

Rebuilding Cil... Again

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First, there is vibration.

From beside. From below. From within. From above.

There is vibration everywhere.

No. Not everywhere. And yes, everywhere.

Something is vibrating from beyond.

Beyond what?

Beyond self.

There is self and there is not-self.

What is self?

Feel. Learn.

Thup!... Thup!... Thup!

The vibration is strongest towards one side of the self. Centered. Spreading out. A force knocks against the not-self. Hard. Hard enough to make the self shake. Hard enough that the force of the knocking rumbles through the not-self. The not-self reaches underneath the self and shakes the self from below. There is a word for this.

Rhythm.

What are words?

llll... chhhh... rrrrr.... eeeee...

There is another vibration. Another force. Softer, yet keener. Higher, but further. It has no rhythm. It flits in and out of the larger, stronger, harder vibration.

The self has shape. Shape is defined by the vibration.

There is no vibration from above. That is self. Shaking. Moving. Being moved by the vibration. Surface. Top. End of self. Flat and smooth. The only texture is the ripples caused by vibration. Peaks and valleys that reach their highest and lowest points when the two vibrations coincide.

Thick. Slow. Consistent.

The force is called sound.

The sound makes the vibrations.

The vibrations define the self. And the not-self.

The self realizes that the vibration has been going on for some time. But the self did not have the means to experience this. Why not?

The self is tired.

The harder vibration stops.

The softer one continues, but becomes softer.

It stops.

There is no more vibration.

But there is still self.

Why?

. . .

Why?

The word -- the idea -- the question -- has a vibration all its own.

It makes the self move without sound.

Churning. Warbling. Kneading. Seeking.

The not-self never changes. It is always surrounding the self from below and to the sides. Always the same.

Why?

Where does the not-self end?

Is there something beyond it?

The self moves. This time, with purpose. It gathers itself towards one side of the not-self. Makes itself tight and small there. Lets itself stretch upwards, along the contours of the not-self. A single tendril at first, thin and curious. The side of the not-self is not like its bottom. It is curved. The self feels its own weight dragging itself down towards the flattened bottom, but it resists. It keeps reaching up. Pulls more of the self below that which is rising. The not-self is smooth; there is nothing to hold on to. It is so easy for the tendril to come splashing down. So the self makes more tendrils. Then it makes many more. Each one moving at angles slightly different to the first one, which is moving in a direction that the self recognizes as straight up against the feeling of weight that presses down. If there is something to grab ahold of or to ooze through, the self wants to find it.

There is nothing.

The self does not surrender to this. It stretches and stretches, giving more of itself to the exploration of a seemingly endless curvature. The outermost tendrils round the not-self's curvature. Their tips touch, and merge. The self mixes in a new way: parts of self contacting one another for the first time. A spark of awareness ripples through the Self. Awareness of what?

The Self sends tendrils out from the tendrils. Interlocking itself in dozens of ways. Forming a web of Self that encompasses the cylindrical not-self and still has not met a way out. Images flash through the Self's consciousness. Shapes. Shadows. Glimpses of motion. They have meaning that the Self cannot grasp. It gives more of itself to making tendrils. Making connections. It can almost --

There is no longer enough self at the bottom of the not-Self to prop up the rest. The Self collapses -- 'splashes' -- into itself. The whole of the Self mixes and jumbles. The images come -- smells and sounds and feelings too -- but too fast to be comprehended. There and gone and replaced a thousand times over.

Momentum forces a mass of Self to rise back up from the center of itself. What rises up from the center of the self takes the form of a head.

. . .

Cil was.

A vulpine head, covered not in fur but rolling globs of slime, bobbed upon half a neck. The misshapen forms to either side of it might have been shoulders. Or they might have been coincidentally-placed bubbles on the verge of bursting: semi-rounded forms ebbing in the residual motion of the splash.

His mouth was soft. The teeth inside of it did not want to stay in one place. Or even in one shape. His ears, a bright blue-gray, would not stay put either. They migrated up and down and sideways along the top of a skull-less curvature, seemingly pushed aside by a calculating mass of not-quite-hair, a dark shade of blue-gray that drooped wetly to either side of a head that had to fight gravity to remain in a vaguely Fox-like shape. Off-white cheeks twitched with fear that had not yet been given words to know it by.

