

1

"Bright, write the dash 1."

Piotr stares at me blankly as the Chief tosses an empty workbook onto my desk. Noticing this, his eyes seem to come into focus. His face changes and he glances at the workbook. Sensing the approach of meaning, he contemplates the ramifications of what he's just read. Some communication that I fail to comprehend passes between us and then he begins to speak. In French.

"Fais ce que tu voudras."

Ah.

So, then, this line drawn is a key.

2

The big trucks are easy to drive. Larger tires, greater purchase on the road. Testing on this model has been lagging behind for months. Somehow, we've run out of test pilots.

They're asking me to write the owner's manual.

I've yet to sit behind the wheel.

For some, this might be a problem. I figure, a job is a job, and I'm ready to work.

Tomorrow, I'm outfitted for stresspants.

3

The test site has cleared out on account of a pending series of test shots hosted from several addresses down the road. There is some fear that the radiation will drift into our facility.

The thin atmosphere has never seemed to worry anyone, before.

I volunteered to stay. Piotr can always be found, with minimal difficulty, somewhere near my person. The Chief stays for his own reasons.

I've never written a manual. For some time, in fact, I've been working away from the equipment. Stationed atop the west ridge, keeping a lookout for any specialists from the other sites who might wander into our vicinity. I cover my beat twice per hour, then park the vehicle upstairs (as we call it) and lean against the hood, surveying the expanse. The grounds are cold, flat. There is a lot of sand.

I've started drinking coffee.

Piotr has taken over my shifts. We maintain radio contact and sometimes trade sarcastic remarks about the birds who have taken up residence down on the flight line. Sometimes, I am sent down to chase them away. Piotr simply fires shots from wherever he happens to be standing. There is no shortage of targets.

Occasionally, some stray piece of paperwork is discovered, blowing across the runway. This causes a minor stir as interns are dispatched to retrieve the invaluable pulp.

Pieces of quartz turn up literally everywhere. At odd moments.

Eschewing the leaf, I write with a pencil.

4

They've butchered my work. Printed it how I never wrote it. But, they've left my name in the byline. Am I satisfied? It's difficult to tell.

These big trucks will be death traps. In spite of the RC lights, huge tires, commercially branded bed liners — nothing seems to help. It's no surprise that we ran

out of test pilots. Even here, word gets out. Back on Earth, rumors of deaths in the testing program have circulated for months. Of course, no one outside the test site knows the details, but everyone is curious.

At the same time, nobody listens.

There's a chance that I'll be pinned with the blame for the poor performance of these vehicles.

That's when I'll post the unredacted dash 1.

5

Finished writing documentation. Now, stationed back near the equipment. The motivation, inscrutable. The timing, coincident.

Our paper is the first to show that you can use automated tools to detect the distinct speech patterns of psychopaths.

Management is pleased.

Naturally, this time, my name is being left off the byline.

Am I satisfied?

You tell me.

6

Son (can I call you that?), these men are only interested in results. Workers who can't hack the pace of operations are quickly sent packing, their home lives wrecked and their resumes in tatters.

I've observed the man they brought in to replace me. In fact, I conducted his first evaluation. (Frankly, I'm the only one left at the site with a solid handle on the material.) He won't last long. Too focused on the rumors surrounding our location. It's a shame, he's an

excellent driver.

Which brings me back to myself.

I guess I kind of miss writing the manuals. Standing on the ridge, scrawling longhand in my notebook while glancing occasionally at the birds flocking on the runway. Sad. That sort of life is no longer an option.

You don't question your assignment. Not if you want to live above ground.

On the other hand, I may still get out of here.

Someday, you may even be born.