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Bespoke ocean

Goo kit, it said. Marceline clicked. Nothing else on the black market website Seaward Haul seemed very interesting this morning. There were the typical listings: overpriced drugs from overseas, stolen guns from around the block, ads for deflated sex—the usual. Not much of it was worth buying. Most of the drugs were safe enough but there were certainly bad batches synthesized by amateurs like herself. Any quality firearms were only managed by the runners and cartels but those were much too expensive, and Marceline had never needed anything more than the pistol she always kept strapped to her leg. And finally, the sex was alright—mostly furnished by the many new illegals in the city—but it was simpler and more fun to just go to the Ingot and wrap herself around whoever appeared cutest through a blurred gaze and droopy eyelids. She never took them back to her apartment though; she always followed them, raising her eyebrows at their tacky decorations.

Marceline liked the Ingot a lot; they had automated kiosks. The first time she went, she traded a saliva sample for a key fob. The kiosk swallowed her DNA and spat out a profile. Whenever she swiped her fob it dispensed an “engineered” cocktail with just the right amount of

booze, vitamins & minerals, and off-market additives to really get her smashed—a bespoke poison. A few hundred bucks passed to the coat check for the management ensured that the kiosks dolloped an extra portion for her and, most importantly, that she could carry out her business unimpeded for that night.

Marceline lived for these kinds of things. The magic of molecules bound to her brain in the right place at the right time to allot her just the right amount of pleasure, and the way her still-young body just barely kept up. There was always enough missing knowledge and hidden variables in the mix that the effect of any particular molecule couldn't be perfectly predicted, much less an amalgam of dozens. Marceline had to experiment with the rest and she was a ready subject. Over the past several years, her life had left only a *little* bit of damage to her body. Her hands shook sometimes, her skin felt a little more numb than when she was little, headaches came and went, and the cuts and bruises from the rare bad dealing took their time to heal, but it was worth it. It's not like there are any good jobs in this witless city anyways, she told herself. It was art, it was business, it was fun; attracted and distracted, she starved less than plenty of other artists. And so the road she took led her to the goo kit. She clicked on the listing:

I work in a govsci lab. The goo's made from a special chem that a friend has been working on. I can't tell you much else. Marceline scrolled down the page. *What it does is crazy though, see for yourself:* and there she saw a collection of pictures of an industrial lab bench with rare and expensive equipment. The ruby-red goo in a beaker sat next to what looked like silicone cubes the size of baby blocks. They seemed squishy, like mochi, but some had hairs on them. They also seemed to be drooling. One of them was wrinkled like an eyelid, another looked like raw ground beef. *Add living matter and see what you can get to grow, oneironaut.* Oneironaut—she liked that, an explorer of dreams. The seller had been well-reviewed; the account had sold a

variety of other stolen chems before and had never (badly) swindled anyone. She clicked Buy, sent the money, and aimed the delivery at her neighbor's address.

Sitting up, setting her computer down, and turning around, she checked the cherub on the kitchen counter behind her. It had a pristine nature to it; its smoked white plastic shell with chrome buttons looked at home in a kitchen lifestyle magazine, and clashed fiercely with the rest of her dirty apartment. The carpet was stained, the black canvas drapes were never opened, the cabinet handles were sticky, and the couch—which took up most of the space of the cramped living room—threw up clouds of dust whenever she plopped down onto it. Her couple bookshelves held stained textbooks from her college days in chemistry. Mechanical mixing utensils—almost dental—lay next to them, unforgotten but unused, and pansy purple sheets draped a bed without a bedroom.

The cherub's display read that the next batch of III6 would take 374 more minutes until it was ready to be sealed into ampules. The cherub took in "raw" chems and squirted out something only a truly burned out basket of brains could qualify as "refined". Still, III6 was one of Marceline's best concoctions and she could sell it on Seaward Haul at \$350 per ampule in bulk; or sometimes at the Ingot for \$800 to anyone who was indiscreet enough to walk up to her and ask. Designer chems had been outlawed since she was young so they fetched an attractive price. Unlocked cherubs like hers—ones where just about anything could be programmed into them—were only legally permitted to the govsci labs and a few universities. Getting the right raw chems was also a hassle of its own and required some lucky connections. All told, it was an expensive and risky enterprise, but for the past few months—especially now that she had finally nailed down a non-emetic menu—it was paying for itself. Someday though, III6 would be old hat and

she'd have to figure out the next big thing. She thought maybe the goo would point her to something more interesting.

