

The Spaces In Between

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Some nights, Bill was a subtle presence, supporting, inspiring and endlessly stimulating. All it took was a little push in the right direction, just the right provoking question while Bill's hand was resting on the back of his neck, his touch light and unobtrusive as he idly played with Ford's hair, his flickering glow accompanying words of praise - and there was no limit to what Ford could achieve.

Some nights, Bill was overwhelming, flooding his mind, his dreams, his every thought, and Ford readily let himself drown in strange, foreign sensations more intense than his wildest dreams.

Bill's arms were wrapping around him like tendrils. Just as Ford relaxed into the embrace of the pitch-black limbs that were ever so slightly weaving their way around his waist and chest, they split into several thin, twisting vines that coiled even tighter around him, slithering around his thighs and upper arms. Others slowly made their way up to his neck, licking at his jawline like dark flames, threatening to engulf him fully.

His first instinct was to recoil, but Ford swallowed that impulse and remained as he was.

There was no reason to be afraid. This was a dream, and Bill was with him - no harm could come to him. And more than anything, he was curious were his delightfully unpredictable Muse was going with this. It might be just Bill's way of keeping him on his toes, or to entertain himself by playing with Ford to see how he would react. In either case, Ford was eager to show he was intrigued. He wouldn't want Bill to think he was coy or easily deterred, when the truth was that he was utterly, unabashedly fascinated by the captivating strangeness of their unique and undeniably intimate relationship.

So Ford inclined his head to meet the non-corporeal caress. To his mild disappointment, it barely felt like anything. The tendrils seemed neither warm nor cold, and aside from their restricting embrace, Ford could not even tell with certainty where they were touching him - all that he felt was an electrifying prickling where they just had brushed over the bare skin of his neck. When the shadows reached his

lips, he parted them to investigate this mystery more closely, yet to his surprise, they crept right past his teeth without any hesitation, coiling themselves around his tongue in a way that made Ford shiver in Bill's grasp.

There was something unnerving about the numbness tingling at the roof of his mouth quickly spreading to the back of his throat, as if the tendrils were still moving and slowly delving deeper inside of him. Ford wanted to speak, not certain if to object, but when he inhaled, the blackness flowed down his throat, formless and weightless, yet unmistakably blocking any air from entering his lungs. His pulse quickened at this invasive, unnatural intrusion, and it took Ford considerable mental effort to clear his mind and calm his agitated emotions enough not to gag.

Focus on the experience, he reminded himself. Observe.

He could feel the numbness trickling down his windpipe and he swallowed in vain trying to get rid of the sensation.

Don't fight it.

He drew another deep breath until his lungs pressed against his ribs, yet he still felt like he was suffocating. A dizziness started to overcome him, his pulse a frantic rhythm thrumming in his ears and throbbing in his fingertips. Ford clenched his fists.

Focus.

His lungs were about to burst yet they still felt empty, and he craved to breath in again, to desperately try to fill them with air instead of void.

Focus--

Ford coughed helplessly, and to his horror, he exhaled nothing but formless shadows that spilled over his face, covering his mouth and nose as if to gently, softly smother him.

It was then that the panic kicked in. Ford struggled violently against the tight embrace, and the black limbs yielded, suddenly not restricting anymore, but clinging to him like tar without releasing him from their grasp. A choked noise wrung itself from the back of Ford's throat as he tried to claw the blackness off his face, grasping at nothing.

He had to break free, he needed to breathe, he needed to -...

Laughter rang out all about him, cutting through his desperate thoughts. There was something distinctly mocking in its mirth. The tone in Bill's voice, however, was merely teasing - and rather gently so. "IT'S A DREAM, SIXER - YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING."

Relief flooded through Ford when he realized that the intrusive tendrils were draining out of him, and he stilled in his movements, surprised to find that he was not suffocating anymore.

Of course, he was in the mindscape, why would he require oxygen at all?

