

**I ASKED FOR
SQUID MAIDS**

**BUT
I DIDN'T
KNOW I'D
BECOME
ONE!**



A27

BY ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN





**Content you posted in-game has been deleted.
Violation: Advertising and/or Promotional Content.**

What do you do when a console manufacturer deletes your drawing because they mistake it for a light novel advertisement?

YOU WRITE 20,000 WORDS OUT OF SPITE IN A SINGLE WEEK.

Hey hi my name is Alex Zandra and I do a lot of things; one of which is draw fake light novel covers (silly situation + excessively long title) and post them to Twitter. When folks started drawing in-game postcards about squid maids in everyone's favorite ink-based multiplayer phenomenon, I made one of my own! But two days later, I got the message above. The decision was final. So I decided to prove them right—by actually making the book a reality. And now it's here in your hands! So settle in for 64 pages of maids, squids, squid maids, self-discovery, and a LOT of gender feels. Because that's what I do.

Please enjoy, and let's keep making wonderful things together. ♥

—Alex Zandra

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I Asked For Squid Maids But I Didn't Know I'd Become One!

by Alex Zandra Van Chestein

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Prologue

The postcard interface on the screen wasn't especially big, but there was enough room to draw all the important things: the title in a word bubble and, to the side, a surprised inkling girl in a maid outfit. No dismay or distress; that part was important. Just surprise. Maybe there would've been some visible blushing if the resolution wasn't so—

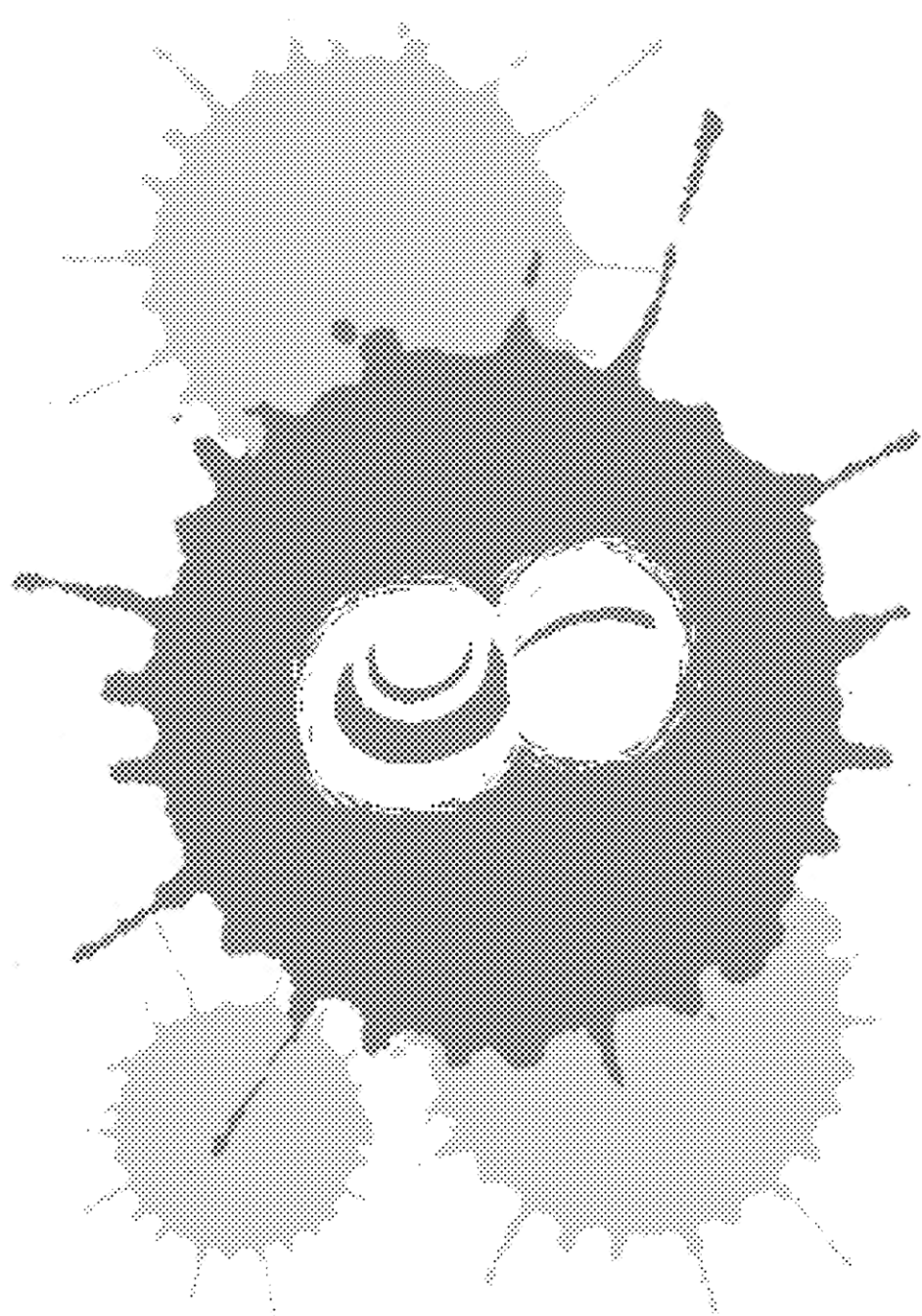
"What are you drawing?"

