



Of
Lilies
and
Remains

Shitskin
Freak

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PREFACE

This is an unofficial, non-canonical short story about Lilija Bilic, also known as Lily White... also known as Femcel, which began as a placeholder name (one which stuck with the users of Anthro.foo and Anthro.booo, at least) penned by her creator and the artist responsible for the drawings herein: Femcelanon, also known as Lilyanon... also known as 40MikeMike, whom I cheekily refer to as Mike Mike, or simply Mike-- or even as Michael on at least one particularly cheeky occasion-- among other names, more than likely, I'm sure. He, of course, has my sincerest gratitude for permitting me to so shamelessly use his character for this story.

I wouldn't usually have asked before doing so because I'm an insufferable lolbertarian bastard who does not believe in intellectual property and would download a car for free if I could. Also I'm brown so stealing is probably in my genes. However, I deeply respect Mike and therefore made an exception to my scheduled shitskinnery just for him. More importantly, I began writing this around the same time he announced he was working on an actual comic and did not wish to accidentally release a competing narrative (non-canonical though it may be), should the comic have been about Lily. Luckily for me, it wasn't. That comic turned out to be "FJELLREV."

Now, I may be brown and a violator of Jewish laws and ethics, but by no means a hypocrite. As such, as with all my other creative works, I publish the portions of this short story which "belong" to me under the Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 license-- however that's supposed to be interpreted in this particular case.

That concludes this preface, I hope.

“It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones...”

- Luke 17:1-2

Constanța, Romania - c. 2005

Lily laid in her bunk, her short muzzle hidden away from the world in the crook between the wall and the dampened pillow. She was performing her nightly ritual, washing away the sights of the day into that sullied sponge of a cushion, rendered a similar shade of gray as her white fur. If only she could do likewise with the words and sounds that violated her black, pointed ears, so delicately fluffed by white on the inside-- with the sensations that penetrated past her disheveled coat and into her soft skin, and the scents that clung thereto, and... the lingering flavors on her tongue.

She tried, of course. Her claws, like obsidian, sliced into the pink below the pelage of her forearms, of her thighs-- and between them especially. She dug and dug in spite of the crimson that swelled, in spite of the sting. But never a sound from her lips-- not the slightest lest the other girls notice her: the freakish mute cat in the corner. And besides, it's not as though there was really much feeling left in the ritual. It was difficult to describe: all there was was anguish, the torment of the day's encounters, and the physical pain-- yet, simultaneously, that same sharp agony had grown so dull and monotone. This was her life.

This was her life even on this day, on this day that marked the beginning of womanhood for her-- legally, that is. It's not as though she wasn't quite horribly acquainted with it already.

Then, above that quiet cacophony of anguish, her mind rose to contemplate the figure that hung above her head, that presided over it all. Were she not herself the victim of grave reality, she'd perhaps laugh at its black humor. Peeling herself off the rank sheets, her dark hair forming her veil, she arched into a kneeling stance before it, having decided that was enough penance for now. Her blue, feline eyes met the figure's brown-- those merciful, judgmental eyes-- the eyes of a long-haired man.

The figure had been hanged there before she'd ever even set foot in those dreary quarters, perhaps her owner's idea of a penance of his own, or perhaps one of his thugs's idea of a protection-- a charm-- against whatever evil might dare liberate the girls. Whatever the case, a small, golden brown portrait of the Pantocrator hung at the head of Lily's bunk in the corner of the room, abandoned there by someone, taken up by her. He was the singular source of solace in her world-- a human male. But though her eyes fixated upon the image, it wasn't the literal man portrayed therein that she communed with. No, the pigments on the canvas, stretched taught in its frame, formed nothing more than a vessel-- a window-- to the aether, to the supernatural, to He who lay beyond the misery of matter.

And for the briefest moment, her soul joined Him and she was made whole again-- pure, white, clean, innocent-- free to roam the boundless meadow within her bosom: a place where fragrant flowers sprung in abundance, tended to by joyful birds and bees. In the depth of her fleeting meditation, she'd done it again: her charcoal hair rose, the ends suspended in air, the sheets below her rustled, and the drawers beside the bunk shifted, one rolling open to reveal unspeakable horrors within. Then, abruptly, she was torn from the illusory sanctuary that radiated its power even through her corporeal form, by a hand upon her shoulder whose violence of motion contrasted with its furred softness, "Lilija... Lili!"

It was one of the girls, a white cat like herself, though spotted with gray, speaking Serbian, no less, "You've done it again, you freak. Stop."

