

Diary of Dr. Emma Nate, 2041

3 March

Arrived at the dig site and got the formal tour of the place. For a dig site on such a remote island, the place is well-equipped with its own chemistry lab, X-ray machine (who *knows* where they got the electricity to run it), and an accelerator mass spectrometer for carbon-dating. My *gosh*, being able to do that here without having to ship the samples to the continent is a game-changer! We can practically carbon-date in real-time!

But...

What the site makes up for in equipment, it lacks in luxury. I expected the communal bunk beds and mess hall—that's fairly par for the course; even Rex sleeps and eats with the rest of the team—but I did *not* expect the restroom and shower facilities to be communal. Of course, I am the only female, as usual. Rex asked me about it, and I told him it wasn't my first rodeo: as long as the boys behave themselves, no need to evacuate just so I can wash the dirt off. We'll see how they do. Who knows, maybe they won't be the only ones gawking.

Saw the dig itself, too. Rex—that's Dr. Winston—seems to run a pretty tight ship. His team has already unearthed parts of three levels. The architecture and the writing on the artifacts found to date are completely different on each layer.

HYPOTHESIS: THE LAYERS WERE CONSTRUCTED BY DIFFERENT CIVILIZATIONS THAT MIGHT NOT HAVE KNOWN OF THE PRIOR CIVILIZATIONS' EXISTENCE. WILL INVESTIGATE FURTHER.

It's too late to do much else; the sun has already set, so I'll actually meet everybody and maybe get started tomorrow, bright and early.

4 March

Met the others. Rex is exactly as I remember him, a stereotypical German shepherd: thoughtful, inquisitive, disciplined, but both his bark and his bite pack a punch. The gray on his muzzle suits him well, but his age has—thankfully—done nothing to reduce his muscle tone. Even after all these years, he's still built like a bouncer!

Also met his protégé, Rosco Owens. He is nothing Rex is and everything he is not: big alpha Doberman energy, condescending despite only having his Masters'. I swear, if he calls me "sweet little doe" one more time, I'm gonna tell him, "Bitch, I got my PhD while you were still working on your undergrad; back the hell off!"

No, Emma, remember to be professional.

*Ugh.*

Anyway, Rosco is lean and wiry, and apparently I'm the only one here shorter than he is. No wonder he's got a chip on his shoulder. Hopefully he'll remember to stay professional and I won't have to deck him.

And then there's Maurice. He's... strange. Not *unkind*, but awkward. He's about Rex's height at just over 6', but he's the only scalie here. I tried to strike up a conversation with him about it. He came off friendly and happy, but when I asked him about his heritage, he turned taciturn, and I thought I'd offended him. A while later, he came over and blurted out that he was a crocodile from the continent; apparently he was recruited to assist with the manual labor. Goodness knows there's plenty of that to be done. Apparently it was his labor that built most of the encampment. I can't say I've had any run-ins with a croc before, but based on what I've read, I'd say he's about average build—that is, not quite as broad-chested as Rex but equally if not more defined in the biceps, forearms, and legs. And based on seeing him work, I'd bet that despite not being as burly, he's probably even stronger than Rex is.

Rex won't let him do any digging at the site, but he does odd jobs like grabbing stuff people need or hauling heavy equipment or artifacts. It's nice to have someone like him at this site. The last place involved a lot of dropping what I was doing to grab another notepad, but he's pretty attentive. It's almost as if he anticipates what people need before they ask for it. I feel kinda bad for him, though: although his mouth is all smiles, there's a kind of dullness in his eyes that makes me think he doesn't really like what he does.

## Don't Open the Box

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HYPOTHESIS: I THINK HE'S DESPERATE FOR PEOPLE TO LIKE HIM—AN UPHILL BATTLE AMONG THE STAFF, *ESPECIALLY* ROSCO, WHO SEEMS TO HAVE IT IN FOR HIM—BUT HE SECRETLY HATES BEING HERE. WILL PROBE DEEPER AS OPPORTUNITY ARISES.

Got my first chance at the dig and immediately collected samples from each level and carbon-dated them. More than ever, I'm convinced that having the AMS onsite is the best idea Rex has ever had—and he's had a lot of brilliant ones. Got the results back in the same day. Sure enough, the bottom civilization predates the middle one by roughly 8000 years, plus or minus a century or so. The middle civilization predates the top one by about a thousand years, give or take a century. The top one, we think, is about 500 years old, which seems to be backed up by the artifacts we've found. Not exactly *modern*, per se, but the presence of typed manuscripts alongside handwritten ones and detailed drawings that, although rudimentary, are not far off from my team's own notes, makes Rex and the others think we might well be looking at an early archaeological dig site investigating the previous civilization. If that's the case, this place might well redefine everything we thought about archaeology as a field itself; archaeology wasn't even supposed to *exist* this long ago! The concept of archaeologists excavating an abandoned archaeological dig is very "meta," as some of my students would say, to say the least. Anyway, my hypothesis is thus far upheld, though I haven't challenged it much, yet.

5 March

Rosco really does have it in for Maurice, it seems. While at breakfast, he started harassing him about not having hair. Maurice took it with a smile, but the pain in his eyes was unmistakable. I thought I ought to say something, but then Rex came in and put an end to it. At least Rex isn't in on this blatant speciesism...

Given what we learned yesterday from the carbon-dating, the middle civilization is definitely where Rex can use my help. I did my thesis on the period from 300–800 AD and have spent most of my career researching that period, so I immediately busied myself on the second level of the dig site. There's clear evidence of exposure to the Sasanians and Byzantines, though coins from one could have been brought along by traders from the other. Apparently this little island was not always as remote as it is now!