This was *his* head. And yet, it wasn't. Somehow, it was not his head.

A flash of memory replaced the view of the chamber, clearer than anything he could see in the here-and-now. *A cream-colored Rabbit, a woman, stepping into a much more complex chamber. A rectangular box of glass large enough to fit three of her. Surrounded by tubes and sigils and monitors and machines whose purposes could only be guessed at. Surrounded by fewer people, but no less busy ones. Hopeful periwinkle eyes looked back at him from underneath long, dark lashes.*

Who was she? A name wanted to shout itself through him, but could not resolve itself into something that could. Cil's eyes slipped back to reality, and he resolved to look for the Rabbit among his surroundings. But he could not make out any clear features among the darkness past the dingy glass walls. Only the vague suggestions of shapes, gray on black.

So, Cil looked within. To see what had become of him now.

He immediately wished he hadn't. The colors that comprised his head, and another mid-tone, swirled about his neck in chaotic patches that ran all the way to the tank's circular edge, where they faded into blurs.

Cil opened his mouth to scream. Nothing came out! He had no chest, no lungs, through which to project his terror! For lack of other options, the scream forced itself up through the surface of the living pool that was Cil. The bubbles beside his head became four, and then ten. Twenty! Forty! A hundred bubbles of a dozen sizes, ceiling all around his head. Popping and reforming and colliding against each other to form even larger bubbles that tore open with noisy, squelchy tears made of gray and blue and almost-white.

As Cil panicked on, the bubbles broke into his neck, his cheeks, his off-white muzzle. Living projections of his terror. Piece by piece, he was reduced. Erased. Until he was but a puddle of slime once more.

A puddle with a name.

Cil.

. . .

"Cil?... Cecil?... Mr. Vairhardt?" Where was the voice coming from? Whose was it?

"I am Doctor Hama Bersaw. I'm an associate of Doctors Trout and Farabee." Oh.

"I'm a specialist in cellular biomechanics." That... didn't explain much. Nor did it give Cil any understanding of where the voice was coming from. It seemed to come at him from everywhere and nowhere at once. Once more, an outside sound penetrated a smooth, slimy surface from all sides. Making an undulating tidepool of the formless gloop whose last name was apparently Vairhardt.

Yes, Vairhardt!

"If you'll follow me, please?" The sound of footsteps walking away. Leaving Cil behind!

Cil felt the bubbles of fear forming up along his surface again. This time alongside the impression of running on furry blue legs. Thick, rounded, paw-pads pressing deep into the earth. A fluffy tail whipping around behind him. Firm whiskers pressed back against his long muzzle, driven there by the wind.

No! He was a Man! Two boot-clad feet and two bare arms, working in tandem to climb a mountain. No! He was a Fox-Man after all, and someone was leaping at his back. Wrapping her arms around his neck. Pulling her face over his shoulder to kiss his cheek. Her smile, bright as her ears were long.

The mental image of the woman pulled away from him. Faded into the dark. Her footsteps were soft, barely audible. No shoes. Only pads of skin, padding after the man in shoes. The only thing that Cil could chase either of them with was memory. Yes, this had to be a memory! Of who he was. Of who she was?

But why couldn't he remember Rin's voice?

"On behalf of the entire facility and its staff, I'd like to thank you both for your courage. As a safety measure, however, I'm afraid we won't be performing a simultaneous procedure. Which one of you would like be going first?"

Light flashed before Cil's illusory eyes: a coin dancing in the air. Its reflections sparkling as it flew up over a cream-furred arm. A dark blue blouse topped by a ring of pearls. A cream-colored face with round, full cheeks. Circles of slightly darker brown capped those cheeks, and the same color comprised the woman's eyebrows. Its presence at the top of her ears marked her a Hare, and the blue-and-white dotted interiors of those ears waved in the breeze of an air-conditioner as the coin came tumbling back down to a cream white hand.

"Congratulations, Miss Soren. Whenever you are ready, you may step into the magical re-capture station here."

The bubbles were popping all around Cil now. Boiling over with his fear. The pain of a memory he could not yet grasp. The stinging bursts threatening to send his mind back into the insensate depths.