Lily's hair dropped in that instant and the sheets ceased their supernatural movement. She turned to stare at the other cat's muzzle and whiskers, which twitched contemptuously. Those episodes often effected such a serenity that she believed she could forgive even the severest of her wrongdoers, only for the notion to be so unceremoniously smashed to pieces by the uncaring mundane. Following an awkward silence, the mouth moved again, "Say something, freak. Why don't you ever say anything?"

It did not matter to Lily. She knew no words could save her. She'd soon turn her back to the girl, then she'd be spat upon or kicked or scratched-- and worse-- for her crime of being so odd, of seeking any escape or comfort. Then she'd do much the same to herself for a few hours longer before drifting off to sleep. This was her life: a vessel for the frustrations of the world. She braced herself. Then, like an unexpected ray piercing muddied water, "Anyways, Father says he wants to see you, so... get dressed-- skank."

The spotted cat turned away, a sadistic smirk flashing briefly upon her muzzle as she left Lily to herself again.

Lily's shoulders slumped. Her sunken eyes dropped to the grimy floor upon which she planted her pawed feet as she swiveled to sit on the edge of the bed. She reflected for a minute. Her owner-- her "father" as he insisted the girls call him-- summoned *her* specifically on occasion, always for the same unpleasant deed. Rewards, he called them. This was nothing new. But never had she been summoned on a birthday. *That* was new. And she reflected for a moment on her age, and on the half-decade of adolescence used, gone. Perhaps she was withered now, ready to be discarded. Her mind immediately rushed with a burning anxiety she'd not felt in a long time to the grim possibility that implied.

But a strange sedative seemed to bloom in her very brain, soothing the paranoia with an equally strong delusion: with an optimism seemingly born of the aether. Surely there must be a connection between the two events: her birthday and this summons. She was about to be set free. She knew it. For a fleeting second, the supernatural warmth radiated again, her mind focused once more on prayer. She was very well acquainted with the world's cruelty. She knew it was the least likely outcome. Still-- perhaps because of this-- she prayed, harder than ever she had. Her penance was done. She was *certain* of it. There was something crazed, almost feral, emblazoned in her celestial blue eyes now. The accursed drawer, still ajar, slid shut through the same ethereal force that'd rocked it open. Her mind was split between the two possibilities she'd fixated upon. Steeling herself, she stood. It'd be what God willed-- freedom from this hell either way.

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Lily stood before the heavy oak door behind which she was sure she'd meet her fate. She held her long, white tail in her hands, caressing it, soothing the bites and scratches inscribed upon it, soothing her nerves. She glanced momentarily down the hall in both directions. She could run, of course, though she'd have to ditch the high-heeled shoes she'd donned. But she wouldn't make it far before meeting with one of the many guards patrolling the manor, nor was she too familiar with the compound, having cared very little about exploring her captors' palace during her tenure there. *No*, she mused to herself. If God willed that she have her freedom, it'd come only by venturing deeper into her prison.

Releasing her tail so that her black skirt properly curtailed her rear again, she squared her shoulders as best she could, then, slowly-- apprehensively-- turned the knob.

"Lilija, my favorite girl! *Sărbătorita!*" bellowed the unfortunately familiar voice inside upon her entry. Her right ear, bearing the mark of her ownership-- a triangular nick-- twitched at the sound of the one word she'd not ever heard before, Romanian like the rest.

Noting the puzzled look on her face, the man continued with that cloyingly affectionate voice, a perverse mockery of something paternal, its abrasion worsened as he struggled with the Serbian, "Happy birthday! You are woman now. Makes very happy, yes..."

Walking past her to lock the door, he switched back to Romanian, "Surely you did not forget this big day, did you? What's wrong, Lily? You are always so sad."

He approached her, his hand reaching out to hold her chin with a grating tenderness, raising the head which'd drooped along with her avoidant gaze. She'd been right. This was about her birthday. But why had he locked the door? That did not bode well. Then again, why was he alone if his plan

was to dispose of her? Was he going to commit the deed himself? Lily's heart throbbed painfully in her chest, her nerves burning from the inside and hackles risen. A note of purest anxiety stained the air, reaching her sensitive nose, and-- though he was human-- even his own, she was sure.

The man circled around her once fully, sniffing. It was then that she caught a glimpse of the revolver holstered on his hip. A chill ran down Lily's spine, terminating with a nervous flick of her tail's tip, her owner's presence wafting over her so unpleasantly. She squeezed shut her eyes, her muzzle wrinkling as she introverted once more, seeking the comfort of the ethereal sanctuary in what she was now sure were her final moments. She *had* to seize this ephemeral opportunity to atone for the million sins she knew she was guilty of with equal paranoid certainty.

Noticing the intense effect he appeared to be having on her, the man distanced himself momentarily, his brows knit with genuine confusion, "What *is* wrong, Lily? Aren't you happy? Today is such a *specială* day! And there is something that will make you *sari de bucurie*."