Had an interesting encounter this evening after the dig. All of us were showering together—to their credit, the boys *were* gentlemen (at least to me; Rosco took the opportunity to pop Maurice with a towel, and I couldn't help but wonder if we were back in grade school)—when I happened to catch sight of Maurice's penis. Here I have to admit to a little morbid curiosity: up until then, I'd seen him naked only once before, and he appeared to be completely devoid of any genitalia whatsoever. But, as badly as I'd come off in asking him about his heritage, I figured he would be even *more* uncomfortable if I asked him where his, ah, reproductive bits were. But, at this particular instant, he and I were both turned away from the others (apparently he's as self-conscious as I am), and I happened to glance over as he rubbed his hand along his front. Before my eyes, the scales parted—there had been *no* indication of bifurcation before—and he reached inside himself and pulled out what I swear is the biggest penis I have ever seen. It must have been at least a foot long, slightly S-shaped, traced with *countless* veins—I have never seen so much vasculature in one place before—and as big around at the base as my wrist, tapering down to a little larger than my thumb at the tip. Curiously, he had appendage hanging off the ventral side of his penis, almost like the curled frond on a fern.

HYPOTHESIS: I BET THAT FROND-LIKE APPENDAGE WOULD FEEL *AMAZING* SHOULD I EVER HAVE THE PLEASURE TO EXPERIENCE IT.

I must have been staring because the second we made eye contact, he turned hurriedly away, obscuring his penis as he—presumably—washed it.

I will never forget that unusual-looking penis. I should not have stared, but in my defense, I have never seen anything quite like it before. Still, I should apologize to him. I will do that in the morning.

6 March

Apologized to Maurice today. He was even more awkward about it than he usually is. I'm not sure if it's a language or cultural barrier, but even as he was accepting my apology and quietly chiding me for having stared, he seemed to be coming on to me at the same time. The situation was beyond awkward to the point of unnerving. I sincerely believe he means well, but it is so very difficult to understand him.

I stumbled on an interesting manuscript today, buried in what was probably a wooden chest before it rotted away. That the manuscript is still intact is a marvel that has Rosco quite beside himself. At least it's kept him distracted enough not to meddle with Maurice. While he investigates the manuscript's ability to survive where its more durable container did not, I have started translating it, and while it is very difficult to read—the letters have been rubbed nearly completely away, the penmanship was not great to start with, the language is obscure, and the writing seems to be full of abbreviations and colloquialisms that do not translate well—I have an increasing suspicion that *this* civilization was actually studying the bottom civilization! Can it be that we have a three-decker of archaeologists? What could that mean if archaeology has really been around over a thousand years longer than we originally thought? The implications are enormous!

But, I have spent all night thinking about it, and now it's time to get some shut-eye. I believe I'll think about Maurice's—ahem—*exotic* equipment as I quietly stimulate myself. Goodness knows I won't be the only one stimulating myself. Rosco is particularly unabashed, but even Rex seems to let off some steam from time to time. Maurice... well, who can say what that strange reptile does? Hm. Perhaps I'll fantasize about that, too.

7 March

Rosco was *out* of line today! I should have said something to him sooner, but now it's too late. Poor Maurice! I wish I had paid more attention to him; I might have been able to intervene before things got so bad. He had been saying something about his necklace during breakfast, but his statements were so half-formed, his emotions vacillating so much between his happy façade and what in retrospect seems like true distress that I mostly blocked him out. If only I'd been paying more attention!

Or, perhaps if I'd paid attention to Rosco's *particularly* obnoxious peacocking today, I might have picked up on it. I was so engrossed in the translation—that manuscript is proving both more challenging and more rewarding than I had originally thought—that I just ignored him. Apparently I missed a lot! I learned at dinner today that while Maurice was sleeping, Rosco had taken his necklace—the one with the fossilized shells—and hidden it. Maurice awoke, found it missing, and was evidently quite distressed, which explains why he was talking so much about it at breakfast. Then, around lunchtime, he saw Rosco with it and confronted him. Rosco apparently dangled it over the pit and threatened to drop it unless Maurice made some concession—I don't know what it was, but knowing Rosco, it was almost certainly something nasty. The worst part of it is, apparently Maurice capitulated and gave Rosco what he wanted, but the damned dog dropped the necklace anyway!

Maurice let out a heart-wrenching sound, one I'm pretty sure no mammal could make but *every* sapient thing could understand. I wasn't even there, but I heard it through the wall, and even I felt pity for him, though I didn't know what had happened at the time.

Rosco swears up and down he dropped it on accident, but the way he and several of the others—I've started calling them his minions—exchange looks when he talks about it makes me suspicious. Poor Maurice has said *multiple* times that the bottom layer of the dig gives him the creeps, yet apparently he dashed down there faster than anybody has ever seen him move before. Unfortunately, nobody has seen him since; he wasn't at dinner. I asked Rex if we should be worried, but Rex said that Maurice sometimes wants to be alone when something bad has happened to him, that it's just his reptilian mind trying to process.

HYPOTHESIS: I KNOW REX MEANS WELL, BUT IS HE QUIETLY SPECIESIST, TOO?

I hope not; I had expected better from him. In any case, I hope Maurice finds his necklace. It obviously meant a lot to him, and what Rosco did was just cruel.

8 March

I gave Rosco a real talking-to today. He played it off to his minions like it was no big deal, but I *saw* the way that stump tail of his tucked. I might be small, but don't underestimate me!

As a side-benefit, I doubt he'll ever call me "sweet little doe" again. Heh, heh.

Ass.

In happier news, I saw Maurice with his necklace back on today and told him I was happy to see that he'd found it. *Determined* to actually strike up a meaningful conversation with him this time, I asked him why it was so important to him. It seems I finally found something he likes to talk about. He launched into a convoluted story that took him an hour to tell but that essentially boiled down to: his parents gave it to him when he came to work at the dig as a way to show support and give him something to remember them by. It's the only possession he owns—even the clothes on his back were issued by the dig—and it's very important to him.

