell her it's alright. I learn she is scared of the next one—the augmentation to change the bones. It is extensive. She will require physical training afterwards, to learn how to control a body that has had everything rearranged. I tell her she is loved as she is, and also that I would not abandon her if the next one is difficult, or if something goes wrong. She is my partner until one of us dies.

She arranges the surgery, with my help when all of the human droning on exhausts her. When I visit her in the hospital afterwards, there is a Chocolate Lab in a hospital bed; Nina; Nina who I yet again am seeing for the first time, and this time, I think, I am seeing her again for the first time for the last time; she is done; this is her. She wags when she sees me.

I kneel at her bedside. She licks my face, and I tell her again and again that I love her.

In a week, she can walk. In a month, she can run. We go to a dog park that has obstacles; Aleksey is indifferent to them, and plays with the other dogs; Nina plays with Aleksey and the other dogs too, but also plays with me on the obstacles, sprinting over and around and through, and I am sometimes beside myself with how impressed and smitten I am with this Chocolate Lab. Most nights she has no interest in making love, and is happy to snuggle up with me and go straight to sleep; some nights she is demanding, and I am happy to please. One night I ask her if she needs anything before we go to sleep; she looks at me and does not answer. “Nina girl?” I ask. She looks at me still, and eventually says, “Val.” I ask her what's wrong. She answers, “There is one thing left. This voice blesses; other dogs would like to have it; they are jealous I can speak to the tall ones. This voice curses; by the gift of speaking, I am cursed to be treated as human above dogs, and not as their equal, as the equal of

everything and a part of my canine kind.” It is the most I’ve heard her say at once in months.

We go to arrange to have the speakers removed; the doctor can disable them there in his office. Nina leaps up onto the medical bed, and stands before the doctor, who holds a syringe. He holds it poised to her snout, and he asks if Nina would like to say any final words.

She looks at me. “Val. You have been my best friend always. I love you always. Thank you always.”

With two pokes of the syringe, Nina is no longer able to speak in human words. I hug her. We go home, and I make dinner for us. Nina and Aleksey eat from bowls, and I sit at the table, eating from a plate and watching them. She clings to me that night, assuring me that not much has changed; she still loves me; she is still happy; I tell her aloud that the feelings are mutual, and I still love her. On this night she is demanding, and as always, I am happy to please this dog.