A quick signature, a couple button presses, and the postcard was off to the game's servers. The screen was blank, ready for a new post. "Nothing."

"C'mon, they're bringing in the new pledges downstairs."

A heavy sigh. "Yeah, okay. One sec." Game system put into sleep mode, screen gently placed back into its dock, messenger bag secured. Downstairs awaited.

The new postcard multiplied and spread across a vast network of interconnected devices, some much further away than others.



Ink Brook

It felt like easing out of a sleep that had lasted a decade. Everything was coated in a thick, numb fog. Limbs slowly made themselves known as feeling trickled back into them. Sights and sounds muffled, but at the same time closer than they'd ever been. The world was nothing but movement and color. Finally, the dreamlike haze where everything made sense began to pull away, letting questions have center stage again.

Where was this? Shouldn't there be... something? A bed to be resting on? Land to be standing on? A sky to look up at? There was only a buoyant swirl in the middle of infinity. Limbs began to tentatively flex and move, seeking *something* to touch, to hold onto, to give any sort of reference in this endless procession of blues and oranges and pinks and—

There! A handhold. A jarring stop, a bit of a stretch, but an instant of stability. That was all that was needed; a firm pull, and then the whole world emerged from the ocean of colors.

Well, not an ocean so much as a small river. A stream? Not even that big. A brook. That's the word. A brook of thick colors mixing together but somehow not ending up in a dull brown hue; every shade flowed alongside and over and through one another in a friendly dance. A brook running alongside some grass, next to a path, next to a fence tall enough to hide whatever was beyond it...and over on the other side of the flowing ink, more grass, a beach, and endless water. That, at least, was water; not like the thick ink they'd just emerged from.

They blinked in surprise, their sense of self returning after what felt like an eternity. Memories wanted to flood into their mind, but there was a blockage, a frustrating clog that only allowed little drips to pass through. They could only remember what was different from what was in front of them. There wasn't supposed to be an ocean there - so what, then? A city. A quiet suburb on the edge of... something. Trying to reach beyond the immediate present was so hard. Even reaching itself was strange; their body felt alien, lighter than it was supposed to be, almost formless. It felt...weird, but not uncomfortable. They knew it should be different, but that didn't seem like a pressing problem.

"Are you okay?" a voice asked.

They wanted to shout, but could only manage a startled burble. They tried to stand up, but instead flailed alien limbs. What was going on? Confusion started to overwhelm them, but a single thought kept the panic at bay: there was someone else. Maybe they could help. Maybe this would all make sense. They looked up at the edge of the path

overlooking the brook.

A young woman stood there, looking down. She lowered her backpack to the ground and, with a few steps, was next to them. She kneeled down, a look of concern on her face. "Everything okay there?" she asked. "This isn't the safest place to take a dip."

Eye contact was difficult, especially now; the only reason they managed it for so long was pure fascination—that's not what eyes were supposed to look like, right? The color shouldn't be so vibrant, the size was unusually large and...that was all the gaze they could handle. Their eyes fled the woman's stare, looking at something, anything else. The attention was just...so much. They had never felt so small.

She raised a hand to her mouth, thinking for a moment. "Wait, are you stuck? Did you get sick?" she asked, craning her neck to see the source of the stream, high up in the hills. "Did Phil put something bad in the ink again?"

They wanted to be somewhere else; anywhere but here, the center of attention, dwarfed by the woman looming over them. But there was... comfort, here? Reassurance. They were in good hands.

"Give me your hand," she asked, extending her own as if to shake. "We'll get you some help."

They tried to return the gesture, but the limb felt rubbery and imprecise. They caught a glimpse of it in the corner of their eye—certainly not a hand?

The woman pulled her arm away matter-of-factly. "No no," she said, this time more firmly. "Give me your *hand*."

They stared at her; at least, for as long as they could before self-consciousness overwhelmed them again.

"You can do it," the woman said. "Give me your hand." She extended hers again.

They looked at it. There was a distant twinge, that reflexive urge again to return the gesture, and this time it felt almost palpable. They reached for it, for that feeling, and in the same movement reached for her hand. It was as if their body had been waiting for this command all along, ready and eager to fulfill it. Their hand reached up.

She took it, pulling firmly as she stood back up.