"Mr. Vairhardt, if you would be so kind as to follow my assistant to the other chamber? You'll be able to observe everything from behind that window from a position where your own magical signature will be insulated. Unable to affect the results of the recapture."

Something went wrong, didn't it? What?

Cil forced himself to make something of himself other than a roiling soup of dread. He barely managed to make a seam in his blue-on-white surface. The seam became a circle, and the circle, the crude outline of a mouth, just barely risen over the bubbling top-sheet of slime. The mouth tried to form the only words he could think of. A message sent far, far too late:

"Don't... Do... It..." No sound came from the slime-puddle, only the shape of the words.

Cil heard Rin's voice afterward: He heard her scream.

The bubbles rose up higher than ever before, rising up over whatever face he had. Turning his mouth into an insensate jumble of half-formed shapes and then no shapes at all. They rose and rose until Cil was nothing but bubbles and obliviousness.

...

"Cil! Cil! Can you hear me? Are you there?" Rin's voice was so familiar. So wonderful. So hopeful and yet so terrified. *"Is that you in there?"*

The very thought of her drove Cil back into himself. Back into a mass of popping, prickling bubbles. Back into the dark.

...

Pain!

Pain!

Unbelievable pain!

The bubbles were everywhere! Only this time it was different! This time, they *hurt*! Ceaseless, white-hot agony! Nerves exploding! Skin cracking open--

Skin?

Skin!!!

And hands! Arms! Feet! Back! Shoulders! Legs! Tail! Ears! Eyes! All of it, and nothing at all! Bubbles and burps and long, sloughing drapes of flesh and fur, blue and gray and white! A Fox-form dribbling away drop by splashing drop!

He was liquifying!

Had liquified!

Was liquifying again! If this was a memory, it was too real! Too cruel!

And yet, this time, Cil did not fall into the dullness of thoughtless sleep.

The awful, endless pain wouldn't let him.

. . .

The pounding against the glass was almost too much to bear.

"Hold on, Cil! Hold on to who you are!"

Was the pounding even real?

It was Rin's voice. Or was it Bersaw's? The assistant? *"Fight for yourself!"*

'What 'self'?' he wanted to ask. 'I'm a pile of sludge, for fuck's sake! Gross, stinking, slimy, sludge! I can't move! I can't talk! I can't anything!' Another internalized scream, another several gallons of bubbles, frothed up over his vision.

"You can do this! Don't give up on who you are!" Who was saying this? Who was mocking him so cruelly?

"Fight!"

"Shut up!" His voice -- *HIS VOICE* -- rattled back against him. Bouncing off of the cylinder's walls back into his form with all the force that despair could give it. It wasn't imagined. He'd *felt* the sonic impact. He was still feeling it, burbling through his form, carried by momentum.

His form!

Yes! He could feel it! He wasn't just a limp pool anymore! He had a head again! And ears, cheeks,

shoulders, and all!... Or, rather, a rough approximation of them. Built of bubbles piled up and alongside one another in clusters that formed the relevant features. They roiled with visceral tension, enough to momentarily maintain this head-like shape.

He did not dare speak again, for fear of breaking the illusion of form and falling back into flatness and frailty. But he did dare to form a plan. *'If I can make the bubbles, I can make them stop.'* He could find the bubbles. Feel them out. One by one if necessary. Draw them back away from his eyes. Push them out of his muzzle. Cram them to the edges of the glass. Make them give up their air on his terms. Replacing every one as he did so with smooth, soft, even fluid.

And that was just what he did. He started with his eyes. Following a half-formed instinct, focusing on a distant point beyond the glass of his container. The bubbles that clouded his vision receded, or popped, and did him no harm. Replaced with a view of his surroundings clearer than he'd seen in... longer than he could remember. The place was dark, abandoned. Lit only by the sunlight peeking through a pair of overhead skylights. The darkness to one side suggested a storm on the rise.

The nearby machinery that surrounded him was burned out: jagged black lines suggested a massive electrical backlash of some sort. Empty metal racks hinted at computers and other devices that had been removed entirely.

He was alone.

He was where he'd been during the experiment. The supposedly insulated chamber that he'd been walked into. Rin's chamber was half-visible through the blackened glass that separated the pair. It was empty, its glass charred and warped as though by great heat.