Slightly embarrassed at his visceral reaction, Ford tried to keep his breathing level as the blackness spilled from his mouth like ink, dripping from his chin and disappearing in the star-speckled dark below him. Now that he felt the odd numbness completely withdrawing from within him, a part of Ford regretted that he had failed to keep his erroneous instincts under control. It was the same part that absurdly, achingly wished Bill would crawl right back in, deeper and further into every crevice of him, until all of him was black like the immaculate void between the stars of the endless night sky that surrounded them.

It was then that Ford blushed.

"IT'S ALRIGHT, IQ. RELAX." Bill floated closer to him and ruffled his hair affectionately, maybe even apologetically. "SHEESH, WHO KNEW HUMANS WERE SO EASILY BOTHERED BY NOT BEING ABLE TO BREATHE PROPERLY."

Ford flushed even harder, now feeling entirely ridiculous for getting so agitated when he should have known better.

"It's a survival instinct", he said defensively. He wiped his still tingling mouth, half-expecting it to be smeared with ink-like liquid, but there was no trace of it left. "In most other cases, restricted breathing means imminent death, so of course the natural reaction is to fight the intrusion--"

Bill cut him off, circling him with sudden interest. "BUT THAT IS THE FUNNY PART - YOU WEREN'T EVEN DYING."

That finally drew Ford's attention to the conversation at hand. Technically, Bill was right of course, but it was not that simple. After all, hadn't Bill been the one who had taught him that dreams could be no less real to the human mind than the waking world? Before Ford could point that out, however, Bill beat him to it.

"AND NOT JUST BECAUSE WE'RE IN THE MINDSCAPE", Bill clarified offhandedly, before he continued. "I MEAN, SURE, YOU WERE CHOKING," he conceded with a dismissive half-shrug, "BUT EVEN OXYGEN-DEPENDENT FLESH BAGS LIKE YOU CAN TAKE THAT FOR MORE THAN A FEW HARMLESS SECONDS. SO WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?"

Ford adjusted his glasses, not entirely proud of his failure to account for these factors. But Bill seemed genuinely interested rather than intent on ridiculing him, so Ford was quick to elaborate. "Well, it is less the actual certainty of death and more the sensation of being about to die that triggers this response. As I said, it is a primitive instinct, not a rational decision."

"SOUNDS LIKE YOUR FEAR CIRCUITS TOOK YOU FOR ONE HELL OF A RIDE THERE." Bill's eye was on him, and for a short moment, Bill was considering him in a way that made Ford keenly aware of his own heartbeat and the warmth of the blood in his cheeks. "NOT THAT I'D KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THAT. FEAR OF DEATH?", Bill soared

up above Ford's head, spreading his arms to gesture to all the stars in countless familiar and foreign constellations, "NOT LIKELY WHEN YOU'RE OLDER THAN THE UNIVERSE AND WILL STILL BE AROUND WHEN THIS PLACE IS OLD NEWS."

Bill dropped his arms and slowly floated down to meet Ford at face level. "SO YOU GOTTA BE A LITTLE MORE SPECIFIC HERE, SIXER - HOW DOES IT FEEL TO DIE?"

It was in moments like these that Ford briefly indulged in the thought that maybe Bill could be intrigued by him in a similar fashion than Ford was drawn to the complex, incomprehensible nature of his Muse. But, more likely, it was just a superficial scientific curiosity - not more than a fleeting philosophical interest of a being far beyond his limited human imagination.

"YEAH, PHILOSOPHICAL, THAT'S WHAT YOU COULD CALL IT." Bill settled down by the collar of Ford's shirt, his thin arm stretched to reach around Ford's other shoulder, and Ford believed he could feel the tips of Bill's eyelashes flutter against his jawline. "YOU REALLY DO HAVE A WAY WITH WORDS, IQ."

The pleasant twinge in Ford's stomach was only heightened when Bill's slender hand casually brushed up the nape of his neck.