He tried again with his broken Serbian, "Uhhh... you will make... jumping for joy, yes..."

Lily's eyelids slid open, a tear soaking into the crusted fur below her canthus. There was the ray of light again, piercing the black water that engulfed her-- that threatened to close around her forever. She was electrified still by sheer nervousness-- her hands tensed, her claws protracted-- but the dark despair that'd held the reins of her anxiety was now tenuously replaced by that forlorn hope again. With shaky breath, "Father... Peter... do you really mean it?"

Her owner's eyes widened, taken aback by her unexpected speech. These were the first words she'd ever uttered to him directly in the years since he'd first *known* her, in her best attempt at his own language, no less. And the words she'd chosen to break that muteness with... they clearly pleased him greatly, a grin creeping onto his face, "Mmm... why of course, *Lilija*. You know I've always loved *you* best... so you deserve the best. Come now, let's... celebrate. To many more years... together..."

The godray was immediately snuffed, and her hope drowned along with it. But whereas before that dread of death would've reclaimed her, now she felt truly abandoned by either emotion, a suffocating emptiness now in their stead. Spurred on by what she had not meant, the man closed the small gap between them. Then he began to peel off her jacket, breathing heavily in her right ear. Then the clasps came undone, the cups falling uselessly to earth. Then his hands ran along her fur, lower, to lower the skirt. Then...

The slits of Lily's eyes were blown wide open, basically engulfing their entire sockets, two pitch black orbs embedded in her white face. And as those tan human hands-- the hands of the man-- roamed over her white fur, down her legs to strip her shoes and stockings, she felt anew what she'd first felt at the hands of that same man half a decade prior. No, she was not yet spent. Far from it: she felt so horribly renewed in that very moment. How could she have so foolishly believed the paranoid ghosts of her mind, be it the voice of terror or the optimist? She was in her prime in the eyes of a man like Peter. One of the other girls was easily twice her age, after all. Her horror at the absence of catharsis thus eclipsed even the imagined sensation of Death hugging her just moments ago. This was worse-- far, far worse: condemned to this life for at least the length of what she'd experienced another four times over.

Peter stood to admire how he'd unwrapped her, licking his lips so wetly, before collapsing into the armchair behind him, his gaze not once departing from Lily's nearly nude form. All of her was exposed now, laid bare to his ravenous sight, save for one part-- her most precious.

"Now, Lily... you know just what to do, *nubilă*... what we both want..." he growled obscenely.

Lily faced Peter, but her gaze fixated upon the steel she'd glimpsed earlier: what could've been her liberator, her executioner. There she stood, all but one petal plucked. And though she never so much as blinked, her soul fled again to those happy fields of her dreams and prayers. Her body was frozen in place, those wide feline eyes unwavering, the abyss within scarcely rimmed by heavenly blue, like two voids threatening to swallow reality whole, to sentence it to oblivion.

Within, conversely, she rested on the grass atop a green hill beneath the myriad stars. It was evening in her sanctuary. *How strange*, she thought. Never had she seen the meadow before at the birth of Nyx. The Moon shone so brightly, so fully, and opposite the Sun which was but seconds from sinking wholly under the world, haloing the West in violent blood gold. She was filled with such a sense of serene finality, as though something had ended, or was on the brink of ending. Perhaps she had guessed correctly after all and her immobility had incensed Peter, who then must've ended her time on Earth. It did not matter to Lily, not anymore. This was Heaven at last-- at long last.

A checkered white butterfly fluttered nearer and nearer. Possessed so innocently by kittenlike impulse, Lily swatted at the bug. She caught it, a second later. It rested so daintily yet impossibly uninjured in her hand. But before she could properly appreciate the marvel, the spots on its wings darkened into a much deeper, less joyful brown. And a grave gray blossomed thereupon as it transmogrified into a hard, hideous thing that did not belong here. She nearly fumbled the object as she glanced about her, in horror again. Growing fissures radiated through the earth from beneath her and sprawled horrifically into the firmament from the horizon. The Sun had now hidden his face fully from her and the stars faded, recessing into the black.

She tried desperately to stabilize what she now knew was but the same old ethereal illusion, only that this time it departed from her as it never had before, shattering and shrinking into the dimly illuminated dust in the air of the dingy room, wherein her owner still sat. A ghastly, bewildered expression now limned his face, as though he'd met with a ghost, an angel, a demon. Her hair fell again from supernatural suspension as it had earlier in the dormitory. She'd done it again, only it wasn't harmless bedsheets nor drawers which she'd moved with her mind this time. She had fallen to her knees at some point during the hallucination, likely to catch the levitating thing out of the air, which she now glanced downwards at to confirm the presence of. Peter's holster was empty.

