

Blushy Mushy

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Green speckled pipes drew meaningless patterns over the porous concrete walls. Liquid hissed through metal, unknowable contents carried to unknowable destinations. Whatever those contents may have been, they were hot – the pipes seared skin on contact, and the air was dense with hot steam. The passage was so tight that every struggling lurch felt like crawling into a copper straitjacket.

This concrete pyroduct was harsh, but not unsurvivable; Placed roughly an hour's crawl apart were chambers, four feet wide and twelve across, which were only as warm as a July afternoon and mercifully walkable.

Finna unshouldered her bag and pushed it onto the ground in front of her. Not bothering to rise, she slid over the floor and pressed herself against a comfortably lukewarm patch of wall. She peeled her shirt from her chest and flopped it around in a moist, greasy imitation of a fanning motion. The sticking and unsticking of moist cloth on her skin felt vile, and she gained no comfort from pulling in the dense, hot fog. She stopped.

"I'm hungry" Finna said plaintively.

"There's no food" was the reply, tinged with a near imperceptible shade of staccato.

And there wasn't. Finna had checked her bag enough times that, despite her hunger, she felt no inclination to look again. Ezra, her assistant, had checked just as much.

The conversation instantly boiled away. For a while they remained motionless, sitting across from each other, just breathing. Even here drawing breath was a struggle.

"Are we going to die?" Finna asked.

"Could be." Ezra fingered the outer pocket on his bag. "Hope not."

Silence.

"It's only been eight chambers since we ran out."

"And how many since we started?"

"Enough that we'd be better off going forward than back."

Silence again. A queasy gout of despair bobbed against the roof of Finna's stomach, briefly breaching the numbing blanket that famine and fatigue had wrapped around her senses. She felt her future, rich and lively, become truncated, inaccessible – gone. She gripped her middle and tightened her chest. Her eyes were tight. Struggling to breathe, Finna held her pose, tense, until she managed to press her feelings back down. There would definitely be food at the tunnel's exit.

She lay on her side. Really, hope for success was entertained only as a token to her

conscious mind. The long journey had left her very, very tired. Her body, mortified by fatigue, was no longer cognizant of its duty to resist oblivion.

So, physical inevitability and conscious unreality met in a predictable compromise; Finna decided that she would lie down for just a little while. Then, she would rise when Ezra asked. And, if he didn't, she would rise on her own. And, if she didn't – time passed quietly.

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“Hey.” Ezra's voice came, interrupting Finna's rest. He intended exclamation but somehow sounded furtive. “I found something.”

Finna lay still.

“Look here!”

With effort, she raised her head and rested it on her hand. When she opened her eyes, the room had gotten foggier. She blinked slowly – it was only her vision. Looking forward, Ezra had pushed his bag out to his left. Between him and the bag was a clutter of blue pebbles – eggs?

“Mushrooms” he said, “I put my bag over them so I didn't notice.”

“Oh.” – A moment of computation – “They're edible?”

“I don't know. They were just growing here. Try one.”

“Sure. But, ah- you're much bigger, aren't you? Pois-”

“Exactly. I don't think you could carry me back.” He interjected, reciting a line that he had clearly given prior thought to.

Silently, Finna frowned up at him. “If I were to pass out!” came Ezra's hurried addendum. “And anyway, mushrooms here tend to be mostly fine, at worst they will mostly make you vomit or trip or go berserk, but you know sometimes they can even-”

Her frown had not moved, so his recital ended. Finna rested her head in the crook of her arm and lay still. At the sight of food, however, hunger quickly reasserted itself. Not even thirty seconds passed before it felt as if her stomach was being twisted around a rod of ache. She raised her head and again rested it in her hand.

Ezra was packing the mushrooms into his bag. “Are you sure you don't want to try one?”

“Maybe one is fine.”

Ezra jolted to action, clearly relieved. His hand flew to the front pouch of his bag but, after a few heartbeats of effervescent yet clumsy fumbling, shifted course and pinched one up from the pile on the ground. Then, in a movement too quick for Finna to perceive all at once, Ezra's arm shot forward, his hand opened, and a tiny blue poof bounced off of her clavicle and rolled over the floor.

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Finna swept her arm over the concrete in a listless but swift motion. She pulled the mushroom close to her face and stared, nearly cross-eyed, miming contemplation. Rushing through the motions of practiced caution with callous inattention, she made a small, probing nibble. Then, since in her hunger she perceived neither smell nor taste but only the tantalizing thunderclap of sweet euphoric relief rolling over her mouth, her second bite took the soft blue puff down whole.