Marceline looked up from the cherub and around her living room. It was small, it was stagnant, and it could use some light, but she couldn't risk anyone peering in. The drone of the living room window air conditioner was loud and it struggled to cough out cool air. She closed her computer on the bargain coffee table and went to bed, holster still on her leg. Between securing her next pick-up of raw chems and aliquoting the III6 into ampules, it took her two days to be ready to sell the newly finished batch. These days, work just felt like work; her apartment felt like a factory.

Two hot afternoons later, the goo kit arrived at the doorstep next to hers in an apple-sized box. It was disguised as a laundry detergent sample pack and contained the promised sealed plastic baggie of pale red powder, along with a list of a few other simple chems to add and directions to be programmed into the cherub. Nine hundred and sixty-nine minutes: easy time to kill. She set the cherub to work and headed to the Ingot with half of her ampules and an optimistic skip in her step.

She swiped her fob and began her hadal plunge into the familiar depths of the Ingot's concoctions. Time splashed away—the lights of a conscious ocean surface faded as she sank into the volcanic smell of the Ingot, into tides of limp bodies and crashing waves of sound, into a vast oasis in an otherwise dusty and painful world. Her ampules sold themselves reflexively to whoever drifted up to her and tried to catch her eye: ampules out, money in, all between the beats. The Ingot swelled up and its maw never closed.

Eventually Marceline resurfaced at home, washed up on the shore of her couch, finding herself staring blankly at one of her posters, red and black. She stood up, woozy, and ate a bite of

something without checking the expiration date. The cherub was still obediently humming away and the breeze of the air conditioner was stale. Her hands were shaking more than usual. She checked her jacket pockets, counted that she had made rent, and splashed, exhausted, into her bed. Her dreams all blended into one and time rippled out slowly into empty, quiet rest.

Marceline heard two fog horn blasts and her eyes lurched open. At the sound of two more kitchen timer beeps, she rubbed her eyes and saw the cherub was finished. The goo sat in a glass cup, its own elasticity curving it into the shape of an egg. Onyx black, darker than dark. It didn't smell like much, other than perhaps faint notes of acetone. It jiggled slightly when she rocked the cup, but it looked dry.

She closed her eyes and excitement welled up. She didn't live in a factory anymore; she faced the blank white canvas, the empty yellow page, the still air of the black dance studio, and the blue sky blowing down from the tops of sacred mountains. Possibilities flooded into her mind and she leaned her elbows onto the kitchen counter, set her head between her hands, and began to dream of the soul she and the cherub were to breathe into existence. III6 was getting too easy and she wanted to astound and to be astounded. She had learned all her life to be creative, to be bold, and to not look back. She closed her eyes again. She is who is.

Add living matter and see what you can get to grow, oneironaut. Marceline took a knife from her drawer and cut into the middle of the goo; one gash forged the womb. She took the knife to her palm and grasped it; a hot trickle of blood dripped from her hand off her wrist; one gash sowed the seed. She oversaw as the onyx goo slowly oozed around the tiny ruby puddle—a smoldering red sun in a terrible black sky. The valley she had carved resealed itself and the goo showed no sign of the wound. She implanted the cup and the egg back into the cherub and pressed its stainless buttons. The cherub chirped that the incubation would continue on to $t = \infty$.

Marceline wrapped her hand in gauze and smiled. Her skin was more numb than when she was little. She opened her computer and found a few III6 orders waiting in her inbox on Seaward Haul. She took the ampules and got to work; she'd find something to eat out in the city. Three hours later her products had been dropped into mailboxes across the city, and she was back home launching up clouds of dust on her couch. It was broiling outside, but the fiery sun was finally starting to set, and dust drifted through shafts of light like specks in the sea.

She peered into the warm cherub and saw that the goo had bubbled up to form a regular pattern on its surface, transforming into a something which looked like a black apple-sized berry. Between each plump drupelet drooped little tendrils like those of an anemone. Its surface slowly pulsed, wrinkled, and rippled. It was alive. Raw, wet, unripe, and immature, but somehow clearly alive. Marceline smiled widely, amazed. She turned up the humidity and the cherub chirped in compliance.

