Parlor of Iniquity

The following morning, the sun shone over the massacre that transpired in the night. Algernon had to quickly turn away from the scene that awaited outside when the door was opened. He didn’t trust himself to keep the rising bile down if he turned back.

Frieda took little time in directing the other scavs. “Grab anything from the steamer that isn’t nailed down! Especially anything shiny!”

All of the other crew members went about the vehicle the other gang had arrived on while Algernon secluded himself to The Dragon. He heard one of the corpses being dragged away.

“Peach, what the devil are you doing?” Frieda yelled.

“Burying the bodies,” she replied. “They don’t deserve to be left out for ferals.”

A long-suffering sigh came from the rat. “Make it quick. We’ll be leaving as soon as the looting is done.”

The sound of the dead being carried away continued, followed by dirt being displaced. With her shovel-like paws, it wouldn’t take long to dig the graves.

While everyone else was working, Algernon figured he ought to be busy as well. Since the front door wasn’t an option, he went up top to see if he could dump ashes on the opposite side of the vehicle. He popped the hatch and was immediately greeted with additional gore. Closing it, he instead decided to wait until the mess was cleaned up before continuing his duties.

After an hour Peach returned to the vehicle. She was matted in blood, and headed straight for the bathhouse. He looked back outside and the camp was now cleaned enough for him to come out without risk of nausea, although the dirt was still saturated with crimson. A pile of supplies lay where the bodies used to.

Algernon perused the haul and was happy to see that there was tape and a wrench to replace the ones he had dropped. He was hopeful that would placate Frieda for his past blunder, since she looked to be in a particularly foul mood as she surveyed the spoils.

“This garbage was all they had? No treasure at all?!”

“They had these!” Teddy held a stick of dynamite in each hand. The coating of them was compromised, and black powder was leaking out of them.

“Give me those!” She snatched the explosives from the raccoon. “It was foolish to let you loot with everyone else.”

Teddy’s face was filled with sadness as Freida carried the dynamite off inside. Everyone else helped carry the other items into The Dragon. Sascha and Senta worked to secure the odds and ends to the ceiling or any other space that could be found for the supplies.

Their captain looked out one last time to see if anything had been neglected. The attacker’s vehicle was all that remained. “If only Seb accepted steamers as payment. Damn everything.” She pulled the door shut, and the vehicle began to pull back on to the highway.

Much like on The Providence, things naturally began to follow a pattern on The Belching Dragon. There was really only one task that took up his time: the continual cleaning of the engine room. The amount of ash filling it seemed unending. Each day’s worth of effort left him filthy and exhausted.

The frequent stops the vehicle needed to make helped break up the ordeal. Slaking the thirst of the machine was also an unending task, so the rats made sure to veer off the main highway whenever a symbol of a water drop was marked along the route. Either a natural source was always near them, or a pump had been erected out of scrap metal to utilize aquifers beneath the soil. He still couldn’t guess who engineered them.

While the scavs siphoned water to the tender, Algernon used the opportunity to break from his toil. Whenever Frieda came out to stretch her legs she would give him the stink eye, but he took her lack of vocal dissent as a license to rest.

On one stop, Peach and Harper went off into the surrounding precursor suburbs. When they returned they carried several roach carcasses with them. Sascha took them and squeezed the meat out of the shells and rolled it into sticks. After grabbing preservatives from their stores and rubbing it on them, the rat hung them up over the prepping station. Seeing how their food was made didn’t help with his appetite.

Once they got moving again, Algernon returned to his task. It took a few days for features of the engine to appear from beneath the ash. Thin vents in the ceiling emerged, which he found out Frieda used to shout orders down to the room with. He got an earful from her when he accidentally pushed some of the gunk up into the wheelhouse. Next, a small reflection appeared to the side of the firebox which denoted the sight glass. The pressure gauge was uncovered shortly afterwards. With it not being visible, it was a miracle that the boiler hadn’t burst. Either Siegbert was a savant or a mad man.

Eventually enough was cleared away for Algernon to notice a notch in the floor. Upon closer inspection it seemed to be a slot where a lever was meant to be. After the Dragon reached another spot he was able to inspect the undercarriage again, and deduced that it controlled the grate of the firebed. It certainly explained why the engine room had become the vehicle’s ashpan. Once the vehicle came to a cold stop he’d need to rectify that.