Her spirit stirred, waking, straining to rise from beneath the moist blanket of heat and fatigue. Her hand became solid beneath her head, her eyelids no longer sagged. She rose to a loose cross-legged position.

“Want some more?”

“Yeah.”

Ezra grinned.

He tossed the handful that remained on the floor to her, letting them bounce on the concrete and roll out like a spread of marbles. In a few snaps of her arms Finna took in a half dozen more mushrooms. Before she was even fully cognizant that she had eaten these, she took in a handful more. They had a squishy, queasy texture, like a thin rubber bladder filled with rich cream. Their faintly musty taste gelled onto the surfaces of her mouth, hanging in her throat and forming a film over her lips. The salty accent of sweat, the only seasoning Finna had tasted for some time, did not penetrate the mellow yet overbearing flavour.

Grateful, hungry, Finna pushed another one past her teeth, meanwhile leaning low to scan for more. She found nothing. Ezra, staring intently at the patch of empty concrete between them, tightened his eyelids and tapped his finger twice against his jaw. Finna sat up straight and haphazardly pushed down her enthusiasm. She wanted more but, suddenly self-conscious, could not straighten out a set of words that would convey her want without scratching at her veneer of trepidation.

“That’s probably enough for testing.”

“They’re dangerous – possibly dangerous – but pretty small ?” was the reply.

“Don’t you think it’s best to save some for later?”

Ezra stared, just as intently as before, at Finna. Feeling full, as if she had swallowed a musty stone, she broke his gaze.

“Yeah, we should save some for later.” She replied, sinking back to the floor.

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Ezra’s little finger was nestled snug in one of the troughs between Finna’s ribs. Placed tastefully low, his humid hand was, assumedly, parsing her heartbeats. When he

was satisfied with his reading, he leaned over his knees, reached for her arm, pulled it up, and roughly pressed two fingers into her wrist. Then, following with unnecessary delicacy, Ezra placed the arm on her stomach, traced the side of his hand over her hairline, tucked back a few sweaty locks, and cupped his hand over her forehead.

Apparently satisfied there too, he popped something spherical into his mouth and moved his prodding elsewhere. It was interminable – two fingers under her nose, three on the clavicle, two thrust thrice more into her wrist, a palm over the stomach, and even a pinch under the tongue. The pitter-patter of touches nearly massaged her to sleep. Finna was grateful for his care but – inasmuch as it appeared that Ezra didn't know what the hell he was doing – she would have preferred if she were left to rest in peace.

Nonetheless, she didn't have the will to protest. If previously Finna felt like she was pushing against a blanket, now she was mummified. It was as if the capillaries in her limbs had been pressed shut. Cold, humming frisson rolled over her body in uneven waves. She felt that if she turned to face the ceiling she might choke on sweat. Inside, her stomach was hot, pained and disturbed. Each shallow, halting draught of humid air felt like sucking a cloud into a boiler; Breathing out was a struggle to avoid vomiting steam.

Ezra finally withdrew. "How are you feeling? Are you feeling okey?"

"Are you okey? You're doing okey, aren't you?"

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He pinched her chin and glared down at her. "Look at me and tell me that you're feeling okey!"

She assented, "I am okey".

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Some amount of time later – adrift, Finna could not distinguish now from eternity – Ezra came to check on her, as he had by then done a few times. A small pile of discarded plastics lay to her left, which she rolled under her fingers as lucidity allowed. Ezra tore open a packet and unsheathed some unknowable filmy thing, assumedly from the first aid kit, and added a new piece to the pile.

"Relax. Just a few more times and I'll be done, I think." He had a refreshing smile, but his eyes were rock-solid. The word 'relax' carried the strained tone of an order.

But Finna, simmering in dull, painful queasiness, acquiesced; And then there was nothing under her fingertips, and time passed again.

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A heavy feeling. She saw mottled grey under a red film – vacuous blobs, a cacography of visual noise. Encased, she lay beneath a shell of setting cement mixed from sweat and ash.

A febrile warmth flowed over the moist cocoon, cutting rivulets of frisson into her body like a finger tracing lines in wet sand. The feeling poured over her shoulders and trickled languidly down her arms. Adhering to her flank, it moved in slow drops down her waist, hips, and thighs, pooling in seething puddles over her body. A tickle started at her feet, bolted up her legs, and paused over her middle. The passing of the feeling, the lines it traced, left unnatural prickles of frost at the edge of her perception.