Almost reflexively, she raised the revolver, then herself, holding it as she'd seen soldiers do in the streets near her home, only more precariously, owing to her never having actually held one hitherto. Naturally, her trembling finger curled around the trigger in search of nothing more than a place to rest. Her arms tremored violently with raw emotion, adrenal fire coursing through her veins. And though she clutched the weapon fiercely, she feared somehow it'd manage to slip from her grip as magically as it'd been delivered into it. Thus, her furred fists tensed and tightened, as if it were possible to crush the wood and metal between them. Her finger twitched with equally increasing fervor.

"What the fuck?! What the- Liliya! You- Put that down, you whor--"

The dim room flashed a hot, blinding white. Red bloomed from the man's center, from just above the navel. He let out such an agonized wail. It churned something inside Lily. She was mortified. She'd almost not meant to fire, really. The flash, the bang, the smell of powder, the smell of blood-- something mortally, primordially terrible had just happened before her and she was its cause. A soul was slipping now from its shell and she had little doubt it would never again find any rest-- such an existentially distressing prospect, regardless of its victim. And yet... that cry, that anguish... oh, how it soothed her ringing ears.

A part of her screamed. She should leave now. This was sufficient. But gazing upon the writhing flesh on the chair, she could not help but feel a hot, terrifying thing which-- for all her hatred and discomfort at it-- pleased her greatly. In this way, the sensation made her more alike the dying man than dissimilar, at that particular moment. Her breathing hitched. It accelerated. She pulled again, deliberately this time. A second rose blossomed, on Peter's chest. Another delicious cry, only now choked, reduced to such a pathetic whimper by the crimson leaking from the man's mouth, from her owner's mouth, powerless. Then she squeezed again. A third penetration, so near the last, so near the heart. *Yes! Yes!* Lily was enraptured by the act-- by the sight, the sound, the scent-- by it all. She bit her lip as she shot again.

Peter went limp. The man went limp. His head, adorned by that burst, loathsome eye which spurted still, hung to the side. The fluids pooled on the floor below. Just as he'd admired her body and his work upon her perhaps a minute ago-- maybe more, maybe less, she couldn't tell-- Lily now admired *his* for the first time ever, and her work upon *him*. She contemplated dumping the remainder of the cylinder into him, if only to desecrate the corpse, the body from which any trace of sanctity had long been rent regardless. She wished she could do more to him, to sate the vitriol inoculating within her stomach, at the base of her bosom, disseminating via her hot, pulsing blood. She wished she could dismember him, flog him, strip him skin from bone... but the man was dead.

Lily chided herself. In the heat of her passion, she had made his death all too painless. *Too quick to properly savor*, she thought. But then, resurfacing from the chasm of her racing mind came a contrary scold. These were horrible, horrible thoughts, reflections of the very men against whom she directed them, of the likes of her "father." She dropped to her knees once more, resting upon the gun which she pressed against the floor in between. Glee crashed with an estranged dismay, vengeful pride with dissonant disappointment at all her shortcomings in that room, like warring waves slamming one against the other in the turbulent waters of her psyche. She sulked at nothing in particular-- at the door through which she'd entered. She was coming down from that deadly high and the ringing in her ears amplified anew, no shrieks of agony to ameliorate or attenuate its sting. And she felt so inexplicably... shitty. Then a creeping despair skulked up along her spine like a cruel vine, at the thought of the next task ahead, of escaping. How? Where would she even go? And in the highly likely event she were caught...

She wanted desperately to feel the reassuring sting of her own torment as opposed to the incessant, intolerable screeching in her ears that only grew louder and louder. Her tearful glower fell to the innumerable cuts and scratches on her thighs, then-- even better-- to the glimmering steel pinned beneath her hand. There was one very simple method of escape, she realized. Raising the revolver one more time, she drove the muzzle into her temple, and-- letting her finger dance upon the trigger as she'd done earlier-- waited. She squeezed shut her sobbing eyes and waited, for liberation, for execution...

Four knocks on the door-- heavy, with a sense of real urgency, the voice of a man, "Boss? Boss, are you in there?! Is everything alright?! Boss!"

Snapping out of her suicidal stupor, Lily's eyes shot wide open as she stumbled onto her bare feet, spinning towards the door and window opposite the shouting. She flung it open after needlessly, nervously struggling with the unlocked doorknob for a second. She heard the thug do likewise with the hallway door, only to find that one locked.