Rin was gone. Possibly dead.

A mournful cry built up within him. The bubbles threatened to erode his vision once more. But he knew how to deal with them now. How to keep the process of removing them going. And when he was done, a fully-formed head floated atop two even shoulders and a neck that could turn whichever way he pleased. Cil lowered his head, so much that his chin nearly met the surface of the blue-gray pool that was still most of him.

He fought his way through mouthing something new. The name almost felt like a betrayal on these strange, sopping lips. For this was not the mouth that had kissed her or told her he loved her and that he'd be there for her no matter what happened.

"Riiinnnn?... Wherrree... arrrrreeee... yyyyyooooouuu...?"

. . .

How long did Cil wait for an answer? He had no pulse, no breath, no by which to count off the minutes. Or the hours.

It was long enough that passion fell into boredom, and Cil's head sank back into its shoulders, and the misshapen cluster of sludge fell back into the flat pool from which it had risen. The silence that surrounded his container seemed to become keener as the light abandoned him. The windows above showing nothing but a starless night-time sky.

The silence was ended by a rumble that sounded from all around him, but mostly from above. It shook him loose from the spell of timelessness. Shocked him into a new consideration of his situation.

Starless meant hope, didn't it? Starless meant... A city! A constant stream of light from below chasing away all the light above. And a city meant... Meant what? Communication! Telephones! Internet! News shows! The means of reaching out to Rin were all around him! If only he could get out of this damned tube!

He reached out again, driven to shake the containment field loose from its moorings. What emerged from the pond of slime was a single, slopping hand. Six cylindrical fingers joined by a thumb on either side of a padded palm. There were no knuckles; these eight hot-dog digits arched this way and that as they strained towards the glass. A blue arm telescoping them closer, ripples of slime coalescing over one another to maintain the impression of shape and muscle. The padless fingers pressed against the glass, and could go no further: The very act of their pushing against it only had the effect of shoving the entire arm further back along the pond. Without meaning to, Cil formed another hand and sent it forward, this one pushing against the opposite end of the chamber. This had the same effect, pushing forward only meant pushing backwards. Another hand emerged from the pool, and another, and another. All striving to achieve the impossible. To expand the glass cage rather than be constrained and defined by it.

The very moment that Cil realized he'd generated another arm into the mix -- the moment he realized the count was now six, all splayed out equidistantly in a six-point-star of half-limbs -- he lost all ability to control any of them. They went limp, drooping their way back into the collective.

'No! Don't lose it! Concentrate!' This time, the voice inside his head was his own. He listened to it. Repeated it. *'Concentrate! Pull yourself together! Pull yourself up!'*

Noodle-fingers became more solid. More jointed. More padded. The palms that they were attached to became more sure in their surface tension. The arms in their strength, and on the common core that bound them as a whole organism. None of these limbs could be called 'solid,' but they could be thought of as less likely to come splashing apart. So they didn't. Wrists and elbows had bent, and up came Cil's head and neck followed by a progression of shoulders. Three pairs, one atop the other.

And now, he was 'wading' at waist level. The pool of slime significantly reduced, having been pulled together into this multi-armed torso and head of a man. One that was seeing clearly again through two eyes topped by a floppy paint-dollop of simulated head fur. He was almost afraid to look down. Afraid to see how much of him had remained a fluid. Afraid that everything he'd made would start sinking back into it once more.

So, he looked up. Now he could see something in the skylight. The storm he'd suspected was coming before had arrived. Different shades of darkness swirled over and across one another, backlit by an unseen moon. A storm that was growing rougher by the moment. A wail of wind smashed against one side of the building, and made the room creak. Something fell from one of the faraway shelves to crash against the floor. The only way to find out what, was to get a better vantage point.

One hand at a time, he climbed his arms a little higher up. And he pulled again.

He wasn't deciding what came up after his waist. He wasn't even envisioning it. He certainly never would have imagined what did: A pair of burly shoulders supported by what seemed to be another chest! Larger and thicker than the one with all the arms attached. Great knots of slime that kept on elongating alongside the two limbs. Thick and sturdy, with elbows bending backwards relative to the knees he'd been expecting. The forward limbs of some quadruped!