Seeing that we'd struck up some rapport, I asked him whether he was happy here or not. His grin faltered, and I was sorry I asked; with that tiny lapse in his mask, he looked so forlorn that I instinctively reached out and hugged him. He admitted that no, he doesn't like it here. He says that I am nice to him and Rex treats him reasonably well, but everybody else is mean and degrading to him, and he doesn't understand because he goes out of his way to be nice and helpful. I assured him that he is indeed very helpful, far more helpful than any assistant I've ever had, and that the problems with Rosco and his ilk are *their* fault, not his. He also expressed disappointment with Rex, which surprised me. When I inquired why, he said that Rex had promised to teach him some archaeological science—almost a mentorship of sorts—but that after Rosco had built the whole compound almost completely by himself, Rex had reneged and muttered something about the "insufficiency of reptile brains".

It seems my worst fears about Rex were true: though he isn't overtly speciesist the way Rosco is, he's just as guilty!

I told Maurice that even if the others were acting that way, *I* would train him. His face lit up a bit at that, so I asked him where he found the necklace. His face fell again, and I could sense some distinct uneasiness, but in halting words, he told me that he'd found it at the very bottom of the dig, down in a bit of a crevasse in the floor. I asked him why he seemed so uneasy, and he admitted that there was a stone box down there with strange markings on it. He'd leaned on the box to steady himself while he reached down in the crack, and his hand had gone through the lid of the box. He said he was sorry, that he hadn't meant to break it, and that he was afraid to tell me because I was nice to him and he didn't want me to be mad at him, too.

I'll admit, I *was* rather upset that the box was damaged—especially if it were so damaged that whatever cultural significance it had could not be retrieved—but I held my tongue. I'm glad I did because when he saw that I wasn't yelling at him, he let me in on some information that *would* have otherwise been lost: he said the box let out a foul-smelling odor when the lid collapsed, so foul, he said, that he snatched up his necklace and got out of there as quickly as he could.

This piqued my interest, and I asked him if he would go down and get the box for me, bringing back every piece he could find so that I could inspect it. He agreed to do this, and I found myself having to brush up on some *very* ancient runes that I haven't seen but once in my life. It did not help that his hand had cracked the lid in several places, *nor* did it help that much of that particular runic script makes heavy use of very fine ornamentation that often looks like hairline cracks, but I was able to partially translate some of the text on the lid, which said something to the effect that abandoning one's primal roots stunted one's growth both figuratively and literally and that only by freeing one's true self and purging civilization could one truly be free again.

Admittedly, it's a pretty rough translation, but in my defense, it's been at least a decade since I last saw that dusty old tome, and even then, I hadn't studied it with much diligence; it was more of a curiosity at the time. Still, I wonder what was in it that smelled so bad or how the box had sealed so well as to keep the stench in over all these millennia. I teasingly asked Maurice if he felt any different—like he'd freed his primal roots—and he cheerfully replied that as long as he was smiling, that couldn't be further from the truth.

I think he meant it as a joke, but *gosh*, that was sad.

9 March

Nothing particularly eventful happened today, though I did find an interesting lead in the manuscript. It seems to be focused on the box Maurice broke. Much to my delight, it has several drawings of each face of the box with exquisite detail. Though the manuscript is faded, comparing it to the box itself and the translation attempted by whoever wrote the manuscript, I'm more confident that I translated the top face correctly. The other faces still remain to be deciphered, but at least I've gotten a little validation.

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Maurice was in high spirits today, and when I talked to him, he seemed a little more "normal". I hate to use that word—as if any of us are normal—but his speech was more direct and his thoughts more focused than usual. It was actually nice speaking with him.

10 March

Emma, you hussy! It's been only a week since I got here, but there's something *very* different about Maurice that I cannot quite place, something I *really* like, and it's not *just* his... well, never mind. More on that later. The thing is, we had such a normal conversation today that I almost thought I was talking to Rex. I don't know why I didn't notice before, but Maurice was articulate and surprisingly forceful in his arguments as we discussed the rise and fall of the Roman empire. He can't be faulted for not having the same depth of knowledge on the subject as I have—having spent the last 30 years studying it, I'd hope to have *some* kind of leg up on the general public—but based on the information he *did* have, he was delightfully well-reasoned. Whatever Rex said about reptile brain insufficiency, he's dead-wrong.

And, whatever nonsense Rosco is espousing about reptiles lacking emotions, well, he's both wrong *and* an idiot!

If truth be told, I myself was caught off-guard by Maurice's newfound subtlety in steering the conversation. How exactly he did it, I'm not sure, but we ended up on the topic of his having caught me staring that one time in the shower. He actually apologized—to me! I asked him whatever for and said that I was the one who should be sorry for gawking, and he said that at the time, he assumed I was like the rest and just being mean to him, but after our talk the other day, he thinks that I was really just surprised and curious. I admitted I was, and he offered to let me see again, a little closer, if I wanted to. The sly dog!

But, I have to admit, curiosity got the better of me, and before I could say "no", I said "yes". One thing led to another, and we were both naked in a quiet corner of the compound where nobody goes. He showed me his cloaca and how he can flex his muscles to keep it tightly sealed, even invisible. But then he took my hand ever so gently and stroked it on himself. His scales were smooth but bumpy, yet even to my sensitive fingertips, there was no trace of an opening. Then, he told me to hold my hand there. I did so, and to my amazement, I felt something move beneath my fingers, felt them spreading apart. I looked over and was astonished to see that a dark slit had appeared. He took my hand again, ran it over the dark line, and one of my fingers slipped inside.

I tell you, it was the hottest place I have ever felt! You would never know it from the outside—his scales are slightly cool to the touch—but inside was as hot as an oven! He seemed to enjoy my touch, too, because I felt his hips move a little bit with my finger inside of him. I told him it was amazing that he could make the slit appear and disappear like that, and he said it was all just muscles.

