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Sweet Dreams

~A rural northern California town in 1968~

“Robert”

The child was near ripe for the harvest.

Children were easy. Not nearly as filling. But easy.

It wouldn't be a pleasant taste. The fruits of their mind were foul. Rancid.

They did not possess the mental capacity to grow Eya fruits neither plump nor sweet. Hunger pulled at every fiber of his mind, body, and being.

His temperamental 'garden' sat across from him on a plush couch, pouting and oblivious.

“Anna,” he said, calling its name.

The child stuck its bottom lip out at him in response.

“When did they start?” He asked, taking in every emotional twitch and tick of its youthful plump cheeks.

Its nose only wrinkled up at him.

“Anna,” he said, ignoring how heavy the pencil kept getting, “The dreams. When did they start?”

““Guess I don't 'member.”

Likely a lie.

She spoke again before he could prod at her further, “Well, 'guess I had 'em for awhile. Maybe a few months?”

“I see,” he said. His eyes scanned the scrawls of his notepad in thought. *It was one way to find out if his ‘garden’ would flower soon.* “You say a few months?” He said, easing up his voice, “Do you find that the dreams,” he paused, choosing his words, “Are the dreams similar? Do they feel the same in any way?”

Anna’s eyebrows scrunched up at him. He could taste the little thing’s fear on his tongue. *Almost time.* It had to have grown enough. The familiar texture of a developing harvest sat plump on his taste buds. *Perfect.*

“Yes—I guess so,” she said, “Yes. I think. I think—”

“Take your time, Anna. We don’t need to go into it today.” He sensed what he needed to sense. It was a matter of letting his brood know. Then picking apart the rest of the offspring’s vulnerabilities before the feeding.

“Sometimes. There’s a boy,” the child stared at the ceiling now, “My age?” Anna stuck the tip of her thumb between her teeth, “And some other kids. They play usually.”

“Kids? They play with you?”

Anna nodded; her eyes still glued to the ceiling. The child kept quiet for a long moment.

“Dunno. Sometimes they get—They get kind of mean.”

“Mean you say? Like those kids at school?”

Its fingers tugged at a loose thread on its sweater. “Worse,” she said, frowning up at him, “They hurt.” The thread came free from the sweater, “Hurt *me*.”

He knew this of course. “Do they touch you? Hit you?”

“Sometimes,” it said, still glaring up at him. Anna shot to her feet, “I think I’ll—I want—I wanna go home. Mama!”

He hated when they got loud. “Anna.”

The thing ignored him entirely, kicking at the door. It shouted again, “Mama!”

He stood to cross the room, but a woman’s face appeared through the crack. Not its mother, but one of the nurse’s. Some brunette with a pug-nose. He was sure it was named Beth.

‘Beth’ turned to him, eyes filled with concern, “Robert?”

That was what they called him of course. When he was in this form that was. In time, he’d certainly go by another title. Hopefully something better.

Beth rubbed at Anna’s head. The attempt at affection only set the little thing off. It kicked at Beth’s shin before running into the hall.

The growing silence prompted the nurse to speak again, “Robert.”

“It’s progress. I’ve gotten progress. The girl has recurring nightmares. Bullies at school. A trauma response, likely. Her own outbursts stem from that,” he said, putting his notepad under his arm.

Beth stared at him, but said nothing more about it.

He’d tell his brood that he’d only need a month more. Maybe less. The hunger pains would be over soon enough.

“Jay”

Father was weakening. His own stomach churned with his shared hunger.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He couldn't think straight. *Damn it.*

Tap. Ring. Tap.

He was cursing like them now? *Fuck.*

Ring. Ring. Tap.

“Ma! Get that goddamn door!” He said before stuffing another one of her ‘cookies’ down his throat.

A gasp came from upstairs. “You watch your mouth with me Jay Sullivan!”

Surely she was faking. She should know the role he was playing here. How ‘Jay’ was gonna act.

Why she chose the archetypal pearl clutching sort was beyond him. He grew fond of this ‘Jay’ character himself.

Her pounding footsteps came from behind him. He looked over his shoulder, meeting her eyes.

The woman he called “mother” by blood and in this role looked like the gals in homemaker ads.