During his trips between the engine room and the roof Algernon glimpsed how some of the others spent their time. Teddy sat up top chucking rocks at the road signs they passed. For some insane reason Harper found hanging from the side of the vehicle exhilarating. He didn’t notice the rope lashed to one of the moorings until a slew of curses flew at him when he dumped one of his loads. Afterwards he dumped on the other side and watched his back for any reprisals from her.

Peach, meanwhile, spent most of the day in her quarters, only emerging when she was needed. The scraping sound of metal against stone sounded from the room throughout the afternoon. When turning in for the evening Algernon occasionally saw the tail-end of her weapon maintenance. It looked like she was in some sort of trance, the needless upkeep transporting her to some other place; From her blank eyes he couldn’t tell if it was somewhere pleasant or not. As she heard him enter she would quickly stop and put her whetstone away.

The weapons’ presence only fueled his anxiety when trying to sleep in Peach’s quarters. Although no more raids came, nightmares continued to invade his dreams, making rest elusive. As each day passed the fog in his mind only grew thicker.

So when the beams of light appeared on the horizon, at first he thought his eyes were deceiving him. Above the roofs and trees, they danced in the dusk-colored sky. Algernon rubbed his eyes with his paws, but the lights were still there.

“We’re almost at Seb’s!” Teddy exclaimed, peering up at them as well. “You’ll need to see it to believe it!” Already worn out from a day of ash removal, he took a seat beside the raccoon. The scav bounced excitedly as he continued to hurl stones at the passing signs.

It didn’t take long for the source of the phenomenon to make itself known. Within the hour, surrounding trees and buildings parted to reveal a fortress lit up like a star in the twilight. Strings of lights hung from a walled entrance pieced together from metal plates and stacked vehicles. Their glow was the white of electric lights, a luxury even the Clergy rarely employed. Yet here in the center of scav territory there were spotlights advertising to all the existence of this improbable castle. A sign towered over it all, spelling out “Seb’s” in electric bulbs and pointing with illuminated arrows down to the front gate.

Rigs of all shapes and sizes passed between the twin turrets watching over the traffic. As vehicles passed around them he was surprised to see that they weren’t the smallest one. Buggies that acted little more than personal movers zipped between the behemoths. Others were almost as large as The Providence, able to swallow their own vessel whole.

Algernon could only stare in awe as the crew worked around him. Senta took down the orange pennant they were flying and replaced it with a green one. As their vehicle approached the entrance it got in line behind the other incoming steamers. Up ahead he heard an amplified voice speak to the ones at the front.

The line of rigs inched forward until The Dragon was halted at the entrance. From the gate towers more spotlights blasted them with light. While they were blinded, a voice boomed out from a speaker. “State your business!”

Frieda climbed up onto the roof. She stepped to the front of the vehicle and stood proudly before the spotlights. “This is Captain Frieda of The Belching Dragon! We have payment for Seb!”

A sigh carried through the speaker. “Very well, move along.”

The Dragon pulled forward into the settlement. Inside, more wondrous sights awaited Algernon. Parking lots were normally filled with decrepit precursor automobiles, but the one laid out before them was filled with fully functionally steamers. Various chassis lined the inner walls in different states of assembly. When he saw hybrids working in and around them, he realized that the steamers were actively being *built* by this conclave of scavs.

“You know how to construct rigs?!” he yelled in shock, pointing at the laborers.

The rat’s snout twitched. “Seb’s lackeys do.”

Algernon stared as a steam boiler was lowered into one of the frames by a complex system of pulleys. He was certain that the knowledge of how to do so was beyond the savage minds of the scavs. Was that something else they had stolen from the Clergy? Regardless, with how many rigs were present in this fortress it only made sense that they were scav handiwork. It certainly explained the haphazard state of The Dragon.

They continued pulling toward the front. Past the open-air garage, great cages were erected containing scores of roaches. Compared to the pens on The Providence, these were entire ranches of the critters. Algernon didn’t envy the ones who needed to take care of an army of them.

When they arrived in front of the main building, he understood why so many roaches were needed. It was a precursor building that was in surprisingly good condition, made even more impressive by the electric lights that set the exterior ablaze. Mostly intact windows covered the entire front of it. Inside he glimpsed more hybrids than he had ever seen in one place, eating and being merry.

“Alright, this is your stop. Teddy, take our recruit inside with you,” Frieda said.

Algernon’s ears folded back. Inside? With all of those hybrids? “I-I think I’d rather stay aboard.”

