Providence

 The report of cannonfire from The Providence rang through the dead of morning. Algernon stiffened, his ears swiveling in the direction of the racket. The possums around him were similarly startled, looking around nervously as though they could locate the source of the rig’s fury while they huddled in the belly of it.

 “Are w-we being attacked?” he asked nervously.

 A weasel, one of the overseers of the vehicle, poked their head through the entrance to the boiler room. “Hey! Back to work you lot!” he barked. “Probably just some scav thinking they’ll get lucky.”

 The words shook them from their daze, but the anxiousness remained on their faces. For possums though, their neutral expressions had the appearance of perpetual worry anyways.

 With how big the firebox was, removing the previous day’s ashes required multiple crewmen. The rakes used for the task were gargantuan, and the effort had already left the marsupials tired and covered in soot. With the cannons ending their salvo, Algernon and the others returned to pushing the kindling to the back of the box. He watched as a brave soul ventured into the vessel itself with a matchbook. Lighting the match, the possum gripped the stick with their tail and nervously lowered it into the paper and thin planks, and as soon as the pile ignited the possum skittered back to safety.

 Once the fire was burning, the group formed a line to heft the fuel logs in to cover the whole floor of the firebox. Soon a blanket of flames filled the boiler. The belly of the colossus groaned as it began to heat up. Now that the rig was waking from its cold start, Algernon and his coworkers ambled out of the engine room. Their work day had only just begun.

 Directly next to the inner workings of The Providence lay the facilities room. It held lockers and the various tools needed for the engineers to do their jobs, and a large CRT screen took up most of the far wall. The readouts detailed the distribution of tasks to the possums. Algernon was one of the few crewmen who could actually read, which made it his responsibility to inform the others. Following along during sermons had made him proficient, and if he were a rat it would have immediately made him an important part of the Clergy, most likely a priest. As it was, it only gave him more responsibilities.

 “Sawyer, you’ll be checking the monkey tail and closing it. Harley will be monitoring the lubricator. Riley and Eda are on air compressor duty.” Algernon blinked when he got to his own entry on the list. “I-I’ll be cleaning the front hatch.” Although he didn’t know why it needed to be cleaned now, when it hadn’t before.

 He shuffled off to his duties along with the other possums. Some climbed up through the inner workings of the behemoth vehicle, others disappeared into the winding passageways on the ground level. Algernon’s path took him through the cavernous main hall. Mess tables that could seat a hundred took up the floor, meanwhile catwalks criss-crossed above, leading to the various offices of the rig. At this early hour, few animals walked through the space save for the unlucky ones needed to man the graveyard shift.

 The largest portal from the hall led to the back entrance of the rig. Algernon was surprised to see the leader of The Providence standing there by the lockout. The rat, Armand, was hunched over the ledger he held in his paws, appraising different items one of the weasel overseers brought to and from the secure room.

 The rat scowled at the precursor-sized hex wrench being presented to him. “You lizard-brains! None of these artifacts look remotely like what we need!” Armand shrieked, his tail whipping against the metal floor. As the weasel hastily brought the item back to the lockup, the rat finally noticed the possum standing awkwardly nearby. “What are you gawking at?”

 “I’m h-here to clean the hatch, sir,” Algernon said.

 “Ah good, it took long enough for an underling to arrive,” he muttered. “The noble crest of our heritage has been soiled, and must be returned to its former glory!”

 The possum wrung its paws. “Can you open the hatch for me, sir?”

 “What? Most of our protectors still sleep, and we can’t let any filthy brigands into our holy enclave!” Armand exclaimed. “Access the exterior through one of the nearby outlets.”

 “But sir, the crest is awfully high up...”

 “Bah,” the rat waved a paw at him. “The cargo lines haven’t broken in at least a season, and you can use that clingy tail of yours.”

 “Oh...” As the weasel came out of the lockout with a screwdriver as tall as he was, Algernon scampered off before the rat threw another fit.

 He grabbed a rag and bucket from the nearest maintenance crevice, and holding the supplies with his tail, Algernon climbed up through the interior of the walls. With an opossum's dexterous digits, they were the only species on the rig that could take advantage of the numerous pipes that lined the inner workings to climb upwards. At least, when the engine wasn’t warmed up and pumping boiling liquids through them.

 At the top of the vehicle, a small flap sat closed. Undoing the lock, Algernon opened it to the outside, letting the cool morning air in. A hint of light tinged the sky, but the landscape around the vehicle was still covered in shadow. He walked out onto the roof of The Providence and lit the nearest lantern. Even though he couldn’t see how high he was, Algernon couldn’t suppress a shudder at the inky void surrounding the vehicle.