Hastily scanning the panorama afforded her by the terrace she now found herself upon, Lily's eyes met for the first time in years with the world beyond the walls, and for the first time ever with the expanse of her captors' manor. To her right, immediately capturing her attention, beyond the wall encircling the property, the purple-green of the sea stretched towards the horizon. A jungle of towering cranes, crates, and concrete constituted its shore, perhaps a mile away or less. On her side of the wall, a repetition of sleek white, black, and glass stacked into boxes formed the compound's amphitheatrical layout, surrounding a shimmering cyan puddle-- a pool-- in its pit, a story below. A monolithic flight of stairs bisected this semicircular arrangement, leading Lily's gaze up towards the lone room crowning it, a ciborium of some sort.

The frantic clicking of the stubborn doorknob twisting to no avail gave way to an urgent pounding. At the sound, Lily scampered along the terrace towards the imposing stairs she'd sighted on her left, the claws of her feet skittering on the hard deck as they failed to find purchase. She made it to the corner, turning sharply to her right. Such was her haste that she nearly slipped onto her hands, tightly clutching the gun all the while. Her tail flailed behind her, and for a moment she seemed a literal cat in flight. Here, her sight met with the protruding side of the massive staircase: a triangular concrete wall with a door leading beneath it-- a storage closet, perhaps? Whatever the

case, if she could jump the lower end of the wall using the parapet on her right, she'd make it onto the stairs, then-

The opaque window on her left cracked. It wasn't until a split-second later her ears registered the loud bang and whistle of the bullet that'd whizzed past just behind her head. Instinctively, she dove for the deck, crawling up against the parapet's safety. The pursuing guard'd made it past the hallway door. Lily glanced at the revolver quaking in her hand. By her quick and inexperienced reckoning, she had two, three, maybe four shots left.



“She wanted desperately to feel the reassuring sting of her own torment as opposed to the incessant, intolerable screeching in her ears that only grew louder and louder...”

Shutting her eyes and pressing the barrel's spine against her forehead, she cooled her nerves as best she could. Then, reciting the world's briefest prayer in her mind, Lily shot up onto her feet, spinning to take aim at the man: a grizzled brownish wolf she'd seen many times before, one of Peter's closest lackeys, a Turk by the name of Orhan. The front sight befell the image of the wolf in her vision, some fifteen meters diagonally across the courtyard. She squeezed the trigger, squinting in anticipation of the gun's roar, of the recoil.

The wall behind Orhan spat concrete chips at him. Lily's heart yanked her down as it sank into her stomach, the glass behind her likewise spitting at her. One bullet down. One bullet wasted.

She contemplated firing again, but decided ultimately to crawl towards the door on the side of the stairs. She had to get inside somehow. The exterior route was no longer an option. Dragging her bare chest along the cold deck, she neared the door. She could only pray it'd open easily as she lay before it, barely covered by the parapet. Mustering her courage, she reached for the handle, yanking herself up whilst depressing it in one swift motion. The door groaned open, inward. She slipped

inside, catching herself on a railing as three more shots cracked into the structure outside, one biting into the door. Whatever the wolf wielded was clearly a more practical weapon, and the worry over ammunition was not shared.

Lily slammed the door shut with her back before elevating the revolver, letting it lead her deeper into the building's interior even as she swung it inexpertly from one angle to another, ready to use what could very well have been her last shot on anything that moved. After trepidatiously advancing thusly, she found herself standing before a more conventional stairwell offering two choices: up or down. Beyond the stairwell, the corridor she was in branched left and right. But before she could give her options much thought, heavy, hurried footsteps-- the footsteps of many men, doubtless-- reverberated from the said branches-- and from her tail's direction, just outside the door. Desperate, therefore, to get away-- to get to ground-- Lily scurried stealthily down the stairs, her claws retracted now in a conscious effort to move silently.

Reaching the bottom floor, she met with a similar layout, a hallway running to her left and right. Without any particular reason, she made a turn in the latter direction again, sloppily clearing the opposite branch with a swing of the handgun after the fact. She stalked along the guilty white walls of the hall, past the brown, numbered doors from which emanated all manner of pained and pleased sounds. Her nose twitched as she caught the masked scent of the rooms. She *had* been to this part of the compound countless times before, she realized, or maybe that was the hallway above, or elsewhere in this manor or another, always the same maddeningly minimalist arrangement of fallow, sterile white and faded brown.

Yet another right turn as Lily reached the corner, leading with the revolver. Then, five meters down the hall maybe: another black suit, a human this time. Reflexively, she pulled the trigger the moment the sight picture aligned, without the previous shot's meditation. The man collapsed. Lily froze, shocked almost.

Sranje, she could not help but think. This was the loudest the gun had ever sounded. A trick of the mind, of course, but the quickened clap of pursuing boots against hardwood did little to reassure her. She proceeded down the hall. It seemed to stretch on forever, lengthening even, in her vision. Glancing leeward, a pointed shadow crept, its fingers sinisterly closing around the bend. Nearing the body, she noticed the door beside the man was slightly ajar. She slipped inside, quietly closing it behind her.