“That is an *order!*” she snarled. “I have important business to attend to with The Dragon.”

Teddy was still bouncing with excitement as he grabbed Algernon by the arm. “Come on Al, Seb’s is amazing!”

He was dragged down the hatch and to the exit. Harper was already leaning against the door, waiting for them. The wicked gleam in her eyes as she smiled at him did not make him feel warm and fuzzy inside.

“This is going to be so much fun!” she said gleefully. Harper swung the door open and led them out to the curb. Algernon expected more members of the crew to emerge, but the skunk quickly slammed the door shut.

“What about the others?” he asked.

She hooked an arm around his shoulder. “And let them be a buzzkill? No, the three of us will get along just fine!”

A whine lodged in his throat as Algernon was pulled along to the entrance of the parlor. Being alone with the two most unhinged members of the gang could only end poorly.

At the pair of gargantuan doors a porcupine stood sentinel, dutifully pushing one open to let the trio inside. Immediately a wave of noise washed over them. Algernon clamped his paws over his ears. “I-I don’t know about this...”

Harper pointedly ignored him as she continued guiding him inside. If the cacophony wasn’t enough to overwhelm him, the amount of chaos happening in the outpost was. The sea of animals had a similar energy to the Clergy’s celebration upon recovering the master key, but without any of the restraint.

Chief among the festivities was food and drink. Tables of every size spread across the worn checkerboard tiles. On the smaller end were groups of rats and stoats tearing into piles of bugs by candlelight. Up from there were other mustelids around Algernon’s size that slew libations at each other across the aisles. There were even larger fauna there, including a coyote who leaned against a particularly tall table and surveyed the crowd. When their eyes settled on Algernon, the canine smirked at him and licked their lips, much to the possum’s dismay.

There were even stranger seating arrangements scattered about. In one section a mesh grate was suspended beneath a precursor-sized table, where bat hybrids hung upside-down. Even while inverted they were able to slurp up fruits and juices without issue. The other mammals made a deliberate effort to avoid going underneath those areas.

Wildest of all, and what generated the most commotion, was a raised platform on which a duo of hares were duking it out. They were swatting at each other with strikes almost too fast to see. All the while dozens of hybrids surrounded the ring and cheered the fighters on. Some in the crowd were doing their own impromptu feats of strength, arm-wrestling or shoving against each other.

“Look! More Als!” Teddy shouted over the noise, indicating the far corner of the parlor. Another porcupine was standing watch over a cordoned-off area where a group of timid animals huddled together. There were a couple of possums as well as some moles and mice, all looking around at the proceedings with terrified eyes much like Algernon was. A few still had the remnants of Clergy uniforms clinging to them.

“Psh, we’re not leaving our possum in the playpen,” Harper remarked. “He needs to get the full experience!”

The skunk pulled him along to a counter sized for the precursors, which had steps built up to it so hybrids could be served. At the top the bar was lined with burning candle stubs and a hybrids drinking. A stout bobcat was manning the taps and sliding cups of various sizes down the counter.

Harper sat Algernon down at one of the shot glasses used for stools, while her and Teddy took seats on either side of him. “Two Belching Dragons and one water!” she called out to the bartender.

The bobcat turned to the skunk and narrowed his eyes. “Ain’t ya part of Frieda’s crew?” he asked.

“Sure am! Put the cost on her tab,” she said.

“Frieda’s tab s’already stacked with unpaid favors.”

“And we just came in with a shiny thingamajig to cover those.”

The bobcat eyed her warily, but went to work mixing their drinks. He tapped liquor into two cap lids and used a spigot behind the bar to fill a third with water. Lastly he pulled a small hose out from the wall and turned a valve on it, layering the liquid that came out on top of the first two. He shoved the drinks towards the group. “Enjoy,” he said with little mirth.

Algernon reached for the water, but Harper batted his paw away. “Ah ah, that’s not for you,” she scolded. She pushed the cup of water over to Teddy, and set one of the other ones in front of the possum. A rainbow film like an oil slick shimmered in the flickering candlelight, beneath which was a cloudy brown liquid.

“What... What’s this?” His voice was tinged with equal parts fear and bewilderment.

“It’s a Belching Dragon,” Harper said, flashing a teasing grin.

“I m-mean... What’s in it?”

“Booze and...” she looked down into the drink. “Booze.”