 He quickly got to work securing a harness. There were several crane arms for doing work around the rig, which the possum attached himself to. Algernon approached the edge of the roof. Gulping, he crossed himself with his paw across his chest, before turning his back to the open air and repelling down the outside.

 Below, the dim glow of another lantern illuminated The Providence’s air compressor. Lowering down to it he caught Riley and Eda starting to drain the reservoirs.

 “Can I catch some of that?” Algernon asked.

 One of the other possums gave him a shrug, so he held out the bucket with his tail and gathered the stream of water leaking from the machine. With that in tow, he scrabbled along the side of the vehicle to the back hatch. He ascended back up to near the top of the rig, where an emblem twice his length stood proud.

 Hooking another lantern over the edge of the craft, he scrunched up his snout at the mess. Expecting dirt and grime, instead a large reddish-brown stain spread across the face, with clumps of grey fur caked into it. Algernon stared in dismay at what he needed to clean for several minutes, before setting to work wiping away the grisly sight.

 By the time he had finished, his paws were covered in gunk and his stomach was clenched in revulsion. The first rays of the dawn were breaching the horizon, illuminating his handiwork. Time was starting to wear down the letters, but the “A&E” encircled by a helix was still prominent and stood proud against the steel frame of The Providence.

 The landscape surrounding the rig was finally casting off its shadows. Below, a massive crater several times larger than The Providence spread out. Remnants of some building lay within, and debris from beyond the cusp of it were drawn into the hole. Gargantuan structures rose up all around it. Algernon wasn’t sure how any creature could have made creations so large, but it just went to show how great the precursor race was.

 However, besides the activity on the rig, a stillness hung over the gigantic colony. Every window in every building was dark. Nature was beginning to claim the architecture, its trees poking through the concrete and its vines snaking up the walls. The sun hadn’t touched the ground yet, but he knew that as with every precursor settlement, their relics littered the streets.

 “Underlings!” Armand’s voice blared through the speaker mounted next to him.

 Algernon’s body jolted in shock, causing his tail to let go of the wash bucket. His mouth opened in a silent scream towards the source of the noise.

 “There is an additional task that is required of you,” he continued. “The Providence needs to be topped up on water reserves. Fill them up from the pump, posthaste!”

 It took a minute for Algernon’s ears to stop ringing. In that time, the possums working the air compressor had already climbed to the roof of the vehicle.

 “Since you’re already tethered, we’ll swing you over to the tender,” Eda said.

 “Wait, I’m not - eeeeeee!” As the crane turned, he was pulled away from the side of the Providence and suspended in the air. He spun in slow circles while the crane arm was guided over to the broad side of the rig.

When the movements stopped, Algernon looked down and spotted the reservoir the vehicle was parked next to. Someone had set up a ramshackle windmill to pump up water to a receptacle, a droplet painted across its side. He lowered himself down to its level. On the side of The Providence the nozzle of a siphon protruded nearby. Swinging over to it, he grabbed and pulled it out to the reservoir. He gave a thumbs up to the possums still on the roof. One of them threw a switch, activating a vacuum pull started by the sparks of power forming in the engine. With suction coming out of the siphon, Algernon attached it to the faucet of the reservoir and turned the spigot. The sound of water flowing traveled down the hose. For several minutes Algernon watched over the transfer, until with a *thunk*, the suction ceased. He detached the siphon and let it retract to its cubby.

Feedback resonated from the speakers situated around the vehicle. “Attention citizens of The Providence,” Armand’s voice came through again. “Morning mass will begin shortly, proceed to the cathedral.”

The possums above immediately left to the nearest flap. Scared of being late, Algernon climbed up rope as fast as he could. Slipping inside, he traversed the tight innards of the machine towards its heart, where the cathedral lay. Another flap opened next to the cathedral’s entrance, and Algernon arrived in time to only receive a withering glare from the weasels at the door instead of something worse.

Besides the main hall, the cathedral was one of the largest spaces in The Providence. Metal arches rose up to the soaring ceiling, arching back down towards the pulpit. In front of it, a substantial, precursor-sized book rested in the choir. Rows of pews took up the nave, and were already filled with possums, mice, weasels, and the hundreds of mammals that called the rig home. Algernon slipped into a pew with his possum brethren.

Many of the constituents were conversing in hushed voices. Others looked paralyzed from boredom. Next to him, one of the other workers was dozing off, exhausted from their intense work that morning. One of the overseers came up behind and smacked them on the back of the head, bringing them back to wakefulness with a yelp.