It was an office... a meeting room of some sort? It was devoid of life and that's all that mattered to Lily, allowed the briefest sigh of relief. Looking ahead, her eyes befell yet another familiar sight past the room's wide window: the pool area she'd glanced from the terrace across. She'd effectively descended to ground level and circumnavigated the pit, winding up on the opposite side. The compound felt so large yet so small in that moment, labyrinthine in her distraught state. She feared the open, but seeing no other routes, swiftly sneaked past the long conference table and its attendant chairs towards the exterior door.

She was nearly there when she heard radio chatter from the hallway, prompting her to turn her apprehensive gaze past her shoulder. Unceremoniously, the door flew wide open. A bullet licked the nick in Lily's ear as Orhan erupted into the room. The glass cracked. Lily leapt behind a desk in the corner, her trembling rekindled and breaths hastened as she drew her knees up to her chest, tucking herself into the wood. Her mind raced, replaying the last five minutes of her life, unendingly ephemeral. She had fired one, two... six shots? Four into Peter alone, yet here was Orhan, like his ghost come to reclaim her.

"Lilija, Lilija," tauntingly sweet, the Serbian even worse than Peter's, "come out won't hurt, *sevgilim*. Want keep you..."

Lily fumbled with the gun in her hands, even pointing it at her face naively as she tried to figure out its exact capacity. The wolf marched closer and closer, each step seemingly slower than the last. There were one... two flutes in the cylinder...

The pit in her stomach grew, the slits of her eyes dilated again.

Three, four brass rims, maybe-

This was it. Time was up. With a sudden, ferocious burst of energy, she sprang from behind the desk and onto Orhan. Forgetting the revolver, she feloniously raked the wolf across the muzzle, drawing a spray of blood as her claws exited the fresh channels they'd just dug into the man's face. Squeezing shut his eyes at the raw pain, Orhan fired a round. Plaster crumbled from the ceiling. Then she did it again, across the eyes this time. The pistol pivoted now, closing towards her flank. Without much more than an animal thought of survival, Lily jammed the revolver's muzzle beneath his own-- pulling, praying for one more.

A cacophonous roar echoed through the conference room, the roar of two weapons exploding in simultaneity. Orhan crumpled onto the hardwood below, Lily still clawing onto him. She collapsed beside him eftsoons. Her hand reached for her side. Bringing it back up to her view, she gazed upon the reddened fur of her palm in horror. She was dying. Surely, she was dying. Yet she felt surprisingly little more than a tingling sear on her flank. Steeling herself, she looked down at the wound directly. The bullet had shaved the fur clean off, leaving only a reddened trail and burnt scent behind. Her gaze then swiveled towards the wall where the plaster's cracks radiated from a hole thereupon. Kissed by death. Orhan hadn't been so lucky, the fur of his neck and crisp white shirt already thick with blood.

Lily rolled onto her chest before peeling herself off the floor once more. Visibly shaking off the experience, she stumbled towards the door and out into the pool area. She was at ground level now as she'd intended, but she realized also that there was no immediately visible exit. It must lie on the other side of those strange stairs. She considered for a moment scaling them, but the guards gathering on the terraces had a different idea. Before they could get a good bead on her, Lily dashed towards the left this time, clearing the building's exterior corner as the shots began to fracture the stucco and glass in her wake.

The wall continued many a meter ahead before angling leftward and out of sight. A garage of some kind, duct terminals, and noisy equipment adorned this corner of the property. Then she spotted it: a shipping container butted right up against the perimeter such that the wall was reduced to a height comparable to her own-- maybe a little taller-- above it. She needed an exit, and she needed it fast. Lily bolted towards the far side of the container. Suppressing the thoughts of what or who might be inside, she jumped, reaching clumsily for the locking bars with the revolver still in hand. Naturally, she failed to gain traction, sliding back down onto her feet. Looking down and about desperately, she could only think of one place to stow the gun away. And so tucking the revolver into the waistband of her underwear, she tried to scale the container door again. Security'd be closing in within a few seconds.

Controlling, therefore, her anxious breath as best she could, Lily hoisted herself up using two of the bars, planting her paws first on the handles, then using the crevasses of the corrugated steel to lift her scrawny frame up and over the ledge with some effort. She scooted herself up against the white wall. From where she now sat, she could just spot some of the armed men dotting the terraces she'd come from. And she knew well they could spot her. Thus, with all the force she could muster, she surged like a cat for the top of the wall behind her. But limited by her anthropomorphic form, she managed only to sink her claws painfully into the stucco of the wall's facade on the other side, her elbows awkwardly jutting above. The bullets began to hail upon her, the plaster beside cracking. Spurred thus, Lily kicked wildly with her legs, her claws skittering frantically but effectively this time as she used what little strength her emaciated body could offer to finally, strenuously vault the wall. She rolled over it, with the grace of a bag thrown out.