She called *her* Maryanne. Maryanne Sullivan.

Maryanne looked like what the humans called Barbie dolls with strawberry blonde hair. His mother threw in a few wrinkles of course to break the fantasy. But her ‘reasonably’ attractive son had to come from somewhere.

He turned away from her, choking down another cookie. “Fucking Christ,” he swallowed the thing down, “I just want real food ma.”

She made some sort of strange hissing noise as she walked off.

Next thing he knew, he heard the door creak open from the entryway. A barrage of happy greetings echoed throughout the house.

He inched down from his chair, crossing the room to get a better listen of the entryway.

“We live just down the street. Tom saw the boxes, and you know, he—well I just thought we should say hello,” said a woman’s voice.

He heard the crinkling of tin foil. A nauseatingly sweet smell swept through the hallway soon after. When he peeked his head out of the living room, he saw two humans at the doorway. A short round looking female and a taller mustached male.

Maryanne took the plastic wrapped plate that produced the odor. She lifted it up, examining it all over, “How sweet of you. What—?”

“Cinnamon buns. Fresh. Out of my oven.”

He watched Ma lift the tin foil. She examined the contents underneath. The mustache man’s head tilted toward him. “That your son there?”

Maryanne looked over, her eyes meeting his. She waved him over. “Oh, yes. Jay, come say hi,”

Maryanne flashed a nervous smile, “He’s just shy.”

‘Jay’ was not shy. Jay just knew to mind his damn business. He shuffled over, nodded in greeting, then stuck out his hand, “Jay Sullivan. And you are—”

“It’s Tom Wilton, son,” he rested a hand on the female’s shoulder, “And Sharon.”

He shot them both a grin. “Pleasure.”

Between the two, he spotted a thin human who stood a distance behind them. It was a ‘she,’ from what he could see. And that *she* was staring at him. He chuckled, “You got a mute back there or something Mister Wilton?”

The ‘mute’ blushed, scowled up at him, and marched off.

God she was gangly. She could be taller than him. And that neck of her's was long as all hell for a human's.

"Pardon?" Sharon said, lost. It took a moment, but her eyebrows shot up when realizing. She turned to call after the fuming long-necked human thing, "Molly! Come say hi!"

Too late. This 'Molly' girl was already rushing down the sidewalk. She kept her head stooped over so her bangs hid her eyes.

"Is everything alright," said his 'mother,' with that pearly white Barbie grin.

"Oh, I don't—" Sharon looked between them, "I'm sorry. It was nice meeting you. I don't know why she," she said, her eyes round from nerves, "I'm sorry. Molly!" The woman scurried off down the street after her daughter, flustered and fuming.

He didn't need to look at mister Sullivan to feel his glare. He could taste the anger that rolled off him in waves. His mother must've felt it too. She let her smile fall.

"I'm very sorry, Mister Wilton. My son's got a stupid mouth."

Tom said nothing.

Jay ought to say something clever, he figured. "Really, look, I didn't mean—"

"My daughter. She's also shy," he said, like it was a warning of some sort.

"I'm real sorry." Jay was bad at sentiment, he decided. Not like he'd feel much for these things anyways. It made the role a whole lot easier.

Tom only grunted. "We'll see you around," was all he said to his mother, before stumbling off after his wife. His tone seemed uncertain.

"I've got it," he said, when the bumbling things were out of earshot.

Maryanne stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Molly. She seems fucked up enough. She'll grow 'em nicely."

“Stop speaking in that tongue.”

Mother didn't like that he picked up on their cursing. Something about that small assimilation made her antsy. Father resented it even more.

“Robert”

His garden ‘dreamed’ of violent little boys.

No longer, “Robert,” the ‘father’ walked across a battered playground.

His form was that of a mere boy now. *Happy Harvest Day*, he mused to himself.

The more ripe the fruit, the more tangible this dimension of reality became for humankind.

His eyes wandered to the vibrant grass and flora that peeked through the concrete’s cracks. *That wasn’t there before*, he noted. When the fruit was only a seedling, this place was merely a field.

Those intense emotions of the child’s mind allowed for this place’s existence.

The human mind was of inferior biological construction. Their thinking was narrow. Slight.