The murmurings of the creatures quieted when a rat in Clergy vestments padded up to the pulpit. Candles surrounding the front illuminated the rodent’s aged wrinkles. His flabby skin jiggled as he raised his arms.

“Sons of Atom, daughters of Eve,” the priest intoned, “We are gathered this morning, as we do every morning, to celebrate the gift of law bestowed upon us by the Creators. Today we’ll be reading from the book of Genesis, chapter six.”

The priest walked around the pulpit to the large book. The rat flipped through pages bigger than his entire body, which threatened to cover them. Algernon grabbed a copy of the holy text from the pew in front of him, thankfully one of hybrid size. His fellow workers didn’t bother getting their own, either from lack of interest or inability to understand.

Just as Algernon found the passage, the rat read, “‘But the earth was corrupt in the view of God and full of lawlessness. When God saw how corrupt the earth had become, since all mortals had corrupted their ways on the earth, God said to Noah: I see that the end of all mortals has come, for the earth is full of lawlessness because of them. So I am going to destroy them with the earth.’”

With a degree of reverence, the rat closed the book. “And so it is in this day and age. We live in the midst of a Noah generation, and like Noah, we too are preserved from the lawlessness of the outside world within our own arks, awaiting the cleansing. As Clergy, it is our sacred duty to cherish the law just as our creators did before us, and protect it from those who wish to see it dismantled. So whether it is your responsibility to administer this entire ark, or prepare the minds of the next generation, or maintain the workings of this vessel, do it with the knowledge that you are performing a righteous task.”

Once more the priest lifted their hands to the heavens. “Creators, bless these humble creatures. Thank you for opening our eyes, and not leaving us blind like the vermin who continuously do evil. Quicken the day of your wrath, so that our enemies may be vanquished and our inheritance restored. Amen.”

The crowd half-heartedly echoed an amen back. With the benediction spoken, that meant that it was time for the first mess of the day, which the animals were much more eager for. Algernon found himself swept with the sea of bodies out of the cathedral and towards the main hall.

Now that the rest of The Providence was awake, the hall was abuzz with activity. A cacophony of voices filled every corner. Algernon grabbed his ears to protect his sensitive hearing. His instinct was to run and hide from the overstimulation, but the pangs of hunger were starting to stir his belly. And so he waited in the chaotic crowd for food.

When he was finally jostled to the front, he was greeted with the morning’s meal; Giblets of roach were offered in small thimble-sized bowls. It’s what was served for every meal, so the cooked insect was hardly a surprise, but Algernon couldn’t help but be disappointed all the same. The meat didn’t have an unpleasant taste, but eating it season after season reduced eating to just another necessity.

Before Algernon was thrust aside by more hungry patrons he grabbed a bowl. In all of the commotion of the hall he couldn’t bear to eat there. He began to rush off to his secret spot, when another possum with frizzy fur and squinty eyes noticed him and lit up. Before he could escape, she came up to him with a huge smile.

“Oh Algernon, it’s good to see you!” she said, squeezing his neck fluff. “It feels like it has been seasons since we’ve crossed paths!”

“H-hello Mabel,” Algernon greeted. The old possum had a look of adoration that was almost unnerving.

“Come, sit with the rest of us! I would love to catch up with you!”

He glanced over to the nearby table. Baby possums were seated neatly together, all smacking their mouths as they chewed their meals. None seemed fully aware of the surroundings, perfectly content to blissfully munch.

“Mabel, it’s been many seasons since I was a joey.” In truth it had been way more than he could count, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell her that.

“I remember when you were as small as one like it was yesterday,” she crooned, squishing his cheeks. “You’ll always be that little bean in my eyes!”

“Well, I-I have to organize the barracks while everyone is up and about, so I’ll need to eat on the job,” he said.

“Always so considerate. Go do what you need to, but don’t be a stranger!”

With a final pat she released him. Algernon gave a friendly flick of his tail, then hurried out of the hall. He headed towards the barracks, but not for cleaning purposes. Just outside of the sleeping quarters was a corridor to one of the cannons, but yellow tape criss-crossed the entrance. Ignoring the barrier, he ducked underneath and traveled deeper inside; he’d found that other hybrids stood well clear of the space, believing it to be hazardous. However, all that lay at the end of the narrow and twisting passage through the walls of the vehicle was an empty shutter to the outside.