"TRUTH IS, YOU HUMANS ARE SO FRAGILE, IT'S CUTE! LIKE THE FACT THAT YOU NEED OXYGEN TO KEEP THAT IMPRESSIVE LITTLE BRAIN OF YOURS RUNNING." Small fingers scratched the back of Ford's head, underlining the fondness in Bill's words.

Heat blossomed in Ford's cheeks at Bill's choice of words. Involuntarily, he found himself thinking of the marks and bruises that had been scattered all over his body after he had let Bill take control of it.

Ford had discovered them hours later, once the initial numbness had subsided, surprised at the sudden dull pain when he had least expected it - when his sleeve had stuck to the raw, weeping scratch marks below his elbow as he undressed, when his fingers had accidentally found sensitive, fresh bruises right beneath the collar of his shirt, or the first time his pant legs had chafed the hot welts of burned skin on the inside of his thighs, making him wince with each step. Once discovered, the bruises had been hard to ignore. Each little hidden mark had served as a burning hot reminder that his body had been shared, in a way more intimate fashion than Ford had ever thought possible.

Ford had started mapping them out, tracing the marks searching for patterns and reverently following the ebb and flow of the pain, remnants of something vast and eternal that had slipped into his delicate skin.

Naturally, he had also wondered about the intention - these injuries could not all have been accidents, some had been too deliberate and in decidedly odd places, almost like secrets to uncover. And each time the ache faded after his fingers had brushed over the irritated tissue, it had left his skin tingling, not unlike the lingering warmth of a lover's touch.

Now Ford believed he was beginning to understand. It was not just that Bill was

simply unaware of the extent of human frailty - more than anything, he seemed irresistibly drawn to it. Bill was essentially exploring something new and exciting that only Ford could offer him, and that realization made Ford think back to the bruises with an entirely different kind of appreciation.

The thought that he, in any way, could be at least a sliver as thrilling and novel to Bill as Bill was to him was intoxicating.

"Bill", Ford's voice faltered and he quickly cleared his throat before he continued, "If you are curious about that, I would be more than ready to share this-- experience with you."

"AND HERE I THOUGHT YOU WEREN'T SO KEEN ON FEELING LIKE YOU'RE ABOUT TO EXPIRE!" Bill floated up to face him, doing little to hide the enthusiasm in his tone.

"Since you have already shared so much with me, allowing you an insight into my human perspective is the least I could offer in return", Ford insisted, "Besides, I am perfectly certain that I can handle it now."

"ALRIGHT, I'LL TAKE YOUR WORD FOR IT", Bill agreed without missing a beat, and his eagerness at Ford's offer was both flattering and endearing. Bill's small hands cupped his cheeks and their light touch registered as cooling on Ford's flushed skin - not cold, exactly, more like the absence of something. "I'M GOING TO TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOU, FORDSY, DON'T YOU WORRY."

"Why would I be worried?", Ford retorted with a smile, amused by Bill's unnecessary concern. His Muse should know by now that he was a quick learner and that his level of self-control through applying reason to govern his emotional urges exceeded what was to be expected from the average human by far.

"After all, it is just a dream."

As it turned out, that was also the crux of the matter.

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The ocean swallowed him whole. Waves collided above him, pushing him under, and before Ford could even think of struggling, he was already sinking into the depths below. Cold masses of water surrounded him to all sides, and in the murky gloom, Ford lost all sense of direction. He held out his hands, yet his fingers were blurring into indistinct shapes before his eyes.

I must be dreaming, he thought.

An otherworldly silence engulfed him until there was nothing but his own sluggish pulse dully pounding in his ears, and even though it felt like he was floating, the water was still tugging at his clothes, irresistibly pulling him downwards.

Bill was not with him in visible form, but trapped alone in this vast coldness, Ford was in a strange way aware of his presence. It was in the silence pressing on his ear drums, the unknown deep sea lurking beneath him and in the foreboding quietness of a few fleeting heartbeats before Ford was overcome by the overwhelming urge to breathe. Ford thrashed about, struggling in vain against the undertow until the fear slowly subsided. It was replaced by a numbing, all-encompassing calm. The icy cold was seeping into his bones, and finally, Ford gave in and let himself sink into the embrace of the bottomless ocean.