He stared deep into the grim concoction. “I, uh, appreciate the offer, b-but I’m not thirsty.”

She kept smiling at him. “This was bought with the boss’s money, drink it.” She inched the cup closer to him, but Algernon leaned away. “Drink it.” The smile was no longer in her voice.

With a whimper he picked up the amalgamation. He didn’t want to dwell on what he was about to do, so he closed his eyes and brought it to his lips. A hand came from underneath the cup and tilted it even further, dumping significantly more into his maw than he was expecting. Instinctively he blocked the deluge from entering his throat with his tongue.

The substance that filled his cheeks was *vile*. It had a bitter spice that no natural thing had, and the oil seemed to suck the moisture from his tongue. The fumes were causing the back of his throat to tickle.

Harper appeared very amused by the torment he was going through. “Don’t you dare spit it out, Frieda will be very unhappy if you waste our hard-earned cash,” she said. Small sounds that were a cross between hiccuping and gagging emerged from the possum. She poked at his bulging cheek with a digit. “Go on, swallow.”

As his eyes began to water, he finally choked it down with an audible gulp. Immediately he started coughing and spluttering.

She patted him on the shoulder. “There we go, first sip done,” she snickered. Taking her own cup, Harper downed half of it in one go. Despite her experience with the drink, she couldn’t help but shiver a little. “Keep going, the neat part comes after you have the whole thing!”

With his mouth already coated in suffering, he quaffed down more of the liquid while Harper and Teddy drank from their respective cups. At several points he wanted to stop, but the continued intense stares from the skunk kept him going. With the bottom of the cup in sight, his stomach was writhing and his head was foggy. He didn’t realize when the second round had appeared in front of him.

“I propose a toast,” Teddy said, raising his cup of water. “To Lewis.”

“To Lewis,” Harper echoed, raising her own drink.

Algernon was trying to process, but his mind was starting to feel like soup. “Who’s Lewis?”

“A fellow raccoon who served with us,” Teddy said, with admiration in his voice. “He gave his life for the good of the crew.”

He blinked. “What happened?”

“When we were planning out the robbery of the steamer you lived on, Lewis helped look for a way inside. He tried sneaking through the back entrance, but sadly the ones inside found out and opened the door all the way.”

Algernon thought about The Providence’s entrance, which the surveyors entered and exited through. It functioned like a drawbridge, which meant if someone was just outside it when it came down - “Oh...”

“It was an honorable sacrifice.” Teddy still wore his blank smile, looking none too grieved.

He glanced back at the fight between the two hares, which was still raging. Blood was beginning to spatter the platform they battled on. He couldn’t help but think about the field of bodies after the night ambush on The Dragon. The priest back on the Clergy vessel taught how scavs only bred violence and death, and while he certainly believed that even before his kidnapping, it wasn’t something you thought about when you were in safety. “Is that... common?”

“It is part of being a scavenger. Crews turnover all the time, and Lewis wasn’t the first member who kicked the bucket. His death was an unfortunate event.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “Now, the hamster who was our original engineer? *That* was hilarious. Grisly, but hilarious.”

He nodded along as though the conversation wasn’t as unpleasant as it was. Tapping his claws on the counter, Algernon peered into the depths of the second Belching Dragon.

“You wouldn’t leave Lewis dishonored, would you?” Harper asked him, a cruel twist in her lips.

The possum dreaded the foul substance, but dreaded even more what Harper would do to him if he went against her wishes. He downed more of the unholy cocktail. Somehow the taste didn’t bother him as much the second time. A part of him worried that was because the concoction was stripping the taste buds from his tongue. The other part wanted to get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible, so he continued lapping up the drink.

The first sign that he was not okay was that he was starting to enjoy what he was chugging down. In that moment Algernon wasn’t of a mind to consider that, but he still had enough faculty to know that when his paws seemed to double in front of him that something was up. He examined his fingers in wonder as his vision multiplied them.

“Whatsh happening?” For some reason the voice that came out of his mouth wasn’t his. Well, it was his voice, just... stupider. He chuckled at the absurdity of it.

Harper was having a hard time keeping it together. “You okay there, buddy?” She got out between bouts of laughter. The words sounded like they were spoken through a funnel.

It took him immense effort to self-evaluate. “I... I Acshually feel great!” He’d never felt so unrestrained before. If this was what liberation felt like, then he wanted more of it.