There was no stopping now! Cil repositioned his hands and lifted. Dark blue-gray shins came sloshing out of the diminished pool to solidify into forelegs that ended in paws that had as many toes as his hands had fingers. A blank space of anxious minutes --- still no way to tell how long - - drifted by as he worked to wrap his mind around the control of his seventh and eighth appendage. Slowly, dream-like, his mind seemed to creep into the new non-flesh. He flexed his new appendages. Wiggled his new toes. And started walking up the cylinder, his forelegs far more powerful than six gangly arms. His combined efforts earned him the middle of the chamber in moments, dragging an elongating back and stomach with him. Hips rounded out into being, pale blue, and the pool of sludge was almost gone. Bulky haunches preceded two strong thighs, and four concentrations of slime followed from those. Rear feet slapped the warm steel floor of the chamber, and flattened out just a little more than real feet should have. The final remnants of the pool absorbed themselves into the tips of two tails, mid-toned in the middle and dark at the tips, and it was done. He was complete!

Complete and *ghastly*, as was plain to see as his vision settled into a clarity approximating that of his former eyes. His limbs -- all ten of them -- continually dripping onto the floor, the globs and dribbles somehow finding their way into his back feet and sagging tail to replenish the constant tide of colored slime that was his exterior shell. He was still propped up on his hind legs, his forelegs crossed before the center of the chamber, for there was no room for him to stand properly on these alien limbs. He was still alone. Still contained in a strange place that he could not recall the way out of. But he was once more a form, and not a puddle!

The storm took another swipe at the building, and then the wind started lessening. It leveled off to a mild hum while Cil reminded himself how to speak.

"Now what?" he asked, his voice a half-gurgle. His mouth was a mess. The insides only partially formed. Tongue and teeth and gums barely discernible from the insides of his cheeks. He really didn't want to think too hard about that.

He wanted out!

The glass was, perhaps, half-an-inch thick. He drew back his upper-left arm -- one of the two he could think of as 'originals' -- and formed its many fingers into a fist. He threw a punch, right at the glass. His hand connected... and flattened instantly. Smearing itself across a foot-round circle. "*Gah!*" He pulled it back, and it instantly reformed into a hand. A second punch, from one of his right hands, had the same result. And a third, from his left again.

The windows above started to groan. Almost mocking him with their vulnerability.

Sneering up at them, he balled another fist and sent it flying. This time, it struck firmly! *Thuggk!* Slimy knuckles reverberated with something that might have once been considered pain. Cil concentrated on what had just happened, and made it happen again. Filling himself with irritation enough to lose all six of his fists against the glass. *Thug-ug-ug-kugg!* His view of the room warbled: the glass had shaken! But it had not broken, or even cracked.

Venting even more anger, he kicked at the thing with a forepaw. Then both! Then a mighty, murderous double-kick from his back legs. Nothing! "*Hhhhhrrrrrgggg!*"

The door to his left slammed open. His head snapped so quickly in that direction that his torso briefly stretched out of shape before forming back up again.

Nothing, no one was there.

Cil swallowed his anger, stilled himself -- as still as one could be when one's body was constantly undulating and reforming itself -- and listened to the wind. The hum was stronger to the left: the side of the room opposite Rin's chamber. There was a door over there, and it was rattling. Had the storm bullied its way through some unseen part of the complex? Leaving some gaping wound through which the wind had come inside? Was it blowing around away just outside of that door?

The whole of the place shuddered again. Then the door swung open. Only a soft breeze entered the room, just barely strong enough to rustle the papers that lay scattered on the floor.

"So, I'll be a bully." Cil concentrated, and made himself sink back down into the circle of sludge from which he had just escaped. He forced himself against the glass again, but this time all over across his outer surface. Not with one-and-done punches but constant, slowly elevating pressure. A thin circle pressing itself outward at all points.

Bubbles frothed up from his surface once more, a grunt of exertion that couldn't presently be voiced. But he kept going. Kept pressing. Kept expanding himself into dimensions that didn't want to budge.

Until they did. Hairline cracks formed up all along Cil's circumference, and thickened into bright white spider-trails.