But, of course, we both knew that there was something else lurking inside of there that had piqued my curiosity. He was gentle and surprisingly earnest when he asked me if I wanted to reach inside and pull his penis out. As if saying "no" was an option!

I have already described his penis, but I am compelled to say that when it comes to his malehood, *feeling* is believing. Seeing simply does not make it real enough. For one thing, it is always erect, and the sheer number of veins is far understated visually. Feeling each of them throbbing in your hand is—well, an aphrodisiac in itself. Then there's the girth: I'm not sure what I expected, but his penis is both pliable and very hard at the same time, like armored cable, yet silky smooth all over. And that protrusion! It turns out it actually moves, throbs, and partially unfurls during sex (ask me how I know!), and true to my hypothesis, it is an *exact* fit against my g-spot. It is a good thing I am lying down right now because just the thought of it makes my legs tremble.

But enough; I have objectified him enough. He told me that he enjoyed our little rendezvous, and so we might well do it again soon.

It cannot come soon enough!

11 March

Another mind-blowing rendezvous with Maurice today. It seems he's found his confidence: when he takes me, I feel like prey being devoured by a predator, but when he holds me, I feel safe from any predator that ever lived or ever could live. He's also picked up very quickly on the archaeology I've been teaching him.

He even discovered another page of the manuscript I've been translating. Hopefully tomorrow, I can show him how to start translating some of the easier stuff himself.

12 March

My get-together with Maurice was delayed today. I had thought I'd noticed something different about him, but Rosco—despite the moron that he is—actually articulated it best: Maurice is bigger. In every way, actually. He's taller by six inches, and his waist is proportionally larger, too. When I did finally get some alone time with him, I was able to confirm that *all* of him had grown. And *grown!* Oh, my! He *was* a little aggressive at our meeting today, though. I'm not sure if it's because he's getting over-confident or what, but I was actually a little put-off. He reminded me just a little of Rosco, which somewhat killed the mood for me. But, hopefully it was just a phase. If I have to, I'll lay down some boundaries to let him grow into his new skin while still respecting me.

13 March

Maurice is noticeably bigger than he was yesterday. He's over seven feet tall now and still growing proportionally. He and I mentioned his encounter with the strange box to the rest of the group. Rosco started to dismiss it, but then he got this ugly glint in his eye, and he insisted that we needed to do all kinds of tests on Maurice. I started to protest, but Maurice surprisingly beat me to it and told them to do their worst.

When we had sex this evening, I warned him about egging Rosco on, but he was rather dismissive. I asked him what had gotten into him and asked where the sweet guy I'd first met had gone. He said—and I'm quoting verbatim here because it was so out-of-character for him: "You translated the box, right?" I told him yes. "Then you know exactly where that loser went."

He grabbed me then, and although I didn't fight him, I wish I had. I've never felt so used and discarded before.

14 March

It's over. I told Maurice that until he can respect me like he used to, we're not having sex anymore. His reaction sounded *exactly* like something Rosco would have said, and it made me want to slap him. I restrained myself, but I reiterated that we were done and then went and talked to Rex about it. While I didn't explicitly say that Maurice and I had been sleeping together, Rex is perceptive and picked up on it anyway. He warned me that deep down, Maurice is a reptile, and no matter what, he has certain ways of thinking that just aren't compatible with civilized mammals. I'll admit that rubbed me the wrong way. I called him out on his casual speciesism and stormed out. Probably not the best move.

Meanwhile, Rosco was crowing about how Maurice ("the dummy", Rosco called him) let him carve a piece of his skin off "for science". He said that yesterday, it was like cutting butter, but today, it was more like cutting shoe leather. I'll admit to being a little snide when I told him to try cutting on himself and to leave Maurice alone. He blew me off, the same as he always does.

15 March

Something is definitely wrong with Maurice. He did not smile at all today, not once. *Everything* he said to anybody was curt and demanding, even to Rex. He even shoved his way in front of a bunch of people at mess, and when they protested, he turned and gave them a "come at me" look. I'm seriously worried about him, but with him being over 8 feet tall now, my diminutive 5' 4" is no match for him should he decide to get nasty. For the first time since I've been here, I am genuinely wary of him. It doesn't help that Rosco said the scalpel glanced off his scales this morning, and when he tried pressing hard, the scalpel broke. Apparently Maurice didn't bat an eye when it happened.

*As long as I'm smiling, that couldn't be further from the truth...*

I can't get over those words; I even went back and reread them in my diary to be sure. What the *hell* is happening to Maurice?

16 March

I'm... stunned.

Rosco is dead.

I was going to get a shower and literally tripped over his body. My gosh, the sight of so much blood. It got on my feet.

And his face... I—I've never in all my years seen a skull just *crushed* like that before. It's like something—or *someone*—grabbed him by the muzzle and squeezed until there was no space between top and bottom. His eyeballs were both pierced and oozing like eggs from their shells. Long gashes starting at the lower half of his orbital sockets extended through his zygoma. Additional, parallel gashes punctured his lacrimal bones and expanded, like a dull knife tearing through paper, towards the flattened remains of his muzzle.

Gosh, I *hate* to admit it... I don't want to fall into the same trap of prejudice as everybody else, but the gouges—I won't call them "bite marks"—sure seem consistent with Maurice's dental pattern. If Maurice finally snapped and bit Rosco on the muzzle, especially with how much bigger and stronger he's gotten...

Goodness knows, Maurice had plenty reason to hate him...

This is all so surreal, like an awful nightmare. I didn't like Rosco, but what a *horrible* way to go...

The police showed up and swarmed all over the dig site. All research stopped; we scientists were all too busy doing our best to tell the police what we could while keeping them from trampling all over the excavations. From what I overheard, I'm not the only one who thinks it was Maurice. Rosco's minions are all up in arms, calling for his head. To his credit, Rex has tried to stay neutral and objective, but the evidence is too damning.