Algernon reached out to his drink, but instead of grabbing it he became fascinated with the ripples appearing on its surface. He was then intensely aware of the floor vibrating beneath his seat. A shadow appeared over him, and he turned to find the double-image of the scarred badger standing behind them.

“Peash! The ground ish shaking!” he warned her.

Taken aback, the badger glared at Harper. “What did you do to him?”

The skunk shrugged, but couldn’t erase the smug grin off her face. “He was thirsty, so I got him something to drink.”

Peach breathed out through her nose. “Frieda is requesting you,” she told Algernon. “Come with me.”

“Oh, wonderful!” He didn’t know what the boss had in mind, but it could only be something good. Standing up from his stool he found that the ground was still tilting fiercely under his feet. He face-planted directly into the wall of flesh that was Peach, eventually propping his arms up against her to steady himself. “Shorry, the room is shpinning. You might need to carry me.”

She looked down at him. “No.”

Peach began walking off, forcing Algernon to wobble after her. In his inebriated state, the stairs down from the bar was the most daunting challenge he’d ever faced. Each step kept shifting away from his feet, so he elected to crawl down on all fours, much to the consternation of Peach and the hilarity of the other scavs. The badger led him across the floor towards the back of the establishment. Down the colossal hallways of the building the commotion of the crowds died down until it was just background noise.

Around the corner stood a door with a hole cut into it from which a mud flap hung, separating the space beyond. On either side of it were two boar hybrids, standing even taller than Peach was and looking just as rough around the edges. Besides the stripes of pink flesh where old wounds had healed, one of them had a metal spike protruding from its snout where its tusk used to be. Most notable were the identical marks on their shoulders in the shape of a “W”, just like Peach had.

The boars’ beady eyes set on Peach and Algernon as they approached. Their gazes especially bored into the badger with an intense hatred Algernon would have found strange if he were sober.

Peach was unfazed by the other’s hostility, ushering her charge towards the opening. “Through there.” She pushed him through the flap while she remained outside.

Unceremoniously he flopped into the room. Chuckling from nearby caught Algernon’s attention and he regarded the space as best as he could with his vision swimming. Unlike the rest of the parlor, everything here was hybrid-sized. Cabinets lined the walls on either side with various sheafs of paper poking out of their drawers. The stationary migrated over to the center of the room, where they covered the grand desk that was settled there. They were filled with numbers and tallies without end.

A plump rat sat behind the desk, peering down his muzzle at the possum with amusement. Frieda stood before the other rat, looking ashen. Languidly Algernon rose to his feet and gave her a salute. “Reporting for duty, capshian!”

Frieda put a paw to her forehead. The other rat couldn’t help but laugh some more at the performance before him. “I like this one!” they said in a booming voice. “Where did you find him? The circus?”

“No Seb, this one came from the same armored barge as the trinket,” she said, sounding like it was taking all her willpower not to boil over.

“Oh, so you did acquire something else on your latest expedition!” Seb scrutinized the possum, who was swaying on his feet. “I have to say, I wouldn’t buy him for much. We already have a few Clergymen pets. They’re not well-adjusted to scav living.”

“He’s not - just show him the doohickey,” Frieda said, waving her hand at him.

“Very well.” Seb lifted the metal rod from beneath the desk for Algernon to look at. “Would you kindly tell me what this is?”

Seeing the artifact, the possum’s eyes lit up. “It’sh the mashter key!” he said in delight.

The rat turned the key over in his hands. “I suppose it does have some teeth,” Seb muttered, fiddling with the nubs on the end of it. “Tell me, does this tin rod open anything valuable? A treasure cache, perhaps?”

“It’sh the key to the worldsh future! It will shave ush from the infeshtashon of the shcavs!“

“Will it now!” Seb propped his head with his hand as he regarded Algernon. “How magnanimous of you, to stop all of these hoodlums from taking advantage of people! Sadly, since I profess to be one and run quite a profitable business, I don’t think this metal tube is of value to me.” The rat’s demeanor shifted as he turned to Frieda. “It would appear you don’t have anything to offer me. Now, if you can’t repay your debt, you know what will -”

“The mashter key is real valuable!” Algernon interrupted. “The Clergy wouldn’t have wanted it otherwise!”

Seb turned back to the possum with irritation, before a sly expression formed on his face. “I imagine they would want it back, wouldn’t they? Enough to pay handsomely for it?”