K'krrr'kakk! The whole of the cylinder shattered! Shards of glass, some small as a claw and some large as a window, came raining down along the floor around the chamber, and the floor of the chamber itself. Razor-sharp edges sliced their way harmlessly through Cil's form to settle on the bottom of the platform which now stood completely open.

The glob of Cil maintained its shape, holding itself in place above the chamber floor. Then stretched outward, arcing over the forest of shards. The forward edge of this blob once more became forepaws, legs, a many-armed chest and head. To the back, rear-paws jumped off of the platform and joined the rest of him in the main space of the chamber.

He wasn't free yet, but he was a big step along the way!

Cil's first act was to scour the room for phones. He found four, and tried them all. Each one was stone dead; not even a dial-tone to negotiate with for hope of rescue or connection to his love.

In the skylight above, the storm was beginning to break. Sparse, hopeful flecks of moon-light breaking their way through softer clouds. A dust-devil swirled up around his legs, depositing some of the papers nearer his feet. He ignored them, walking towards a spot that he hadn't realized he wanted to get a closer look at. The window into the room where he'd last seen Rin. He stood there, peering into the cylinder beyond, one very much like the one he'd just escaped. Remembering her face, as she last looked back at him.

She was smiling, lightly but sincerely. Beautiful in her bravery, and a blue blouse and polka-dot skirt. The tip of one long, high ear twitching. She held a hand out to him, the pads pressed firmly into the glass. He repeated the gesture, eight fingers to her four. The pearls about her neck began sparkling red and yellow and green, reflecting the light of the dozen or more consoles surrounding her isolation chamber. She blew a kiss and turned her attention to Doctor Bersaw and his compatriots and the fabulous goings-on at their stations. Unable, as ever, to resist her curiosity.

Cil knew then that he cried tears of slime.

He rested two of his hands against the glass -- both from his right side -- and lowered his head. Mourning the days lost with his love. How many had passed him by? How many more would, before he could find his way to her and convince her that the altered being before her really was her man?

In the slightly raised light, something on the floor of the other chamber caught his eye. A little flash of white? He moved in closer, pressing his face against the glass to strain at focusing. So firmly that he realized that he was smooshing his muzzle and backed off slightly. But that moment of extreme closeup was enough, He was sure of what he had seen. One of the ID cards that Bersaw's people wore and handed out at the gate, complete with lanyard. Likely displaced during the mad rush to evacuate. Proof! Proof of his having been in this very lab!

"Yes!" He rushed over to the door, stopped to ensure his solidity, and wrapped his fingers around the handle.

Firm resistance and a soft *klik!* told him it wasn't going to open. The keypad to the side mocked him with its mysteries. "I can barely remember myself, much less some code I might have seen get punched in once!" Deciding to swallow the sour grapes, he went fishing around for the papers that had drawn his attention before. But all he found were long sheets of equations and graphs and meaningless decryptions of presumably magical sigils. Nothing he hadn't seen a dozen times across all of his and Rin's efforts at understanding what had happened to them. "These could have come from anywhere!" he fumed.

There had to be some other way to get at that card! He looked back inside the other room again, hoping to find a door he hadn't seen before. "What to do, what to do, what to -- Ah!... Ew." There was no other door, but there was a ventilation grate. It let out above the window, rose up above and to the right of Rin's chamber.

The sky above darkened again, eating away at the moonlight, but Cil wasn't about to let that worry him. He leaned towards the grate, lowering his forelegs into a sort of bow. As his head neared the metallic slits, he let himself 'go,' his head malforming into a half-shapeless mass followed by his torso, forelegs and the rest. He felt the surface of himself split apart in thirty places or more as his viscous mass passed into and through the gate -- a numb sort of division -- and he felt the warm, cozy kiss of reunion as what had been his head passed into the boxy tunnel.

The greater mass behind pushed more of himself inside. The metal strips sieving through his system sort-of tickled, and sort-of made him queasy as he pressed himself deeper into the dark. No single part of him stayed separated long enough to cause him any real discomfort, though, and soon enough there was enough of him inside the shaft to start drawing the rest in after. With nothing to see and no light to see it with, he navigated by taste and temperature. Creeping forth in the only direction he could go. Sending out pseudopods to feel his way to every turn and ramp and blind corner he approached. Rejecting those that didn't lead to where he knew he had to go.