What she did not expect was the ten meter plummet that followed, tumbling through tree branches before thumping inelegantly onto the leafy earth. She laid there for a second or two-- maybe ten or more-- a pile of bruised and bloodied fur and black hair. Groggily stirring back to life, Lily rolled onto her back, the verdant canopy and chirping birds above filtering through her half-closed eyelids. And the scent of the pines and the soil and the sparse wildflowers wafted over her, as

if beckoning, recalling her to the waking world. The gentle hand in the air thus helped her up as she groaned, coming to her senses once more. Then her eyes met again with the odious white wall over which she'd just vaulted, entrenched so haughtily and abruptly into the earth. Remembering exactly where she was, therefore, she fished the revolver from out of the only garment she wore, running deeper into the trees as rapidly-- as far-- as possible.

In time, the verdure thinned, revealing asphalt: a small road, empty. The salt in the air, on the other hand, thickened. Cautiously, Lily padded her way across towards an unassuming industrial building. She hesitated as she reached for one of the doors. Part of her wanted to simply recede back into the trees, away from any and all threats, but she knew it'd only be a matter of time before she was tracked down. Yet, what if she ran into someone inside? She was all but nude and with a weapon in hand, a thought which only now began to matter again. Moreover, how could she be sure anyone she ran into wasn't one of Peter's men?

It really was so oddly calm on the vacant sidewalk, in the shadow of the small building. Inaction felt so anxiously blissful. She could feel it seducing her psyche, lulling her into another torpid state. Realizing this, she smacked the revolver into her side, as if to spur herself into action. Taking a deep breath, she slipped inside yet another unknown door.

It was a storage building. Racks and crates imprinted with all manner of symbols, words, and numbers concealed her as she stealthily stalked along them. She could hear chatter-- the chatter of men-- not too far off. Lily did her best to stay clear, to stay out of sight, out of sound, in the shadows. In this way, she crept out of the building from beneath a rolling door that'd been left partially agape, across a yard, then betwixt and amongst towering stacks of shipping containers which never seemed to end. She followed her nose seaward. Maybe she could... swim? To some distant shore? The freedom she'd dreamt of all these years was so close yet so far. She did not really know what she'd do once-- and if-- she reached the water, but she chased after it regardless. Maybe she'd swim back to... Serbia? Whichever direction that was even in. She thought back to her parents for a fleeting moment, her chest and eyes aching sharply. Letting out an audible whimper, Lily chastised herself, refocusing on sneaking towards the shore.

She was getting close now. She could smell it. She couldn't believe it-- this far, undetected. She turned yet another corner before coming to a grinding halt, immediately jerking back behind the container the moment her vision befell the back of a human man not far down the aisle. Then, just as she began skulking in the opposite direction, she saw the flash of another bright vest turning the far corner ahead. She dropped, shrinking behind a box. Judging by the footsteps and their voices, the two men were en route to pinch into her. Lily's head pivoted frightfully from one side to the other, searching for any way out. She readied the revolver, though she greatly feared it truly was spent this time.

A hard edge dug into her shoulder blade. In her panic, she nearly jumped as she swiveled around. A shuddering gasp and sigh later, she realized it was one of the container doors, left ajar. With no other option, she pushed the hinged sheet slightly wider before letting the darkness within envelop her fully, recessing past the cargo as deep inside as possible. She squeezed herself into a hole amidst the pallets, breasts tucked behind her knees, facing the narrow slit of light, handgun upheld-- waiting.

The murmur of the two men briefly conversing beyond those doors eventually subsided. A number of minutes passed and, gradually, Lily lowered Peter's gun. She thought of trying again now that the men were gone, but she could simply not will herself out of the shipping container's safety.

She'd been familiarized with shipping containers before-- many, many times before. It seemed her many captors' preferred method of transporting girls. It's how she'd arrived at Peter's hands in Romania. It's how she'd been lent and shipped to all too many other men elsewhere. It's how she'd visited all too many manors. All too many girls like herself would be packed in these hot, humid boxes like sardines. Lily could've sworn she almost heard them and their weeping and crying as she

began to sob herself. It was about time to perform her penance again, to purge her eyes of the all too many things she'd seen.