The worst part, though, is that nobody can even *find* Maurice. I'm actually scared now, jumpy, afraid that he's going to suddenly show up behind me and take what he wants.

Damn it, Maurice, why can't you go back to being that nice guy you used to be?!

17 March

Rex and the police called for a manhunt to find Maurice. We scoured the compound and finally found him at the spot where he and I used to have our rendezvous. Of course, that's where he'd be, and of course, I was the one who found him. He was sitting down, his back hunched and facing away from me. He heard me and turned to look, and for a brief instant, his face lit up. It happened so fast—did I imagine it? But then it was gone, and I couldn't help but feel like I—his only friend—was betraying him. It would have cut less deeply if he'd glared at me, but that simple expression of joy just...

The only thing worse than that look was what happened next. I called out that I found him, and everybody was suddenly packed in together. They cornered him, and Rex told him to stand down, but it's like all his senses had left him; he lashed out with his tail and swept six people off their feet. One poor cop took the tail to his chest and was sent flying through the wall of the compound. He's fine other than some bruised ribs, but the wall will have to be repaired.

But when the tail-swipe didn't deter the cops, Maurice, he—he went full-on *feral*! He started lunging forward, his jaws snapping. He caught a cop by the head and chest, there was a gut-wrenching *crunch* and blood splattered everywhere. Maurice spat out the cop's severed upper torso, and I—I'll never be able to forget that awful sight. His head was crushed like it had been caught in a trash compactor. Ragged bits of lung and heart and bone dangled out of the part of his chest that was bitten-through. It was just... grisly.

I can't write about that anymore; it was too awful. The police opened fire, but the bullets just ricocheted off his hide. Before the ceasefire was given, one of the assistants took a bullet to the arm. He'll pull through, but the whole situation was just terrible. Since they couldn't shoot him and kill him, they decided to restrain him until they could figure out what to do. It took ten cops and a length of stout chain to restrain Maurice, and then they used the crane to hoist him up so he couldn't use his feet to get leverage. I couldn't bear to watch it anymore, but apparently he thrashed for hours like that. I still occasionally hear the rattle of his chains. It's... horrible. Just horrible.

Rex ordered us all to our quarters; tomorrow, we have to figure out how to deal with Maurice.

18 March

What a cruel, cruel day this has been! Maurice should not have killed Rosco or that police officer, but he does not deserve this! Rosco's minions took it upon themselves to try to figure out how to kill him. With him

bound and helpless, they tried cutting off his head, but if bullets wouldn't pierce him, why did they think an axe would? They tried putting him in the trash compactor. Ugh, the whirring and whining of the ram before it broke and Maurice's gasping will haunt my dreams for years to come. They even tried running one of his fingers through the table saw to see if they could find any kind of vulnerability, but the saw blade jammed and burnt up the motor.

When I protested that what they were doing was cruel, Rex himself demanded to know if I had a better idea. I told him that Maurice was chained up and not a danger to anyone anymore, but Rex was having none of it. I only agreed to research the texts in hopes of ending poor Maurice's misery.

Well, that and I couldn't stand to watch them torture him anymore.

Alas, even my efforts failed.

I went back to translate the remaining sides of the box, but the text was very difficult to make out, even with the drawings in the manuscript. Rex overheard me murmuring "freezing", and before I could tell him that I wasn't sure of the rest of the context, he had Maurice dropped into a tank of liquid nitrogen that we use to cool some of the test equipment. I ran after him, telling him that was inhumane, and he lashed out at me, saying that Maurice was a monster to be destroyed at all costs, that I was either with them or against them.

The liquid nitrogen did not work. Maurice hissed and lashed with his tail as he was lowered in, but even when the frigid liquid touched his skin, it had no effect. His muscles, already bulging with definition, went rigid for a brief moment, and we thought that it might have worked, but then he started moving again *in the liquid nitrogen!*

"Fine! We'll *drown* the son of a bitch!" Rex roared, and despite my protests, they kept lowering him until even his nostrils were submerged

The tank churned and sloshed, and people had to leap out of the way as he threw out wave after wave of liquid nitrogen. There was no question as to whether the nitrogen was actually cold: everything it touched instantly froze. It was fortunate the tank itself was immune to the liquid's effects; had it ruptured, all of us might have lost our feet.

I couldn't watch anymore, and when I left, they were trying to figure out how to lower just his head into the tank. Distressed, I went back to the manuscript and started furiously trying to figure out the rest of it, but no matter how I translated it, I couldn't make sense of it. There was the word for "frozen" from before, and also one for "dagger", I think. There was the preposition "inside" and the verb "strike"—or was that the noun? Frozen dagger inside strike? Strike from inside with the frozen dagger? What does any of this even have to do with Maurice? Am I just wasting my time and prolonging his suffering?

19 March

I stayed up all night, but I was no closer to finding the answer. In the meantime, Rex and the others abandoned trying to drown him and instead tried to poison him, but obviously they couldn't get his mouth open. They tried pouring the poison over his face in hopes of getting it down his nostrils, but just as he had done in the tank of liquid nitrogen, he closed his nostrils and formed an impenetrable barrier, just as he did with his cloaca.

Finally in desperation, I went down to the dig site and examined the bottom-most civilization, looking for *anything* that might give me additional information. But after two hours of scouring the area with a brush, nothing new turned up. I wish we had spent more time digging down here; perhaps we would have found more information before it was too late. At last, I gave up and was heading back to the surface when a symbol printed on a piece of stone caught my eye. I hadn't expected to get any hints from the middle civilization, but there it was on a tablet: the word for "frozen".

Two instances of the word "frozen" were too much to be a coincidence. I rushed back to the surface and started going over all of the notes from the top civilization, and sure enough, I found the reference there, too. The middle civilization had only made it so far in their excavation. They had tried but failed to glean the meaning of the markings on the box, but there was scrawled in ominous letters a warning: "do not open the box." Comparing notes with the top civilization, they had made more progress on the translation, but there was the same warning! More ominous still was a scrawled hypothesis that perhaps the box's contents were



what had caused the collapse of civilization. The middle civilization also mentioned something about the end of the world.