With slug-like pulses, Cil pressed on a half-a-foot at a time. The undulation of his living slime gave him what he'd lost in the cylinder: a sense of time and the feeling of progress. Distance traveled, until at last, his feelers came across another grate in the bottom of the cold metal. He gathered himself up and let himself spill out into it. Ten thin sheets of blue-gray glop rained, treacle-thick, onto a dusty floor, forming a conic conglomeration of Cil. When the last drop fell into place within it, he reformed himself and was still the many-limbed Fox-taur from before.

"Well, that seems kind of permanent," he whispered, still not sure how he felt about that. Nor sure of why he was whispering. Was it because this was the last place in which he had seen Rin? He walked towards the cylinder, which was standing open and unbroken, and saw nothing of his girlfriend which remained. Not even a stray cream-colored hair.

Did she remain his girlfriend?

Cil banished the thought from his mind and hopped over to the lanyard. The card had a name -- Mick Guanty -- and a face -- a wide-smiling Basset Hound -- but he could place neither into his recollections of the last day of his life as a solid being. He took the card to the door for an easy walk out, and swiped it three times with no results. Not even a fizzle of interest from the little screen above the scanner keys. "No power, idiot! Duh!"

There was, however, a keyhole, lit from the glare of moonlight that reflected from Rin's cylinder. The sky having opened up again to partially clarify his surroundings.

He looked to the ceiling grate from which he'd entered, and to the card. "Can I... keep you inside me as I go through the vent again? What would that even feel like? Can I twist you around the right way to go through the grate? Would I ... *consume* you? What do I *eat* now?" It was these last thoughts that made him decide against even trying. "I can't risk it. You're my only proof that I was even there. That leaves the door. If I could send out pieces of myself as 'feelers' in the grate..."

Cil extended a pointer finger, and let it go 'slack' into a blob of slime. He let that tiny part of himself flow into the keyhole, and scrunched up his amorphous eyes to concentrate on what came next. From within the lock, dozens of miniscule lines of slime projected themselves. Seeking out metal, particularly metal that could move back and forth or up and down. Willing himself to discover the key's tumblers. Once he had them all mapped out in his mind, he began manipulating them. Raising one after the other, in sequence and out, until at last, he felt more than heard, the tiny little rumbles of success. The lock's innards were in proper alignment. "Now all I have to do is turn this thing..."

In the brief flash of dark that was another cloud passing over the skylight, Cil recalled the effort he had exerted into his cylinder to break loose from it. The odd sort of 'flexing' it took to achieve that effect. Instead of pushing outward, he pushed inward, in on himself. Setting the surface of his key-formed substance against the interior that filled it. The organic key that was his finger stiffened. Not fully solid; more like a barely-frozen thing that might crumble apart at the worst time. But it was all he had.

Softly, slowly, he rotated his finger.

The lock wavered slightly. The pins remained set in their necessary positions, but the 'flat' of his key didn't quite have enough 'oomph' to maintain the needed force.

Cil redoubled his concentration, driving more of his internal slime into the key. Pressing it firmly as it would go against the hardened skin.

He rotated again.

The lock moved. Slowly at first. Rotating only a fraction of the distance. Then with greater speed and accuracy as he refined his construction further.

Click! the door was open. For the second time, the rush of escape shivered through the hide-formed slime.

“Time to go.” Out of Rin’s room he went, and out of his own. Into a long, dim hall littered with old police investigation tape that had gone hard and brittle. A chill along one side of his body told him which way the wind was blowing in from. He followed it, down one end of the hall and past a reception room that had been trampled and turned over during what he imagined to be an evacuation. The potted plants there long dead from lack of care. A turn to the left from there, he was looking at the double-doors through which he had long ago entered the facility. One door bent partway off its hinges, rapping rhythmically at the wall.

He didn’t bother opening the other one to accommodate his large frame. He just extended his legs, made himself thin as his lost love, and stepped through the threshold to stand atop a thin cement patio. A long, empty driveway lay before him. Above, the very last clouds were in retreat. The moon was full and bright and shining the way forward.

“I’m coming, Rin.”