Linear. They could exist as their own individual thinking mind, but it made them all the more inept. It permitted his kind to manipulate and influence their perceptions of this reality with ease.

From his work, he learned that they called this dimension of reality a dream. It didn’t exist to them.

The father lifted his nose, letting the sourness of the ripened harvest waft through him. He ran his fingers across the swing set chains.

The stirring in his chest told him his garden was near but hidden away. “You better come out freak!” It was a stupid warning, but human offspring weren’t bright.

Other boys appeared beside him with rocks in their arms. They compiled them into a mountain of rocks that sat in the center of the playground. The other boys cooed, whistled, and chanted alongside him. It became a rhythm. A song of what was to come. Like impish fiends of human tales, the boys crawled up the slides, searching the dark crevices of the jungle gym.

The rancid taste was thick enough on his tongue to gauge where Anna was. He was only dragging this scene out for the success of the harvest.

A rock flew from one of the surrounding boy's hands. It hit something fleshy that yelped. In the corner of his eye atop the jungle gym, he saw Anna clutching her bicep. Blood now decorated her pale skin in a veiny pattern. It darted across the playground toward the barren grass field in a panicked frenzy of verbal pleas.

The boys laughed at her fear. They charged after her with clumps of rocks. He followed behind them. The child's screams carried across the winds, telling him where it was.

The child comprehended her lack of power now. Often, it told the boys to, "Fuck off," but it always ended the dream crying for its brood mother. Anna knew by instinct this would be the final one. Somehow, most human children did.

The child gave another wail as it tripped and fell down a rocky hillside. He heard a sickening *crack*. Cheers erupted around him at the bloody sight. The children surrounded Anna in a circle of jeering and hooting.

Anna bared its teeth at the boys. It flashed a knife gripped in its balled hand at them. Stones began to soar through the air, hitting and piercing the female's flesh.

One of the boys got cocky. They came too close. The girl child grabbed their ginger hair and plunged their knife through its throat. Ginger boy gurgled, bubbles of blood spewing through his lips as he hit the ground.

The father winced, putting a hand to his own throat. If his garden did it again, he might not have the strength to reap his harvest. He came forward, the surrounding boys parting for him like the sea from common human fiction.

Anna retrieved her knife from the ginger's throat, angling it straight at him. It looked rather primal at this moment with its eyes bulging out at him.

“I’ll fucking kill you,” it shrieked, “I’d kill you all! I’d kill you all at school if I could!” The child broke into hysterical laughter, spitting as it said it all, “Mother doesn’t let me. But I’d kill you all!”

The father did not stop at the threats. His mouth opened, his jaw unhinging. He took in the pure essences of the mind that the child bore to him.

Anna stared at his eyes. A concoction of bloodied spit dripped from the girl’s chin. It was quiet. Some fragments of recognition seemed to flash in the child’s eyes. “Doctor—”

A spasm of pain overtook the child. Anna began to grip at her throat, hacking up globs of blood. It began to claw at the throat. *It started with an itch that could never be scratched.* The child dug its nails deeper, gouging out bloody chunks of flesh. Veins and pure red muscle replaced pink flesh. “Helf. dofctur,” it whimpered. “Pheaf.”

It wailed and wailed for the Robert it knew to console its demise. To provide *some* explanation. The father only waited.

It began to rip things out now. The brown eyes still stared at his own.

It gave one last hurl, its entire mouth unhinging with a *crack*. Teeth chipped and broke. They always came out with the fruit. Sometimes they got stuck in it.

His feast slithered out of Anna’s mouth covered in saliva, mucus, and blood. It was perfectly preserved in a creamy protective film. To a human, the Eya fruit resembled a fuzzier dragon fruit. The father stooped over to collect his prize. His stomach rumbled with all his brood’s hunger. He stuffed his mouth full of its rancid juices. He winced, spitting out a canine tooth that likely came out of the child.

Happy Harvest Day.

“Jay”

He hated how humans always traveled in these small packs at this age. Ones that he had to participate in.

It took him a week to figure out Molly’s route back to her house. Her special brooding spots. Her reading spots. The days she would come back late. The precise street where she’d split off from her two friends on the way back to the Wilton house.