Algernon’s face drew blank as he used his remaining brain function to think through the rat’s question. “Yesh! We’ve been shearching for sho long, we’d do anything to get it back!” he eventually responded with glee.

“And since you belong to these zealots, surely you know where to find them so you can, well, ransom this hunk of metal back to your kind?”

Frieda frowned at the other rat. “Seb, I don’t think -”

“Shh!” He held up a finger to his mouth. “I suggest you remain silent while your life hangs in the balance.”

“I’m... Not shure where The Providence ish...” Algernon lamented, oblivious to the situation. “But! I know where the Clershy headquartersh are!”

“Do tell!” Seb said, indulging the drunken ramblings.

“It’sh at the end of Route... Route... The end of The Devilsh Road!”

“There isn’t anything up that way, unless you mean -” Seb broke out in roaring laughter. “Really? All the way to the Pacific? Oh that’s too rich!” He continued to laugh until he burst into a coughing fit.

Clearing his throat, Seb once again turned his attention to Frieda. “Well, it seems you have quite the trek ahead of you! Since I am so merciful, I’ll give you some time to... spearhead this expedition your friend has kindly offered,” he said, voice dripping with fake saccharine. “Let’s make it sporting; How about... Two weeks! Your rust bucket should make it a fair distance in that time. Who knows, you may even make it to Depot before my boys overtake you!”

Grim resignation lined Frieda’s face. “Thank you for your kindness,” she forced out through clenched teeth.

“Of course! Now, I do believe you should -”

A scream burst from outside. One of the boars stumbled into the room, tearing the mud flap separating it down in the process. “That bitch of a badger broke my wrist!” he bellowed, clutching his limp hand in the other.

Outside, the other boar had his back to the wall, eyes wide in alarm. Peach stood with her arms crossed, a subtle smirk on her lips.

Seb’s features contorted into fury. “Frieda, take your crew’s hides and get the hell out of my establishment! You have one week now, pray I don’t make it less!” he screamed.

The rat leader grabbed Algernon by the arm and hastily pulled him from the office. “Oh, bye Mr. Sheb!” the possum waved to the fuming rat.

Frieda stomped away from the guards down the hallway, with Peach shadowing them. “What the flaming hell was that about!” she berated the badger once they were out of earshot. “You’ve signed our death certificate for us!”

“They were getting handsy,” Peach said with a grunt.

The rat eyed her incredulously. “Making moves? On *you*?”

The badger flattened her ears. “No, not - Handsy in a violent sort of way.”

“Whatever. We need to get everyone else and move out of here ASAP.”

Algernon found himself guided along back through the twisting corridors of the parlor until they made it to the crowds again. Before, the noise was overwhelming, but now it seemed to invade his skull and put an intense pressure behind his eyes. The high from earlier was gone and he was now fully aware of just how much his guts were twisting within.

The stairs back up to the counter were even more impossible to traverse the second time. Cursing, Frieda had Peach drag him up. He remained face-down and groaning the whole way up, his ankles smacking against every step.

Finally they got to where Teddy and Harper were sitting. “Hello!” the raccoon greeted as they approached.

Harper sluggishly turned, her neck lolling around and a woozy smile plastered on her face. “Friedaaa! You’ve been misshing out!” she slurred. A hiccup escaped her mouth, eliciting a giggle.

“Creators above, she’s also hammered,” Frieda commented, the last of her patience fading. “Harper, we’ve leaving! Get your sorry ass moving or we’ll drag you out by the tail!”

“Come oooonnn, jusht wait until -” Suddenly she jolted. “Uh oooh! Here it comessh!”

Despite her anger, Frieda knew what was coming, so she quickly ducked back out of the way. As a rumble travelled up her form, Harper turned to one of the candles and let out an almighty burp. Immediately a fireball erupted from the candle, blasting back into her face and knocking her flat on her back.

The whole crowd quieted as the explosion went off, their attention drawn to the skunk who had spawned it. Harper lay on the ground, still and scorched from the blast. After several seconds she hacked out a cough. With breath returned to her lungs, she began giggling maniacally where she lay. All of the hybrids cheered and hollered at the display.

Even as he was in anguish, Algernon couldn’t help but wonder how she could find such a thing entertaining. His belly growled. With dread he felt movement in his guts, the realization that what happened to Harper was about to happen to him. When it reached his throat he clamped his hands over his muzzle, but it was too late. He couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Instead of a belch, the contents of his stomach splattered everywhere, and he passed out.