But the box Maurice broke was intact before he broke it; surely all these texts could not be referring to the same box? Could it be regenerating itself? Or were there multiple boxes? The idea is nonsensical, but could these boxes be the missing link, somehow tied to the Bronze Age collapse? Was Maurice a modern, southern version of the "sea people" mentioned in the Mediterranean?

I was getting off-track. I had to figure out what the writing meant. Somehow, I was *convinced* that encoded in those cryptic words was the cure that would save us. I called Rex in and told him we had to think through things logically, that I needed his help to piece things together. He agreed to be objective, and I started laying out what I'd learned. We laid out the words "strike", "frozen", "dagger", and "inside" on the table and rearranged them various ways, trying to figure out what they meant. But there was no dagger near the box, and the other translations had wound up equally puzzling.

After the two of us stood at that table for two or three hours, both of us stumped, the thought suddenly popped into my head: what if it was a metaphor, not meant to be taken literally? What if the "dagger" was a reference to a penis? Certainly that parallel had been drawn countless times throughout history. But if that were the case, why hadn't the other civilizations' archaeologists come to the same conclusion? Nevertheless, it was something to explore, and we again put our heads together to try to make sense of it.

We came up with a variety of potential meanings: perhaps we needed to stab inside of his penis with a frozen dagger, or maybe we needed to freeze inside his penis? Or maybe freeze him from the inside with his penis? But Rex pointed out that *all* of those methods supposed that we could even *get* to his penis; he had no knowledge of where Maurice kept his penis, let alone how to get to it.

I gasped instinctively when he said it. He noticed and asked me why I'd reacted that way. I didn't want to tell him, but if it would spare Maurice more suffering, perhaps it was best that I come clean. I told him that I know how to get to Maurice's penis. When I explained it, Rex was determined to go try it himself, but I told him that Maurice didn't trust him. It would have to be me.

I hate that I said it. Perhaps Rex manipulated me into saying it; I don't know. But once I said it, there was no turning back. Rex told me the plan, and I agreed to play along. They put some extra chains on Maurice's tail and legs to keep him from thrashing, and then they left him for the night to get used to it. My part comes first thing in the morning.

20 March

Maurice is dead, and it's all my fault.

"It was the kind thing to do," I tell myself, but... was it?

Per the plan—Rex's plan—I went in to see Maurice in the morning. I don't know if he recognized me, if he just liked the smell of female, or if I was perhaps less threatening than the others who all had actively tried to kill him, but as I entered, he seemed to watch me with guarded trust.

The poor fool.

How I wish things had turned out differently! What he lost in mind, he more than gained back in body! At ten feet tall, he weighed over a thousand pounds, all of it muscle, and despite the grimness of the situation, his body seemed to have taken on a new vivacity with more vivid coloration than before. Where he had been a relatively uniform dusky gray-green, his dorsal side was now deep forest green, and his underbelly was markedly yellow, slightly more muted than lemon but a far cry from what it had been before.

His calves were as big around as my head, and his thighs were twice as big as that. His waist sloped inwards from his hips, then expanded back outward in the typical rounded, crocodilian midsection, terminating in a broad chest whose pectorals were now undoubtedly larger than Rex's, though still proportionally less defined relative to his size. His shoulders and biceps were each nearly as big around as his calves, and even his forearms were bigger around than my thighs. His fingers were long and tapered into tooth-shaped claws strong enough to crush cinder blocks in his palms. His neck was so thick that his necklace—once his great pride and joy—had long since snapped off and fallen to the ground somewhere, probably crushed during the standoff.

Other than being generally larger, his head looked much the same as it had before. His golden, slit-pupiled eyes were alert yet showed no sign of the intelligent spark he'd demonstrated mere days ago. In place of that intelligence was nothing but teeth. Long, jagged, threatening teeth still stained with blood. Rosco's blood. That police officer's blood.

The sight of them reminded me of just how dangerous my situation was and how important it was to finish what I'd started. I had cared for some piece of Maurice, but that part was gone. As far as I could tell, nothing but a monster remained.

Still, I said sweet things to him, things I might have meant before he turned, things like how I wasn't going to hurt him, how morbid curiosity had driven me to sneak in to see him, to see if the size of his body had affected the size of his *already impressive* girth.

I don't know whether he understood me. He watched me intently, but he offered no attempt to speak words—not that he could have with his mouth chained shut anyway, but failing even to *attempt* it reinforced in my mind that his mental faculties had already deserted him. Nevertheless, when I tentatively reached up to stroke his groin—he was suspended horizontally from the equipment hoist in the high bay—he did not flinch away. Rather, he seemed to press his groin down towards me as best he could, given his bondage.

In fact, it was I who flinched, not expecting him to respond so eagerly. But as I looked up at his face, I saw, there in his eyes, a glimmer of remorse. Was it really there, or was it just my guilty conscience? Nevertheless, the expression was gone the second I returned my hand to his groin. His eyes half-closed, and he again gently thrust his crotch against my hand. I felt his smooth scales moving apart and glanced up just in time to see the entrance to his cloaca materialize. Even *that* had become more vivid and saturated with color. Where it had been only a dark line when we'd met before, that line was now markedly pink as the flesh separated.

For a moment, I froze, knowing what I needed to do next yet knowing that it would be the death of him. But if he sensed my hesitation, would he know something was up? Would he seal himself off again, remaining invulnerable forever? I *had* to keep playing my part!

I took a deep breath and slipped my hand between his folds. If the inside had seemed hot during our little escapades, now it felt like hellfire. I winced and pulled my hand out. He shuddered and shook impatiently above me, glaring at me—I suppose—for leading him on without finishing.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rex waiting in the wings with a length of stout rope. Several others were with him holding chains and various other instruments of restraint. I saw him nod, and I faintly nodded back.