This was easy enough to do when he made friends with some insipid blokes that’d follow him back to his own house. He let them both talk while he observed.

Jay made two close friends. Some meathead from the football team and his semi-popular friend. Mike and Jonathan.

At least father’s harvest was a success. He’d finally found the focus that escaped him for days.

“Man, what is Robinson saying half the time,” said the meathead, “Jay you’re good at physics aren’t ya?”

He didn’t hear him. His eyes were on his soon-to-be garden.

“Bye Molly!” a feminine voice yelled.

“See you next week Molly!” came another one.

The two girls that flanked Molly scurried off. Moments passed before Molly continued down the street.

“Getting a good look Jay?” He could hear Jonathan’s shit-eating grin.

“Molly? You’re staring at Molly *Wilton’s*–?”

“Johnny,” Mike’s palm hit the back of Johnathan’s head, “Shut the fuck up. Christ.”

He wasn’t. There wasn’t much to stare at if he was. *Regardless*. “I was.”

“No you weren’t,” said Mike.

“I was.”

Now she was listening. She slowed her walk down a bit, but never turned to look at any of them.

“Hey!” Jonathan called after her.

Molly’s pace quickened. There was a rigidness to her stride now.

“Molly!” He came again.

Nothing.

“Don’t you wanna hear what he has to say about your ass?”

That made her stop. She turned to face them, her face a beat red. He almost thought she’d explode. Maybe she would but all she said was, “Sullivan. I–I would appreciate it if your friends kept their comments to themselves.”

Jonathan laughed. Molly flushed harder, but there was an odd glint in her eyes.

Mike only shrugged at her like he was embarrassed for her. That surprised ‘Jay.’

“Go on.” She said, “Since you keep bothering me.”

What. “What?” There was this strangeness to her he could sense. Anger? Fear? Embarrassment?

“What do you have to say?” She brushed the bangs from her eyes, “About it.”

“I can’t really say anything about it.”

Silence.

Thwack. The air knocked out of him. Something hard hit his stomach area before it thumped to the ground. He saw the familiar red, white, and blue of the country’s flag that decorated the cover of Smith’s 11th grade history text. “Fuck yourself.”

She said it like she was about to cry. Like she never said a human curse. Then he began to realize. Molly craved validation. Any sliver of approval. Molly looked like her parents and not in a good way. Anything was everything for her. And Jay was a good-enough looking bastard.

He had her.

A hand touched his shoulder, “Jay, you good? What the hell was her problem?”

He brushed him off, scooped up Smith’s history book, and ran after the girl.

She didn’t seem the athletic sort. Molly’s pace slowed just as she reached her block. He had to purposely slow his stride down for her. ‘Jay’ had to time this right.

Molly stood at the edge of the street. She looked down at her baggy jeans, adjusting them in an effort to hide her figure.

“I looked. But I wasn’t staring,” he said, coming to stand behind her.

Her fists balled.

“I had nothing to say, cause I’m not gonna make you—You know. Feel uncomfortable?”

Molly looked over her shoulder. Her lip wrinkled.

“You play baseball?” He extended his hand with the history book to her. *The ‘Jay’ role was too cocky for direct apologies.*

She swiped it from him, brushing off the pebbles of gravel and dirt. “What?” Molly said, not getting the quip.

“You knocked the air out of me.”

She said nothing to that.

“Was it the mute comment?”

“Just shut up.”

“Okay,” he stepped off the curb, “Shutting up.”

“Don’t call me mute.”

“Look, I’m sorry.”

Molly was silent again. She just kept staring at him.

He shrugged, turning back toward his own house. The silence dragged for a moment. “You’ve got a nice face though.”

“What?”

“Geez, can you talk? You got a nice face.” He flashed that ‘Jay’ smile at her. Jay was also a ‘liar.’

“If you’d let me make it up to you. You should swing by this weekend.”

“What do you want?”

She was good at this. “Those things your mom brought over.”

She ignored the joke. “Sullivan,” she said, dragging his surname out, “What do you want?”

“You’ll see if you come over.” And he left it at that, resuming his stroll.

“Sullivan.”

He gave her a wave, but didn’t answer her.