At some point later that night, a man arrived to shut and lock the door. Lily'd fallen in prayer in the midst of her ritual. She sought the solace of that ethereal paradise she'd so strongly hallucinate back in the dormitory, the very same through which she'd been delivered here. But something was different. Something had broken. All that remained was the guilt of what she *must* have done wrong. Then the world rocked and trembled with a horrid groan as the shipping container was hauled up into the air, Lily remaining entrapped in its darkness.

New York City, United States of America - About 4 Weeks Later

The stench. The stench was beyond overwhelming-- vomit-inducing. Yet as with all the other tortures and discomforts of her life, Lily had managed to grow impressively desensitized to it, though she did wonder how it was that none of the crew she overheard daily had noticed. She had to have been really high up in the ship's cargo, aerated by the ocean winds. That briny breeze had become her closest friend-- her only friend-- in the sickening confines of the shipping container. Perching atop the boxes and pallets within, she'd press her nose against the tiny vents lining the upper edges. She had to, lest the suffocating miasma literally kill her. Those same vents also served as the only sources of dismal light during the day. Her feline eyes adjusted, of course, as best they could, but even then she struggled to see. This had costed her hands many a cut at eating time.

That was truly the greatest miracle she'd experienced since the night of her escape all those weeks ago, she mused, in an attempt at humor: that she'd chanced upon a shipment of tuna cans... but no canopener. That was assuming she had indeed escaped, of course. She still did not know if the men on board were Peter's, or of the larger network to which he'd belonged, at any rate. Many a night she'd spent paranoically pondering if the men below were perfectly aware of her presence, leaving her to rot in her cage as punishment for her actions.

Instead of a proper canopener, then, she'd battled with the cans with tooth and claw. Those were battles she'd won, barely, with much bloodshed. But in the boredom of the container's hold, she had toyed with the only other object of interest she had with her: the revolver. She had not fired it, of course, but she'd successfully disassembled and reassembled it hundreds of times by now in the dim light, almost entirely by feel. Using the cylinder's rim, she'd devised a method by which she'd grind down the tin. Then, using the hammer, she'd puncture and pry the cans, freeing the fish and fluid.

If only to amuse herself, she'd tried many a time to conjure up the old trick, the magic that'd marked her as a freak amongst the other girls-- that'd put her here. She tried to move the empty cans with her mind, or the gun, or the container itself even. But alas, nothing. Like her mind's sanctuary, it'd gone from her, forsaken her. She'd meditated upon what this could possibly mean, upon why she continued, or what she'd done to deserve this, as usual. The idea of the men intentionally leaving her to rot in this foul prison, in particular, resonated within her like an echo only growing deafeningly louder and louder, like the ringing that'd marked the moment she'd first tasted vengeance.

Forgiveness is a virtue. For all the torment, for all the abuse, for all the unforgivable sins they'd committed, she wondered if she'd been meant to pardon the wickedness of the men she'd killed-- if she'd been expected to. Then, in a sudden swell of rage, she recalled the murderous thoughts and sensations that'd followed the first life she'd taken. She replayed the moment thus, day in and day out, with the same vividness of the heavenly mirage, only this was a perverted inversion thereof. And she wondered if it was her delight at the condemnation of the men that was actually the sin. Did it matter? How could she possibly be expected to bridle her thoughts, the voices in her head? After all she'd been through? Did she not deserve even a crumb of the sadistic pleasure those same men had reaped from her? This is what she was. This is what they'd made her.

And so alternating between judge and victim-- when it all became too loud-- she'd ground herself with claws and jagged metal as she'd done for years.

She was about to begin one such cycle, trying in vain again to levitate an empty can off the floor. Then she focused on the container itself, on the hull imprisoning her. To her surprise, it suddenly jolted then seemed to rise. Puzzled, she tried the can again. Nothing. Then she felt the container descend slowly back to earth. Another trick of the mind, she thought, as it would not have been out of place with the other strange, hallucinatory works of her broken psyche. She resumed her

rotting, but then came a heavy thud from above, then from beside. *No*. She realized what was happening now. Grabbing the revolver, she readied herself to make her last stand.

She waited thus to pounce for minutes, which ultimately blended into over an hour. Then, finally, the door rattled as someone worked the lock and handle outside. This was it. With a whine and blinding flood of light, the doors parted. The dark silhouette of a man slowly morphed into a dockworker-- a brown-haired, gray cat adorned by white from the muzzle down the front-- his visage aghast.

“Oh my... God...”

Lily practically stuck the revolver in the man’s face, scowling. She let her finger tremble on the trigger.

A second figure emerged from behind the man: a long-eared, beige-colored thing. Lily’s eyes widened. She hesitated.

From the shorter figure, a feeble voice, female, “What is it? What’s that sme- OH MY GOD!”

“... Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”

- Luke 17:3-4