This was it.

Flashing a smile at Maurice, I reached up again, slipping my hand, wrist, and half my forearm into his cloaca's burning interior. But when my fingers felt their target, I had to stop and gasp. The sheer *size* of his penis cannot be overstated, and as I pulled it out, Rex and the others all gasped, too.

It was almost four feet long and S-shaped just as it had been before, yet where his appendage had been the perfect size to stimulate my g-spot before, it was now bigger around than my wrist and longer than my forearm when unfurled. It was so big around that it took both hands to pull it out, and even then, my thumbs could not touch each other. The whole thing pulsed and throbbed with enough force that I had to hold on firmly to avoid losing my grip and having it vanish back up into him. But where it had been rather gray before, it was now a deep purple, and the frond had flipped forward to give the glans the appearance of a mittened hand or perhaps a livid sock puppet whose mouth would deliver semen—though it would never again have the chance.

After that, everything was a blur. Rex and the others sprang out from their hiding spots, and before either I or Maurice could react, they had wrapped several loops of rope and chain around his cock and yanked it down towards the ground, tying it off to cleats bolted to the floor. Not taking any chances, they brought still more ropes and chains and tied off to even more cleats, distributing whatever force Maurice would exercise against them once he figured out what was going on.

While Rex and the rest of his team got Maurice restrained, another group brought in a pump and a long piece of perforated pipe. Without ceremony, they jammed the pipe into Maurice's penis so roughly that I had to turn away. He let out a sharp screech of pain—the first sign of perverseness he had ever

demonstrated—and yanked back on his penis, trying to pull it back into himself. But Rex's team had been too efficient, too cautious, and despite Maurice's furious thrashing, his penis remained exposed and vulnerable.

There was an awful screech as the pump started up, followed by an even more horrific screech as liquid nitrogen flooded into Maurice's penis. Nitrogen steam exploded out from the tip of his urethra as the super-cooled liquid hit the super-heated interior of his body and instantly phase-shifted. Maurice shrieked and thrashed over and over again, letting out cry after piteous cry.

It was heart-breaking.

And yet that wasn't enough. After a few minutes, Maurice settled down, and Rex and the others and I all exchanged glances. Clearly there was still life in Maurice's eyes, so why was he no longer bothered? Had the nitrogen numbed the inside of his urethra to where it no longer felt pain?

Rex hypothesized that now that Maurice's penis was frozen, perhaps we could kill him conventionally. He tried stabbing Maurice's belly with a pick axe, but that only pissed Maurice off, and he began thrashing again. Rex tried shooting him, but the bullet ricocheted once again. I yelled at him to stop, that this had nothing to do with what the manuscript had told us, that it was just senseless cruelty. Rex truly showed his true colors then, leaping from conclusion to damnable conclusion and testing them all out on the helpless creature formerly known as Maurice.

First, "strike", "frozen", "penis", and "inside" were arranged as "strike from inside the frozen penis", and Rex yanked the nitrogen-carrying pipe out and struck the frozen urethra with the pick axe repeatedly, eliciting wails of pain but no lessening in Maurice's vitality. Next, Rex tried arranging them as "strike from inside with the frozen dagger" (completely forgetting that the penis was the dagger) and began jamming the nitrogen-pumping tube into Maurice's penis over and over again, deliberately trying to abrade the inside but only succeeding in increasing Maurice's misery.

Rex was about to try "striking the frozen penis" and had hoisted a sledgehammer over his head to bring it down on Maurice's frozen member when I at last stopped him and reminded him to be scientific, to think logically and to consider the facts we had observed. I hypothesized that the reason Maurice had ceased thrashing was because his penis had indeed been frozen, which cut off the blood supply to it and no longer harmed him. Putting my hand up into his cloaca, I could tell a marked difference in the temperature before versus the temperature now. I told Rex that we needed to slow down, to "strike, freezing inside the penis", but doing it slowly.

When we tried it my way, Maurice indeed began thrashing again, and I could not face him. This misery he was enduring was *my* fault.

But Rex was impatient, and he reasoned that if Maurice's penis were not as thick, it could absorb heat from the outside, keeping the blood slightly warmer and letting it flow faster. While I doubted the logic in this, Rex was adamant, and to prove it, he bade me come and observe closely. As I watched, I saw the frost rise to the surface and grow sharp, jagged dendrites that pierced the nearby flesh, cutting and shredding cells from the inside like a glass bottle shattering in someone's stomach, or like a thousand tiny—

I gasped, suddenly realizing that the dagger represented both Maurice's penis *and* the ice shards, and like watching someone being stabbed over and over, I couldn't help but wince on seeing the ice crystals forming, relentlessly stabbing and severing cells layer by layer. Rex took a knife and ran the back of it over poor Maurice's penis, scraping off the epithelial layer of frozen, destroyed cells. He did it again and again, showing just how fast Maurice's organ was succumbing to the cold.

The sight of it alone would have been bad enough, but to top it off, Maurice was not immune to Rex's cruelty: he felt everything. I would have expected that for his flesh to be so cold, surely the nerves must be completely numb, yet it seemed the cold heightened his sensitivity, as if in exchange for invulnerability anywhere else, *this* pain was amplified. Every scrape elicited a violent shudder and a pained hiss.

"Okay, you've made your point!" I cried, turning away, yet Rex seemed to take some kind of sick satisfaction from scraping Maurice's dead cells over and over again, the sound like someone using fingernails to scrape the frost off the inside of a freezer, interspersed with Maurice's anguished cries.

The look in Rex's eyes terrified me; I have never seen him so angry or hell-bent. But despite prolonged entreaties, the air still echoed with those horrible sounds.