Tonight she’ll dream as they called it. He could feel it.

And she would come over.

“Robert”

“Please. Murphey please. Just tell me. Tell me who I can go to.”

‘Robert’ rubbed at his temples. He played up the scene, pretending to have a headache that wasn’t there. “Can I see Anna?”

It was Anna’s mother that sat across from him. Its human fingers tore at a tissue in its hands. It exchanged a look with the pug-nosed Beth.

Beth looked to him, “I don’t think—This is not something you can solve—”

“Just bring her.”

Beth closed its mouth. The nurse’s whole face turned taut. It gave each of them an uneasy glance before heading out the office door.

The mother wet its lips. Some tissue pieces fluttered to the ground. “Listen Doctor, when you see her. She’s not—It’s like she’s alive but just—She’s not connecting with me. Does that make sense?”

“I suppose it does. We’ll see Miss Collins,” he said, scrawling a note about ‘emotional cognition problems,’ in his notepad. He knew exactly what was wrong with Anna. Once the fruit was harvested, the prey’s limbic system was wiped. Save for parts of the hippocampus that kept her memories. But they were memories without emotion. They were non-episodic. Sometimes memories were lost with the harvest, but he found that varied among the prey.

Because the fruit grew from the pure psychic essences of humans’ intense emotions. The parts of the brain which processed emotions went blank.

Just as Collins went to blabber on again, Beth returned with the child.

He was used to Anna squirming at the nurse’s touch. Now it only stood with stiffness blankly staring into space.

“Anna,” he said.

It looked at him, like it was registering his presence. “Murphey.”

“You know my last name?”

The girl just stared.

“Where did you get that name from?”

The child pointed at the door where his name plate hung. “Doctor Murphey.”

That’s what he thought. He put a checkmark next to his previous notes as a confirmation.

Its mother stood up. “It has to be some sort of amnesia. But, how I don’t–”

“Amnesia, yes. Somewhat. But it’s beyond that. Did she know who you were?”

“I think so?”

“You think so?”

“She knew I was her mother but-but she–Things are missing. I don’t know. Is it a reaction from stress? With the bullying and everything. And with her dad–”

“Fraid it doesn’t work like that Miss Collins.” He looked up at Beth, “Give her a pinch.”

“What? Robert–”

“Now. Just do it.”

Beth Anna’s arm and gave her a hard pinch. The child’s face contorted in pain. It stood where it was for a time until it eventually yanked itself away from the nurse.

He turned to his notebook again, writing: *Responses to pain are purely survivable based.*

Before he could write another sentence, a hand slammed down on his notebook.

Miss Collins stood over him, fuming, “Robert if you don’t tell me what’s going on–”

“She’s got no emotional processing. Anna’s physically here of course. She can speak. She has at least some of her memories. That’s why she knew you. But her reactions are purely for her own survival.”

“How? Why?”

“Some damage to the limbic system. Don’t know what. Never seen something like this before,” he couldn’t help but smile wryly, “But I’m not a doctor in that field.” He rummaged through his cabinets, thumbing through his personal stack of business cards. “He is,” he said, tugging out a card for Collins with a doctor in another town.

It took the card from him. Collins looked like they wanted to tear it in two, but all that it said was, “I trust you Doctor Murphey. I hope you know that.”

“I know Miss Collins. Nelson’s the best I know. He’ll help her.”

Beth guided Miss Collins’ offspring over. It wrapped their arms around Anna.

He stood up to open the door for them, “And I wish you two the best of luck.”

Miss Collins shuffled over to the door once it clicked open. “Mother,” it said, down to Anna.

“Mother,” the child repeated.

Miss Collins looked at ‘Robert’ one last time. With not so much as a, ‘thank you,’ they headed out.

He kept his eyes on them as they made their way down the hall.

Just as he was about to turn away, he distantly heard, “You must be Miss Collins.”

A constricting sensation rippled through his throat. The ‘father,’ who still *was* ‘Robert,’ locked his gaze on the large, bearded figure that greeted the two humans. Whoever it was, possessed a stocky build. The human looked built for the military. *For fighting.*

They were here.

“Jay”

Molly Sullivan was a hopelessly confused girl.