The next day the tendrils surged into viny tubes like intestines, veined and peristaltic in motion. The pattern of drupelets distorted itself and the berry grew lopsided. Rigid beams of keratin reached out and cemented the mass to the cup and the inside walls of the cherub. The internal compartment of the cherub was flooded with an rancid urine-colored liquid and its outward vent was sweating with rotten humidity. The stench was a tantrum: yeasty, piercing, and acidic. Marceline moved the cherub next to the kitchen window and let the hot air of the city flood in. The cherub would need some deep cleaning, but that wasn't a big deal; she finally felt stimulated and ecstatic in a way she hadn't since III4 and III5 almost a year ago. She could feel something great looming over her horizon, something awful and awesome, something blasphemous and absurd. This is what she lived for.

Or it would just shrivel up and die, but either way, she wasn't going to give up. The outside heat swept into her apartment as her wheezing air conditioner languished behind. She lay down on her bed, cocooned in the warmth of the earth, as the cherub's innards churned and fed the tumor growing inside it. Marceline imagined her heart beating in unison with whatever soul gestated in her kitchen as she drifted off to sleep in the doldrums of deep-colored dreams.

On the morning of the third day, she awoke to a fresh morning breeze. She ran to the cherub to inspect its progress. The berry of goo and the cup had been engulfed by the keratinous outgrowths, which started to fill the inside of the cherub to capacity. The liquid had all dried and the outside of what now looked like a huge spider's egg was crusted and flaked white. Marceline suspected the time was nigh and she decided to stay in her apartment, waiting to witness the moment the life awoke from its prenatal slumber. She jumped onto the couch, giddy as the dust spewed upward swirled in circles in the open window's breeze; she opened her computer, peering back at the cherub every several minutes.

It was before lunchtime that she heard one of the intake fans on the cherub suddenly spin up violently. She swung around to the kitchen counter and saw its insides completely stuffed by the keratinous mass. Flakes and strings of the matter were spilling out of its vents. She smiled widely, showing all her teeth as her chest swelled with anticipation. She waited for the cherub to open and for the egg to peel apart and hatch. A moment later, the cherub started to rock side to side and then tipped over. Marceline reached out to set it upright, but the cherub's exterior shell was searing hot. She pulled her hand away and the cherub started to beep and whine in mechanical pain and terror, its display filling with blood. A look of panic twisted her eyebrows upwards as she wrenched its electrical plug from the wall socket and stepped back to other side of the kitchen. Her hand, shaking, gravitated towards her holster. The cherub's display went dark

as it jolted itself across the counter, like a swallowed monster fighting to crack free. Marceline caught a glimpse of the seams and seals of the cherub beginning to split as it rolled itself right out the kitchen window.

Marceline leaped up onto the kitchen counter and peered four stories down at the empty parking lot below. She saw a crash, the cherub smashing asunder and the keratinous mass, now a bit bigger than a watermelon, rolling off into some dried bushes. She flew out the apartment door, down the stairs, and around the corner to behind her building, under the kitchen window. The cherub confetti was sprawled across the asphalt lot, heralding the birth of a new horror. She didn't have time to think as her eye caught a shadow zipping past off to the side. Her hand swung for her gun as the shadow pounced out of the bushes. She felt a sting of fire shoot up her left leg and looked down to see a girl. Time trickled to a halt and her eyes opened wide.

Or at least its head was like that of a girl; its hair was mousy but its mouth was too wide. Marceline felt dizzy. Its mouth was too wide and it had too many teeth, each pointing in a different direction. Marceline's vision started to blur, and that single second stretched out into a narrow sea. Its body was wrinkled like an eyelid and its skin was similarly pale to hers, but patchy with matted fur and keratin dandruff. Her left knee buckled, she felt winded. Its legs, oh so many legs, all seemed to shift and slide across and over its contorting body. Marceline drew the gun from its holster on her right thigh as she fell backwards onto the rough, hot pavement. She wanted to throw up, to melt away, to wake up, but she had no strength left, no breath to scream.

The girl's face looked up at Marceline, a few of its prehensile legs wrapping themselves around her as it released her left leg from its mouth. Marceline's skin was more numb than when she was little, but the pain had sucked everything from her body. The horror pounced up onto

her, heavy, its legs stretching all out and over her, enveloping her. Its face was like raw ground beef and the ruby-red blood from Marceline's leg dripped out from the gaps in its Cheshire grin and down onto her chest. Marceline's eyelids flickered down, the lights were going out. Rallying a last gasp of air, she plunged the gun into the hadal doom and pulled the trigger, but her gun whispered only a click—the piece of Seaward Haul trash.

Its teeth kissed into her neck. Its eyes were inky pools and as Marceline's eyes shut themselves, she dove into their depths. Its breathing sounded like the ocean and she smelled the sea breeze, cradled and finally cool. Time drained out into infinity.

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