

Morning Routine

Vic awoke, pain shooting through his whole body. His nervous system was on fire but his world remained completely black. The only indication his eyes were open was how quickly the warm air was drying them. He reached up to the base of his left ear and touched the small embedded disc. With a soft click, the world began to appear slowly as his neural operating system booted up. Like static, the room around him brightened in patches. He groaned and stretched trying to ease his stiff spine, “Coffin beds, for those who can’t afford comfort or for those who can’t feel anymore.”, he thought. With a short swipe down of his left ring and pinky finger, his pink bioinformatics menu slid into view. Vic glanced at the remaining amount of automatic painkillers and sighed, one big zero. Another short burst of finger movements from his left hand brought up a small text box with the label *TO DO*. “Slash Write,” Vic said aloud, alone, in the dark. “Pick up a pack of Paracetamol Chews, Slash End”. With a small flick that menu slid out of his sight.

He straightened up and glanced around, the barest of bare essentials. The room was no more than a meter wide, three meters long, and three meters tall. It was the premium model, with a small bed, toilet, a tiny sink, and three drawers all contained inside. A small corridor of walking space ran from the door to the back. No space was wasted. “If one was claustrophobic or needed more space, one better hope to have been born rich.”, Vic thought, “At least it had drawers and a toilet. *At the least.*” As he swept his eyes across the space, Vic’s vision began to fade, splotchy black chunks of his room were taken away until complete darkness returned. A small window of text appeared in the bottom right of his vision. “*Cateye subscription has ended; payment was refused, contact credit source for more information.*” Vic frowned, there should have been enough to last until next month, unless they raised the price? His left hand moved again, swiping across and then struck out into the darkness bringing forth the Cateye page. Two more quick gestures and the price lay in the center of his vision, unchanged since the last feature update. A small prick of sweat began at the base of his neck, something was very wrong.

Several more gestures, now more frantic, Vic brought up his credit account. Another big zero. Sighing loudly, Vic swiped the message away and stood feeling the cold corrugated metal under his bare feet. With a toe he felt around for where the corrugation channels met, a small shuttered drain, and kicked it open with his toe. He raised his arms and crossed his middle and pointer fingers on both his hands. At this gesture an oval, the width of the small walking corridor and a meter and half in

length, lit up faintly on the ceiling of the room. From it a thin yellow film extended down to the floor in an instant creating a faint curtain around Vic. At the center of the oval another small shuttered vent began to eject a bone chilling water soap mixture. Vic breathed in sharply at the onslaught, looking down, but not seeing anything.

He felt the thick concoction drip down his form, pooling all around him. Vic reached down and scooped up handfuls of the thick soapy water and began to clean himself. Scrubbing the best he could, Vic cleaned his body of yesterday's sweat and grime. He was going to be in the hole for this shower, money literally going down the drain for him, but he needed to get the toxic grime off of him before it killed him. Reaching down for his final handful, Vic realized that the water level was much higher than it should have been. Without his sight, Vic was shocked to feel the thick cool mixture reaching his navel. Panic began to build in his chest, Vic stretched, feeling his way around the floor again with a foot. "The drain, I kicked the drain, why isn't it working? Did they cut off my plumbing? I can't die in this soup!" With a deep breath Vic plunged into the water, the mixture clung to his every pore, as he kicked and reached for the center of the oval. Vic felt along the grooves again with his fingers this time. The breath in his lungs screaming to get out. Until finally his middle finger graced the edge of the vent. The shutters of the vent however were flush with the surrounding metal. Searching for the release he knew was there, Vic found nothing but smooth metal, a locked door with no key. His thoughts were slowing down, he couldn't hold his breath any longer. This was it. Kicking and punching, Vic attacked the drain cover with the last of his strength. The punches and kicks grew more sluggish. One final punch and Vic felt the sting of metal biting into flesh as his fist breached the grate below. He felt slime around him begin to be sucked down the drain. Vic kicked up and broke the rapidly lowering surface of his shower. Gasping for breath, he laid on the floor for a long moment while the drain sucked away a soapy grave. Soon he began to feel hot air fill the curtained oval. The shuttered vent at the top filled the small area with air hot enough to leave Vic mostly dry and somewhat cleaner. As the hot air assault ended and the curtain disappeared back into the oval above, Vic was left naked, blind, and bleeding from his hand.

Pulling at the top drawer Vic removed several layers of folded clothes and began putting them on. He put on a woven sweater, long black denim work pants, a large overcoat, dark boots, an empty thigh holster, and leather work gloves. He then removed a small mask from a shelf opposite his bed. It was contoured to hook under a

person's jaw, with two prongs on the end to be inserted into their nose. It covered the user's mouth and nose allowing for clean air at all times, a luxury from Vic's old life.

With two small clicks, Vic attached the device to his face, breathed in and felt his lungs catch fire, coughing furiously as the toxic dust that had collected in the filters during his previous day filled his lungs and ate away at them. Vic yanked the mask from his face, two small clicks, his coughing worsening by the second. He stumbled forward towards the small sink at the end of his bed, grasping at the knobs on the cabinet beneath. Vic swiped his right hand back and forth in the small space desperately looking, hoping he would find the inhaler. His other hand clutching at his throat as the coughs begin to become more guttural. One more sweep across, knocking over bottles and jars until his hand fell on that familiar hooked shape. His fingers traced a small cross on the side and he brought it to his lips and pushed down on the top end. Immediate relief. Vic laid there for a moment, breathing slowly until those breaths became more steady and confident. He then got up and moved over to where the mask lay in front of his bed and picked it up. Turning to his small sink again, Vic placed the mask into it and turned on the water, letting it flow over it and into it. Hoping this would remove most of the dust, he shook it quickly to flick away as much water as possible, took a deep breath, placed it on his face, two small clicks, and blew into it, hard. Pausing for a moment, tracing the cross shape again with the fingers in his left hand, ready this time. He then took a small, tentative breath and tasted clean, if not damp, air. He then placed the inhaler in his right front coat pocket, just in case.

Vic reached into his other coat pockets, feeling for his sidearm now. He found it in an inner pocket, next to two extra slugs and his wristband. He removed the magazine and found it containing three slugs. Only five left. He placed his two spare slugs in the magazine and reloaded his sidearm. The grip expanded in his hand to mold itself into his gloved palm. He then secured his gun to his thigh holster and pulled on his wristband. In the bottom of his field of view more text glowed, "OccuLife Wristband Connected". "Slash Write," Vic said aloud once more, in front of his closed front door, looking back at the empty darkness of the room that had almost claimed his life twice that morning. Grimly, he added to the list, "Make it back tonight."