Even the way she ate at their dinner table struck him strangely.

She picked at mother's broccoli, staring at it like it was an exhibit at a museum. When watched for longer than a second, she'd stuff the food down her mouth. It wasn't disgust, but something else. If it was, he'd know. The way humans ate was wasteful and empty. Disgust was something he learned to mask well.

Why was she upset then? It was obvious: He'd connected with Molly during her sleep last night.

In human terms, she 'dreamed' of him. Another one more and he could implant the seed.

Because humans were socialized to perceive that dimension of the world as intangible, she'd given in to her inhibitions. He let her wake up just as she was about to kiss him.

It wasn't what humans called love. More of a guilty lust that you'd stow away and never tell anyone of. Very atypical of humans her age.

And Molly wasn't the only one uncomfortable. The whole of their brood felt uncomfortable. It was something that seemed to stem from my father's end. He didn't know what. It made him shake. Jay wasn't an awkward bloke, but the feeling made him appear that way. He could barely grip his fork.

His mother looked at him, her thoughts intermingling with his own. They all jumbled together with father's but all seemed to run along the theme of: *Hurry. They know.*

Then he'd often get existential. He'd imagine his death. All the ways he could be killed. It all came from my father. He was scared. Because the 'they' was coming.

He never knew what it meant, but on an instinctual level he knew staying meant death. They moved their unit often because of this, 'they.' It was something that hunted them. Made it harder for them to get home.

“Your food is lovely Miss Sullivan,” said Mollie, interrupting all their thoughts. Then she was staring at him again. He could tell she wanted to ask if he was alright, but her own ego got in the way.

His mother put on that trademark plastic ‘Maryanne’ grin, “I’m very glad you like it.”

He went to say something, but Molly spoke up again, “This is all really nice, but I really ought to go home now.”

His mother’s eyes narrowed. A growing painful pressure on his head began to blossom. Mother wasn’t patient. “Molly—”

“I do forgive you,” she said, standing up.

Ma flashed him another look before she stood up as well. “I’ll be in the kitchen,” she said, scooping a few plates into her hands as she walked off.

That was her way of saying to speed this all along.

Molly couldn’t look him in the eye. Her fingers picked at her cuticles. “I have to go,” she went to move past him.

He blocked her.

“Jay.”

Jay. Not Sullivan. Progress. He smiled, “We’re friends now.” Then he took her hand in his own, squeezing it.

She snatched it away from him. He thought she might slap him for that gesture, but she said,

“What are you trying to do?”

“Make friends. Like any new kid would.”

“What do you want?”

“Friends. Why do you keep asking that?”

“All awfully fast.”

Damn. She *was* good. He made a show of counting on his hand, “Two conversations. That’s enough to be friends.”

Molly brushed back her bangs. She really studied him now. It wasn’t good because his father’s paranoia was beginning to mix with his own. *Was some part of her seeing through him? Was she the ‘they?’*

“Okay,” she said finally, “Alright. We’re friends.”

‘Jay’ smiled, “Good.”

The girl actually smiled back at him. It was slight, but still there. A fluttering sensation went through his stomach. It came from her.

“I’ll walk with you tomorrow,” he said.

Molly frowned like she wanted to protest, but she said her favorite word, “Okay.”

He opened up his arms to her. *Why not try it*, he thought.

Molly reddened. She took one of his hands instead, deciding to turn the hug into a handshake, “We’ll walk.” The girl scooped up her bag and went to the door. His garden gave him one last look, “Goodbye Jay.”

Then she was on her way.

He had only a few days. Or less. A harvest couldn’t be rushed without risks. *What could he do?*

“Jay”

Molly ‘dreamed’ of the boy she couldn’t have.

They were in a bedroom. It was his. At least that was what she thought. She took in Jay eyes he never saw outside this dimension of reality.

Jay traced his fingers down her throat. She went rigid but didn't move. "Is this fine?" It might've been a whole lot quicker if he played off fear and forced instead. Maybe the Eya fruit would grow faster. He didn't know.

Molly nodded.

He lowered himself on the bed next to her, caressing her throat with his thumb. The essence of pleasure poured out of her. It was enough for the seedling. He moved his thumb to her lower lip, tracing just below it.