*Schlick, schlick, schlick...*

The thought of it chills me to my core, the weight of so much cruelty crushing my chest and making it hard to breathe.

I cannot say how many countless hours this went on, but I can measure Maurice's demise in terms of the slow, excruciating deterioration of his penis. An hour or so consisted of Rex slowly scraping off the smooth outer layer of skin, which flaked off like powder. Then the scraping took on a rougher sound, like running a knife over coarse sandpaper or dry toast, as Rex scraped down into the corpus cavernosa. There, the spongy flesh made for a more irregular surface, and Rex's knife alternately struck high spots and skidded over voids.

And though Maurice should have had no nerves that deep in his tissue, it seemed the deeper Rex scraped, the more Maurice thrashed and cried. So prolonged were his cries that he eventually grew hoarse and could do nothing but hiss feebly beneath the unrelenting yet irregular sound of the back of Rex's knife.

*Scrape, scrape, s—scrape, s—sc—c—scrape...*

As Rex scraped deeper into the spongy tissue, the voids increasingly allowed blood to collect and then expand into crystals, jutting out like cactus quills and freezing instantly while caving off little pieces of flesh the size of bread crumbs or little pieces of old, worn-out foam rubber. These fell to the ground, first tinting the earth with a ruddy layer and then forming a little anthill at Rex's feet.

Unable to get Rex to stop and unable to watch any further, I pressed my hand to Maurice's cloaca and felt my heart sink as his temperature cooled from scorching to warm, to tepid, to cool, to cold. We all saw his body beginning to shiver, his chains to rattle more and more violently as his core body temperature dropped. The shaking grew so violent that the chain around his mouth shook free, much to the alarm of some of those present, but the risk was too great to try to replace it.

Over agonizing hours, his body continued to cool. A patch of frozen tissue appeared on the folds of his cloaca and spread rapidly towards his extremities. His tail froze first, followed quickly by his toes and legs. As the muscle and bone structures crystallized and became brittle, the strain of his weight began to overpower the broken structures. With a terrible crash, his tail fell to the ground, nearly crushing one of the police officers before exploding into a million super-cooled pieces that flew like shrapnel in every direction, pelting, stinging, and freezing anyone who touched them. His leg came next, and then the other, and his arms were not far behind.

Suddenly what was left of him jerked, as if shaken violently from sleep. For a brief instant, his eyes looked both alert and intelligent as they scanned the room. They fell on me, and as we locked eyes, I could feel in my soul his sense of betrayal.

"Emma," he gasped, "Why...?"

Did—did he really say it, or was it just my conscience? He should have been dead—his head and torso were nearly iced over—but even now, I can't be certain...

"Turn off the pump!" someone yelled.

At that instant, the tube fell out of what was left of Maurice's frozen penis—little more than the frozen husk of urethra now—and flew around, spraying into the air for a split second before the power to the pump was cut. It doused a cop in liquid nitrogen, freezing and killing him instantly. Then Maurice's naked, withered urine-tube fell down, landing on and breaking off its fragile tip before the rest of it landed on its side. A second later, there was a creak overhead, and then what was left of Maurice crashed to the ground. We all took cover, ducking and covering ourselves as frozen body parts rained down like monstrous hail. I felt my arms pelted with the frigid material and yelled in pain.

It was all over in just a few seconds. The room was deathly silent, and for a moment, nobody stirred.

At last, Rex got to his feet and, scowling at the shriveled, sad remains of Maurice's penis, stomped over to it and ground it beneath his boot until there was nothing left but frozen powder.

## Don't Open the Box

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The last of Maurice was gone.

He is dead, and I am sad.

And I am angry.

What the *HELL* was in that damn box?!

\*\*\*\*\*

"17 May

I'm not sure if I'm going to make it out of here alive, but in hopes that this journal will help others in the future, I'm capturing my last moments. I pray the evacuation helicopters make it here before Rex does, but the outlook is grim.

Rex became obsessed with what happened to Maurice after the incident. I warned him not to mess around on the first level, that it was too dangerous, that there were things we don't understand. I warned him there *must* be more boxes, but he wouldn't listen to reason. He took some of Rosco's minions down with him, and they made a royal mess of the first layer, digging like men possessed without properly reinforcing the space above them. They caused a cave-in but survived, and before anybody could aid them, they'd already started digging again, searching madly.

They found what they were looking for.

Rex said the smell cleared them out before they even realized what they'd done. They all rushed back to the surface, and not one of them thought to bring the accursed box they'd broken with them.

Now it's too late. Rex himself has already killed most of the other scientists; Rosco's minions killed most of the laborers and support staff. I am hiding in the only remaining safe place. It's a bitter irony that the only place I can hide is where we caught Maurice. I called for help on the radio, and the choppers are coming, but they are far away, and I can hear Rex sniffing around. His teeth and claws are long and sharp like our feral ancestors, and if he finds me...

Whoever finds this, heed my advice:

Don't open the box! It's a trap! Whatever you do, do not open the—"

Angineel gasped and reached for her handheld chemical analyzer. Holding it over the ruddy streak that terminated the 21st-century script and ran off the edge of the page, she swallowed and grimly read the analysis: it was, as she'd suspected, blood.

She frowned suddenly, realizing she'd seen that warning before. She brought up a hologram of the dig thus far and dictated a query. A few seconds later, some cryptic, hairline symbols from the fourth layer, an ancient manuscript from the third layer, and some text two millennia old floated in the air around the thousand-year-old diary recovered from the first level of the dig site with the relevant portions highlighted in their respective languages.

"But *what* box are they talking about?" she murmured aloud. "We haven't found any boxes like the ones in the manuscript..."

"Angineel!" a fellow archaeologist cried, rushing in and holding a stone box with hairline runes on it, "Look what we found!"

As he came to a stop, the box slipped out of his hands and crashed to the ground. Seconds later, he and Angineel covered their faces and fled the room.

The smell was just too awful.