Countless arms reached for him and pulled him out of the depths to the surface with astonishing ease. Ford emerged from the water's grasp, dripping wet, coughing and wheezing between deep gulps of breath.

He found himself floating under a wide, night-blue starry sky, reminiscent of the day when he had first met his Muse. The black water beneath him stretched beyond his field of vision, now completely quiet, reflecting the countless stars like a perfectly smooth, dark mirror. It was a breathtaking sight. Hovering far above the water with nothing to hold onto, a small speck lost amidst infinite wonders, was humbling - but it was also unsettling in its sheer endlessness in a way that made Ford's stomach lurch.

"NICE VIEW", Bill had appeared at his side as if he'd been there all along, flickering cheerfully and clearly not daunted in the face of eternity. "I LIKE YOUR CHOICE OF SETTING, SIXER."

Ford couldn't remember picking a setting, at least not consciously. Yet when he glanced down at the ocean stretching through his mindscape, there was a pull somewhere right behind his stomach, and Ford thought of drowning, of sinking to the deep unknown bottom of the open sea.

He shuddered.

"PITY IT WAS OVER SO SOON", Bill interrupted his thoughts, and Ford pulled his eyes away from the black surface back to the warm, familiar glow of his Muse, a small sun below the firmament. "COULD HAVE PLAYED UP THE DRAMA A LITTLE THERE, STANFORD - YOU PROMISED YOU'D PUT ON A SHOW FOR ME."

Right, that had been the purpose of this dream, hadn't it? Ford vaguely remembered that before going to sleep, he had mentally prepared himself for a potentially harrowing experience, but it had turned out to be relatively harmless. He had been scared, yes, yet that had passed quickly. In a way, it had not felt real or immediate enough to truly elicit that kind of reaction out of him. Ford did not quite understand what had been amiss.

"WHO KNOWS?", Bill said with a dismissive flick of his wrist. "DREAMS ARE FICKLE. IT COMES WITH THE PACKAGE."

"But it worked last time, didn't it?" Ford distinctly remembered his very real fear, his earnest struggle - it had been so unlike these weirdly distant sensations just now.

Bill tapped one finger right beneath his eye as his gaze wandered down to the unnaturally quiet ocean. "MAYBE YOUR BRAIN FINALLY FIGURED OUT YOU'RE NOT REALLY KICKING THE BUCKET", he suggested, and when Ford was not convinced, Bill raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "HEY, I CAN ONLY WORK WITH WHAT I HAVE. SEEMS LIKE YOU JUST NEVER ACTUALLY DROWNED."

That did make sense. His subconscious could not convincingly emulate what Ford had never experienced - and he'd never even been in danger of drowning. There was an obvious futility in trying to share something that he knew only little about himself.

It was a bit disheartening that despite the imaginative freedom they offered, even Ford's dreams with his Muse were woefully constrained due to the limits of his own knowledge.

"AW, DON'T BEAT YOURSELF UP ABOUT IT, IQ." A small finger flicked his nose upwards. A little startled, Ford looked up to see Bill's eye curve into a smile. "IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS!"

Ford laughed and rubbed his nose, relieved that Bill at least was not terribly disappointed. It was hard to pinpoint why he still had this sinking feeling in his chest at their failed experiment.

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The sun was setting in the attic.

Ford's head was throbbing as he scribbled down incoherent thoughts at the margins of the complex notes written in a thin, scrawly handwriting that was not his, his mind a tired, hazy mess. The shadow of the stained window had crept steadily closer until its eye was falling on him. Ford liked to think of it as his Muse watching over him.

He closed his eyes, exhilarated but also deeply exhausted, and as he leaned back in his chair, it was as if the darkening shadows beneath the sloping roof were reaching out to embrace him.