The cannon had been removed and never replaced, leaving a small ledge inset to the side of The Providence. Algernon let his legs and tail dangle off the side and began munching on his meal. The giant-sized city was now fully visible under the mid-morning sun. Below, what was once hidden by pre-dawn shadows was laid bare. Although much smaller than The Providence, great behemoths of steel, rubber and glass lined the sides of the roads, the remains of mythical vehicles. None showed signs of steam valves or pipes so it was unclear even to an engineer like Algernon how they functioned, but the precursors had many such technologies that were beyond hybrid comprehension. No matter the case, no one would get the chance to investigate; every vehicle showed signs of tampering with, likely by groups of scavengers. Like the Clergy said, they tended to destroy everything they touched.

Other relics from a bygone age littered the streets. Great poles that housed electric lamps were broken against the asphalt. In rare instances the sophisticated lights still glowed in the evenings, but with a city in this much ruin it seemed unlikely many would work here. Lengths of cables that once spanned the buildings now slithered across the ground. Numerous signs of every color and script imaginable were littered everywhere, torn and scattered, making the initial meanings illegible.

Even though no life was left in the city, peeking out between the debris and foliage were remnants of it. The bleach-white of bones left in the sun was all that was left of the precursors. Algernon hadn’t been up close to them in person, but from his perch he’d seen some of The Providence’s surveyors next to their remains, and many of their bones were longer than the average hybrid. Their scale must have been astounding.

Speaking of the surveyors, Algernon heard a colossal groan rumble through the vehicle as the hatch of the rig opened. After a minute of the whole frame shuddering a dull *bang* sounded as the top of the hatch hit the ground. A few minutes more, and the workers started appearing down below; crews of moles and martens equipped with carts to transport any precursor relics they found back to The Providence. Algernon didn’t know why they were searching for them, but he trusted that the overseers knew what they were doing.

One of the groups was picking through an abandoned vehicle at the lip of the crater. Even at the distance they were from him, Algernon’s sensitive ears were still able to make out bits of their conversation.

“Do you really think this is the place?” one of the moles asked. “Clearly there used to be some A&E presence here, but is it the one with the key?”

“How should I know?” a marten snapped. “Stop distracting us, and let us do our job.”

With a jolt Algernon realized that if the surveyors were out, then he was late for his own work. He hastened back inside to the facilities room, but he was already too late; the overseers were agitated that the possums were delayed in their duties by his lack of presence. He couldn’t stop stuttering as he read out the tasks from the monitor, waiting for the hammer to fall.

“I-I’ll be maintaining the firebox for the afternoon shift,” Algernon said, hoping to swiftly move along.

Those hopes were dashed when the overseer clamped a paw on his shoulder. “Edgar has already been doing a good job keeping the flames healthy,” the weasel said, a malicious glimmer in their eyes. “Why not let him continue doing that duty, while you can do a special task that needs doing, hm?”

“What task w-would that be?”

Shortly thereafter he was standing in front of the paddocks with a mop and bucket, a whimper escaping his throat. Inside was where the rig raised their flock of roaches, hundreds of insectoids as big as he was. In the dim space the bugs covered the entire floor, in some places piling on top of each other.

His duty was to clean the pens out of loose chitin and refuse, a chore that had clearly been neglected judging by the stench of rot filling the space. With immense reluctance Algernon stepped into the first paddock.

The next several hours was a grim chapter in Algernon’s life he didn’t want to relive anytime soon. The smell within the pens was overwhelming and made him want to pass out. Hardly any of the roaches wanted to move for him to clean and he had to coax nearly every single one to move. Some decided to flick their wings at him, and a couple flew at him with limbs outstretched in an act of defiance, causing Algernon to flee several times.

By the end of the ordeal much of the grunge caking the paddocks transferred to his fur instead of the bucket. The only consolation was that the roaches would all end up as food for the crew, eventually.

When supper rolled around, he didn’t have to make an effort to avoid the crowds. Everyone gave him a wide berth with the stink that clouded around him. He returned to his quiet place with his meal more so to not be ridiculed by his peers than for an escape.

It was a relief when the day was reaching its end, since that meant it was time for the nightly bath. All of the possums had migrated to the lowest levels of the vehicle, where the reserve tender was accessible. It doubled as a cleaning tub once most of the water was emptied into the main tender. Usually that wasn’t an issue, except for the one time the cooling lines were incorrectly redirected to the reserve tank. The smell of boiled mammal didn’t leave the rig for weeks.

Algernon discarded his overalls and uniform along with the others and stepped up to the edge of the tank. The sight below paralyzed him. Water was lapping at the top of the ladder down, its depths hiding the bottom. He felt unsteady on his feet, and backed away before he could tumble in.