It was like Molly wanted to fall into him, but despite the lust she still had hesitance. He'd fix that.

Jay moved his face closer to her's, his lips touched hers. She flinched but took him in.

A sharp pain singed across his left cheek. Suddenly, the girl was gone and Jay Sullivan could only see an abyss of darkness. The reality faded. It was over.

The hand came to slap him across the face again. A hard, sturdy, firm *male* hand.

A gruff voice yelled at him. "Wake up. Wake up!"

"Father?"

Before he could register what was happening, his father took him by the wrist and tore him from the bed. "Get up now!"

"The fuck—"

He pressed his thumb down hard on his lips. "They're here. We're moving. Now."

With a steel-like grip, his father dragged him down through the hallway. In mere seconds he was pushed into the front yard where even the moon felt too bright.

His mother was already in the car. She looked panicked this time. He'd never seen her like that.

I'm going to die. Was the first thought that crossed his mind.

They moved towns early sometimes, but there was a methodology to it. It was never chaos. His brood family never felt this kind of fear. Not while he was alive.

He found himself flying across the grass in bare feet and boxers. The son jumped into the backseat, slamming the car door behind him. His voice cracked when he shouted, "What the hell is happening?"

Father got into the front seat, turned the keys, and hit the gas. The car lurched forward, screeching as it sped down the road.

"Who the fucks after us?"

No answer.

"Mother?" He tried. The two's fear felt consuming. Like it was tearing the fabrics of his mind apart. It made him irrational. He felt something warm touch his wrist. It was his mother.

"We'll make it," she kept repeating to him. Not just to reassure him it seemed, but herself.

It felt calm for a moment. He heard his father say they reached the city.

Then something large slammed into the side of the car like a torpedo.

Everything went dark. But it was never light again.

"Robert"

The father felt a rough calloused hand yank him from the wrecked car. Another pair of hands shoved him from behind. He coughed when his chest smacked against the dirt.

A rough voice greeted him. "Doctor Robert Murphey."

His clothes felt damp. In the dim light, he could make out a stream of blood inching down his forearm. *Damp with blood*. Not red blood. *Purple*. Its tint was slight, but the hired agent that stood in front of him would know the difference.

"My son. Where is my son?"

"Still playing human?" A wet glob of spit splat against his face. It slithered down into his eye only adding to the blurry surroundings. "Fucking Axin."

His vision came and went. The human flesh of his hand seemed to fade darker. Its texture is changing and shifting. He felt the energy being expelled from him as his whole biological composition began to shift. His fingernails began to elongate.

When his kind died, they could hold their form no longer. Their fabricated phenotypic appearance faded.

The figure that stood above him, squatted in front of him. Was it the same stocky military man he saw those days ago? It could be. It was hard to say. His hair was dark and blended into the surrounding night.

"Bind him. Get ready to take him like the others." The sound of a gunshot cracked through the air as he said it.

"No!" He yelled, writhing at the pain that hit the back of his head. His body was a useless broken thing now. The thoughts in his mind spun. They became shallower and shallower. More linear. Less whole. *Almost flat*. "See," the hulking mass of a man said to whoever stood behind him,

“Kill most. The rest follow. They’re one mind. Can’t exist without the other.” His head was yanked back. He was forced to look up at the piercing eyes of his brood’s killer. “That right?”

The father sobbed. He hadn’t sobbed in decades. In a lifetime. This was the first and last time he would. “I’m going to join them,” he said, grinning shakily, “Home.”

“He’s dying sir,” said the voice from behind him.

Cool metal pressed against the back of his head. “Death,” he mocked, “You humans think of everything finite and flat. Selfish creatures. Only know the fragments of what it’s like to be conscious. Your brains all tuned to ignore other layers of reality. Think you know the tangible world. You don’t know the half of it.”

The agent just stared at him. Its eyes glinted in delight at his desperation. The mountainous man nodded to the one that stood behind him. “For Anna,” he said. The final shot ripped right through him.

The father felt as if he watched his demise from a bird’s eye view. His lifeless body fell limp.

The form of Robert dissipating into nothing.

The father felt the calmness of his brood embrace him as numbness enveloped him.