A blush of warmth brushed against the bottom of her stomach. Embers of illness flickered above its soughing membrane. The warmth pushed in, unbidden. A blushy, mushy feeling – her stomach throbbed like a barrel of fermenting mash being struck by a mallet. The hot flecks of sickness were hammered awake, swirling inside. Dormant coals of pain re-ignited, searing the floors of her innards. The pounding continued, throbbing and throbbing and throbbing.

Finna was unnerved. Confused. Wasn't it her body? Why couldn't she move? The wet ash hardened over her before she could even notice herself beginning to struggle. Preempted, she found her wrists and knees buried beneath an unconquerable weight. Why? Consciously, she pushed against the weight. It pushed back, forming, reforming, slipping over her motions, wrapping itself around her limbs.

It would have been easy to just relax. The weight was heavy, and struggling up was difficult. Briefly, Finna felt the allure of the abyss.

But why? Pushing hard, then harder, then so hard that her vertebrae ground against each other like chunks of jagged flint, she squelched out from the scummy black. Coughing, swaying, she voided her lungs and her stomach. Finally free, she rose to see a rolling, hilly field of pea green, stretched wide under a spotty grey horizon. She felt disgusted.

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Finna's eyes hummed open. She was sitting. Her head hung over her standard issue cargo pants. Ezra's trousers, kneepad, and boot bordered the left portion of her vision, a pace away from her thigh. She coughed. There was snot on her lip and a speckling of drool on her chin. She couldn't feel the ground under her, the air, or any part of her body. Translucent, she tossed her hand onto her lap in an attempt to substantiate herself. Her fingers would not grip at her command. When she gave her leg a probing shunt her foot dragged over the concrete like a chunk of wood.

"Oh. I see you're awake. Are you still feeling bad?"

Ezra's voice. Finding strength, Finna clenched her fist over her thigh. She began to rise, though her still sleeping body swayed languidly beneath her.

"Relax. Don't strain yourself. Are you sure you can handle this?"

She clenched a little tighter. Her sense of touch began to return, though the feelings still hovered tepidly over her skin. She was itchy from sweat. Her face was muggy. It felt

like the capillaries under her skin were filled with hot air. The embers of sickness still jostled inside.

“Try not to stumble. Why don’t you try kneeling down?”

Concentrating her resolve, she stamped the embers out with a heavy boot. Rushing blood thrummed beneath her skin. She stood tall, as was her longstanding habit.

“I’m fine standing.” She didn’t face him.

No reply. Finna felt an ugly gaze on her back.

“I think I’ll start moving.”

Finna took a step towards the exit. Ezra’s boots clacked twice behind her. In a twitch her hand was at her gun-

“Hey-”

but it was absent. Tense, she stood fixed in her pose.

One clack backwards, and a short pause; “Hey now. Hey! Are you sure you’re feeling well?”

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“I have a question for you. What the hell did you do to me?”

No reply.

She repeated herself, now craning her neck, enunciating each word with effort. “What the hell did you do?”

“You nasty- you fucking bitch! Tell me what you did! You’re sick! You sick, sick-”

Finna held her fists at her sides. Her throat swelled. She struggled to speak into the thick air.

“Sick, ugly fucking bitch! Do you think I’ll let you get away with this? Tell me what the fuck you did!”

Panting, she swayed atop her shaking legs. Her eyes were open wider than they had been in a while.

“Finna,”

She snapped to face him. Her blood was hot, always growing hotter under the room’s suffocating humidity.

“Finna. The mushrooms are probably-”

“Probably poisonous. You think you can put me into your sick little game like this? I know better, fucker!” The final sentence was punctuated by a taut lean and a pointed finger.

“They’re probably causing mood swings!” Ezra spoke tersely, nearly cutting his words with

the frantic lashes of his tongue. “You know, why don’t you try to calm down with me? Don’t you remember the, eh, the breathing exercises we-”

“You knew they were fucked up! You gave them to me, and you knew!”

“I was doing what I- what we thought was best. I said they could cause paranoia! Didn’t you ask for more, despite the risks? You wanted them. If anything, you knew!”

“Liar! Liar! Why were you eating, liar? Where’d you get the food from? You ate one, I saw you, and you were fine!”