His fingers were still a little stiff when he rubbed them together and Ford shivered in the warmth of the evening sun. Looking down at his desk, he smiled at the numbers and words before him that he had so crudely tried to annotate. He did not pick up the pen again, but instead reached out to fondly trace the neat and perfect equations that had miraculously transferred from his own fingers onto the paper.

To think that this was also a rare opportunity for Bill made his heart surge. Ford knew the thrill of discovery and the allure of the unknown, and all the more he wished that he could share all the wonders of a living, mortal body with his Muse.

Truth to be told, Ford himself mostly felt inconvenienced by his body's constraints and rarely had the mind to marvel at its senses and inner workings. It made him

wonder what it would be like to truly see himself through his Muse's eye, who marvelously deemed him worthy of greatness that transcended all human limitations.

There was something else that had been growing in his chest, a yearning that became harder and harder to bear.

They could take turns controlling his body and they could meet in dreams, but even though Ford had invited Bill into his mind, they couldn't truly be joined - two brilliant minds together, with no barriers between them.

"OH YEAH, THAT'S A REAL SHAME", Bill had agreed once Ford's thoughts had formed into a more coherent, palpable desire. "YOU'D BE IN FOR SUCH A TREAT, IT WOULD BLOW YOUR MIND!"

Ford did not doubt that. In fact, he craved it so much his head would spin at the sheer thought of this limitless, raw knowledge too vast for his all too human mind to be contained. But he knew he was privileged to be allowed even small glimpses into something so fantastic and magnificent. He was already blessed, and to wish for more seemed ungrateful.

Sudden pain made Ford abruptly stop in his movements. There was a smear of blood where his index finger had brushed over the paper, sullyng the immaculate notes.

Absentmindedly, Ford put the finger to his mouth. The sting of the deep paper cut registered as an exciting stimulation to his addled, tired mind, mixing with the coppery taste on his tongue to something fresh and foreign. It made him feel closer to something he still couldn't grasp - the most enticing mystery of all.

A thought came to him, outrageous and thrilling, and Ford did not even have to make up his mind. He was too enamored by the idea of being able to show Bill the extent of his gratitude.

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It required a certain amount of preparation, of course. Ford had made sure that Fiddleford was preoccupied with a demanding task that he could not abandon, but he still locked the bathroom door, just to be certain. His assistant's overly sensitive disposition made him incapable of appreciating the nature of Ford's rituals, so Ford had to make sure to keep them secret. Ford did not mind - it felt more appropriate to keep this only between his Muse and him.

Once the door was locked, Ford lit the candles that he had arranged around the tub so they would reflect in the prisms that were carefully placed between them, creating a circle of light. It was gratuitous, and he knew that, but he wanted to give this a proper setting worthy of a being that was divine in every sense.

Finally, Ford placed his journal on the cupboard next to the sink, ink and pen beside it, ready to document the experience. He undressed with rather unceremonious, routinized movements, yet his mouth was dry with anticipation when he turned off the faucets and stepped into the tub that had been filled almost up to the brim.

Meditating had turned out to be an efficient way to release his conscious thoughts and reach a state of half-dreaming that brought him closer to his Muse. After some practice, it took him not more than half a minute to achieve this, but right now, Ford found it unusually hard to focus. His nerves were tightly wound with apprehension like wire on a coil singing with electrical energy, yet he could let neither his impatience nor his excitement get in the way.

Breathe in. Clear your mind.

He tried to focus on the warmth of the water instead, his back pressed against the cold smooth surface of the tub, and reclined his head.

Breathe out. Beckon him.

He knew that there was the possibility of Bill not indulging him, at least not right away, so he waited, heartbeat after heartbeat, repeating his mantra devoutly, like a prayer to a whimsical god, a plea to accept his offering.

Just as his mind was slipping, he felt Bill's presence, the echo of cascading laughter resonating within him like a shiver running down his spine. Ford's heart was thumping against his ribs in a frantic rhythm, as the familiar numbness slowly overcame him, trickling down from his scalp to his fingertips.