The sound of pumping water steadily grew until the others started climbing down the ladder. He peeked over the side. Water was only up to the possums’ waist now, so he grabbed a chunk of lye and descended as well.

Joining his fellows he immediately soaped himself as fast as possible, vigorously rubbing to wash the entire day away. The layers melted away one at a time: mud, sweat, and finally soot.

He was startled when he felt someone start to scrub his back. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Mabel smiling up at him. Feeling he ought to contribute, Algernon started to wash the back of the possum in front of him, who gave an appreciative hum.

Once every limb and every digit was clean, the group bundled out of the tank and dried off under the heat sinks of the engine. Then it was off to their quarters, which was just a small room with padding lining it. Together they curled up in the center so that they looked like one big jumble of fur.

With the warmth shared between them and after the exertions of the day, it didn’t take long for Algernon to begin drifting off. Before sleep overtook him, he clasped his paws and prayed to the creators, giving thanks for another day passed, and praying for their blessing in the day to come.

It was the following morning, and Algernon was on his hands and knees wiping the floor of the back entrance. All of The Providence’s surveyors tracked grime in when returning from their expeditions, causing the entrance to be caked in dirt. The task was grueling, and he was pretty sure the floor would become just as grimy again in the next couple days, but if the overseer watching over him said it was an important duty, it wasn’t his place to question.

With the first shift of surveyors already out in the city the hatch was open and let the breeze and soft dawn light in. The faraway sounds of shifting rubble in the city indicated where workers were searching. The sudden patter of feet coming up the hatch drew his attention. Seeing the group rapidly approaching, Algernon scrambled out of the way right before they bustled into the entrance.

“Fetch the boss, quick!” A marten from the group said to the overseer. He held up a rod caked in dirt out to the weasel. “I think this is what we’ve been looking for!”

In an uncharacteristic act of doing work, the overseer ran off deeper into the Providence. Meanwhile, Algernon wrung the end of his tail as the surveyors muddied up the floor he had just cleaned.

Not a minute later Armand came striding into the entrance with his ledger. He had his usual scowl across his snout before seeing the artifact the surveyors had. The rat opened to the first page and looked between the rod and the ledger.

“Brush it off,” Armand demanded. The moles and martens complied, rubbing off the dirt covering the object. Beneath was a metallic surface lined with symbols. A few rings circled the cylinder at one end.

The lead rat kept glancing between his ledger and the strange artifact until his ears perked up. A small rumble emerged from his chest until he started laughing with glee. “I can’t believe it! This really is the master key!”

The surveyors looked excited as well, if a bit uncertain of what to do. “Sir, what does this mean now?” one of the moles spoke up.

“Put it in the lockout, in the most secure place you can find,” the rat said. “As for now, it is time to celebrate!”

Algernon found himself carried along by the surveyors to the entry hall where many of the other denizens were starting to travel through. The possum untangled himself from the other hybrids in the middle of the space, still at a loss for what was happening.

Thankfully, Armand’s voice was broadcast through the entire rig, causing every hybrid to quiet and turn to the speaker. “Attention citizens of The Providence. Today is a glorious day; I have found the master key, the prime artifact we are after on our holy mission! With it in my possession, we can finally return to the home of our order and sanctify this lawless land. In honor of this event, every worker can take the next shift off, and our special food stores will be open to all.”

The intercom went dead, leaving the room in silence for several moments. Then, a raucous cheer from every corner of the space erupted, causing Algernon to cover his ears. Hybrids from all over the vehicle poured into the hall. A few carried cans as big as they were with them. Overseers climbed on top of them and pulled on the tabs as hard as they could until they opened with a pop and the weasels tumbled off. Numerous paws reached in and pulled out preserved fruits and vegetables, a rare treat for the animals.

The food spilled out into the crowd, and Algernon was able to snatch up a piece of melon. Before the celebrations became too exciting he scurried off again to his secret spot. Even from the empty cannon shutter the sounds of excitement could still be heard in the distance, but it was low enough that he didn’t feel like he would risk fainting from all of the stimulation.

Sighing, he sat down on the ledge and let the mild breeze jostle his fur. Nibbling on the melon, his eyes dilated. Compared to eating roaches every day, it was a transcendent experience that pulled him into his own world. In the juicy euphoria of the fruit, Algernon could finally imagine that after all of that he and his brethren had worked for would lead to something better, if this savouriness was any indication.

His pleasant thoughts were swiftly interrupted when something yanked on his tail and flung him from the safety of The Providence.