“What?”

“Don’t try and fraud- fake, lie to me! I saw it, when you were touching me,” – she turned to the side, her face rotten – “you just put it in your mouth, because you thought I was drugged, so you thought I wouldn’t see. But you forget that I fucking know better than you!”

Ezra was still, lips pursed, eyes narrow. His index finger rolled over the top of one of his shirt buttons.

“Ah, Finna, no, that was my chewing gum.”

“You don’t fucking chew gum you fucking liar.”

“Yes I do, are you- Don’t you remember? This whole journey, even since I quit smoking, I’ve been chewing gum all this time. Every single chamber, first thing I do is get a piece of gum out. Don’t you remember me chewing gum?”

Finna took pause. Did she remember? Probably not. Maybe not. But then,

“So you think I believe that I was starving, and you didn’t give me gum? Greedy, fat, potbellied fucking pig. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“It’s gum! For me! To quit smoking! It’s zero calorie! I would’ve given it to you if you asked, but you didn’t, and I assumed that you didn’t because there’s not any point. Don’t you remember me chewing gum?”

Maybe she did.

“Why were you feeling me all over? Why did you touch me?”

“Well, maybe that’s because I was checking on you, isn’t it?”

“You’re not a doctor.”

“I was doing my best! And, do you really think this is an okey accusation to make? After all this time? Did you not want my help? And would I really do something like that? And maybe- Well, don’t you think you should’ve said something if you didn’t like it?”

Maybe she should’ve. She pressed her fingertips into her palms.

No. It didn’t matter. Not a single word that freak says should be listened to. In a snap Finna turned, dropped to her belly and scraped herself – concrete against skin – as far into the tunnel as she could go.

Jagged bumps peeled ribbons from her fingers. Steam seared her skin. She could neither see nor breathe. Still, her ankles were exposed. She shuffled herself forward with constrained desperation.

“Finna, what- stop! You’re- you shouldn’t go like this.” Ezra’s voice was strained and high pitched

Finna neither paused nor turned her head. “If everything is fine, why did you take my gun? I don’t believe your fucking bullshit!”

Flexing her toes, she pushed herself forward in a rash of hurried jolts until only the flats of her feet remained in his reach.

“Don’t you think this is absurd?”

Now she was totally enveloped by seething pipes.

“Finna, you can’t make it like this. Come on, why don’t you come back?”

Despite her pace, Ezra’s presence was still palpable. Tendrils of anxiety played over her ankles. The parts of her calves which she knew he could reach were coated with prickles of anxiety in the shape – grotesquely familiar – of his hands.

Ezra spoke again. His voice hummed faintly beneath the sound of rushing water, but she couldn’t hear.

Finna’s desperation became less constrained. Her nails skittered over the cement, breaking into chips. In rushed, clawing grasps she yanked herself forward, using the pipework as a ladder. Blisters formed, burst, and formed again. She was panting, but couldn’t breathe. Fear made her movements light in spite of the pain.

One word, ‘Finna!’, rattled down the tunnel, terse and severe.

Rushing, she nearly swam through the hot darkness. Pain accrued. In her mind, Finna saw a trail of blood oozing behind her. She did not stop. Deep into the heat. As far away as she could go.

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When she finally felt alone, Finna halted her retreat. She pressed herself against the ground and pulled in her arms to prevent herself from being cooked. The sticky blood against her chest felt vile, but she couldn’t reach her shirt. If she could, her pus-slick hands would only get it dirtier.

She stabilized her breathing as much as she could. Briefly, Finna wondered if she was going to die. She didn’t dwell long on that thought.

She had been through so many chambers before that she could feel that the next one wasn’t far. Steadying herself, she prepared to move again.

Ezra’s voice – grave and watery – seeped into Finna’s ears from beneath the whistling of a burst pipe. “Don’t you think it’s best to talk this out back here?”

She burst forward.

“Aren’t you in pain? I took off your jacket. You had a fever.”

Her stomach turned. Now wasn’t the time to think about turning around.

“No matter how far you go along the wrong path, you can always turn around. Why are you running into danger? Aren’t you tired?”

Another shove forward. Pain. Finna had bashed her shoulder against the edge of a rusty fitting.

“Are you in any condition to be doing this? Don’t you realize that I was worried about you? That I was working to help you? You put put your holster over your jacket, don’t you remember?”

Finna took pause. Maybe he had.

“Why don’t you come back?”