Ford closed his eyes and exhaled.

Let him in.

When Ford regained consciousness, he found himself on the wet tiles of the bathroom floor, coughing and gasping for air despite the water rattling in his lungs, his mind swirling. With trembling arms, he tried to prop himself up, but before he could reorient himself, his nose started to bleed - red, dark splotches falling onto the white tiles. His vision became unfocused, but Ford dug his fingers into his arms to stay conscious, helplessly convulsing under violent retching and coughing.

The exhilaration thrumming in his veins was fading into panic. He had to breathe. Just breathe. Ford tried to focus on nothing but that, inhaling and exhaling, but he was still shaken by violent coughs, blood splattering on the floor with each tremor.

A sense of dread had come over him, and Ford could wait no longer. He reached for the sink, slowly pulling himself up, but his legs were numb and stiff and he almost slipped on the tiles that were treacherously slick with water and blood. He caught himself by holding onto the sink with a death grip, and waited for the dizziness to

subside.

Without thinking, he pressed a hand to his nose and flinched at the dull pain, his thoughts still a swirling mess.

He must have hit the ground hard - maybe when Bill had left his body or when he had tried to step out of the tub - the tiles were slippery - he must have tripped - it wasn't broken - he was fine.

Still, Ford did not feel steady enough to look up. His gaze fell on the sink instead, and for a dreadful second, he was convinced it was filled with dark blood. It took him a moment to realize that it was ink. The bottle had apparently fallen over and spilled its content all over the porcelain.

Ford's fingers clenched around the brim of the sink. His fingertips were blackened with ink stains. Taking another rattling deep breath, Ford braced himself before he finally looked at the mirror, but as he did so, he could hardly see his pale, bloodied face staring back at him.

The mirror was covered in scrawled black letters written in running ink, and Ford's heart lurched at the sight:

THANKS FOR THE GIFT FORDSY

He reached out with trembling fingers to touch the writing, a physical remnant left by his Muse, and unlike the notes on the Portal, a message intended just for him. His finer motor skills were still recovering and his movements were clumsy, causing him to accidentally smudge the letters even further, but it mattered little. Like in a trance, Ford imagined his ink-stained fingers writing the words with a fondness that mirrored his own as he carefully, tenderly erased them.

Another secret to be tucked away, a small gift from his Muse to him - like he had made himself an offering of worship.

It made his chest swell with an emotion so strong, so overwhelming, he had to choke down a sob. Ford did not know how long he remained like this, holding onto the sink, shaking and crying, while his blood dripped into the pool of ink, black like the ocean beneath the endless night sky, like the cold, vast space between the bright heat of the stars.

Thirty years later, Ford still traces the scars on the inside of his forearm, following the dots in pairs of three scattered across his skin, almost like constellations. He vehemently rejects that thought. There is nothing beautiful and wondrous about the

remnants of his narcissistic naivety.

As Ford traces the lighter tissue of faded burns and scars on his chest and stomach, his fingers inevitably search for shapes in the intricate patterns. He is relieved to find that their arrangements are accidental, nonsensical, and do not resemble any familiar geometrical form.

Things like that leave marks, of course - superficial, faded reminders of past mistakes.

There are a lot of reasons why Ford prefers to wear sweaters at all times.

There is no reason why his heart immediately starts thumping painfully against his ribs when he submerges his head in the water of the bathtub, and Ford digs his fingernails into his palms, waiting until his lungs feel like they are going to collapse and the need for air overrides all of his thinking.

When he finally surfaces, something drains from him, washed away by an overwhelming wave of relief.

Ford reclines against the back of the tub, deliberately drawing deep, greedy breaths until he has to press his eyes shut to keep his head from spinning. His chest is heaving, but he can't seem to breathe in deeply enough for his lungs to finally be full.

The dizziness fades as his heartbeat slows to a steady rhythm, and there is no trace of Bill in the marks he left, only in the spaces in between.