It happened in a frenetic instant—reflexes firing and their whole body feeling like liquid again and all the pieces falling into place aided by some unknown muscle memory—and they were standing. Not just ink and soft flesh, but a person. They had a body. And two feet, and two arms, and a head, and hair...well, kind of. It was shiny and blue and looked more like tentacles masquerading as hair, but it did the job. Besides, the woman had something like that, too.

"There you go," she said, "good job!" She looked up the brook again, searching for something. "Did you lose your clothes on the way? Well



you're just having a day, aren't you?" She shook her head, hands on her hips.

Their nakedness hit them suddenly and they covered up, one hand on their chest, one—they looked down. That's not what their chest was supposed to be like, was it? They weren't supposed to have—

"Here," the woman interrupted, handing them a long faded tank top. "Let's get you to the city. I'm not sure what happened to you in there, but I know folks who can help."

They quickly covered up, the fabric reaching down to their knees. It wasn't much, but it was something. They carefully stepped into the colorful flip-flops the woman threw down, and felt a little better about their current state. They looked up at her—even now, she was taller than them, but only by a head this time.

She tilted her head in return, asking, "What's your name, by the way? How did you get end up in here? And where are you from?"

Too many queries at once. There was a moment of confusion as bits and pieces of memory jostled against each other. "...Brook," they said, surprised at the sound of their voice, *another* thing that just didn't match up with what they remembered. They didn't know about the first two questions, but they knew where they'd come from, at least.

The woman stared blankly for a moment, then sighed with a smile and a hint of good-natured resignation. "Alright Brook, nice to meet you. I'm Sandi."

They blinked. That wasn't what they'd meant by...oh, but why fight it? It'd just make this awkward moment last longer, and it's not like they had anything better to replace it with. Brook it was. Surely they'd remember their name later.

"You're okay to walk, right?" Sandi asked, already heading down the path.

Brook took a step, then another, and then was catching up, reflexes taking over for a pile of new feelings they weren't sure how to process. But they were in good company, and they were going to get help, and that's what mattered right now.

The City

Brook inched closer to Sandi as they entered the city proper; their newfound guide's attention was divided evenly between the path ahead and her cellphone (it was weirdly shaped but definitely a phone, Brook reasoned). This place was *huge*; tall buildings huddling close together with giant fixtures on their roofs, skylines as far as the eye could see, streets full of very stylish...people? Yes, people; that's what everyone was. Brook actively ignored the flood of questions that conclusion brought up in their mind.

Maybe everything just *felt* bigger now. Brook's memory was still a mess, but they knew they should probably have been a bit taller. Different. It was such a strange feeling; everyone they came across defied some distant concept of what a person was, but without being entirely alien? This was all familiar, somehow, despite the constant nagging feeling that this was not how things were supposed to be. This was not how they were supposed to be.

They had no time to contemplate, as Sandy suddenly pulled them into a side-street. "Here," she said, "we're going this way. You really aren't from around here, are you? You'll get plenty of time to see downtown, but first we have to make sure you're okay."

"Okay?" It was the second word Brook had spoken since waking up.

"Yes," Sandi replied. "I'm not an expert, but I know someone who is. It's a good thing she works at the same place I do, because I'm about to run late."

Brook was hit with a sudden pang of guilt. Of course Sandi had somewhere to be. She hadn't planned on making a detour to help them. They were grateful, but had they shown it enough? Did Sandi dislike them for it already? What a terrible first impression to make. And why were they thinking so much about it right now?

Sandi led Brook by the hand into a set of double doors next to a charming little terraced restaurant. The smell of grilled food followed them through a side corridor, but the building also housed a multitude of things things Brook wasn't quite able to identify. They passed by a dizzying variety of rooms, shops and what looked like a large public space until they arrived at some kind of medical office. Sandi gave Brook a gentle push inside, said something about being late, and was gone.

There was no one at the desk.

Unsure, Brook picked a chair along the wall and sat down. No sooner had they done that than a tall figure stepped out of one of the consultation rooms. Towering, glowering, and sporting the blackest of

coats with a thick feather boa that seemed to have a mind of its own, the lady made her way out with a confident step, her walking stick tapping in rhythm with her footwear. She thankfully did not acknowledge Brook; just one long held breath and she was gone.

They exhaled, somewhat relieved, and then nearly jumped out of their skin when they heard a voice speak up, close and sudden.

"Hey hi hello how can I help?" said a girl who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, enthusiasm bubbling up behind a pair of spectacles.

Brook stared, stunned speechless for a second.

The girl adjusted her white coat, smiling broadly.

"Uh," Brook replied, "I'm just...I woke up outside of town, and I don't remember anything?"

The young lady looked at her phone. "Oh right!" she exclaimed, "Sandi texted me about you. Come in, come in!" She led the way into her office.

The lady walked up to a shelf, retrieving eye protectors and carefully slipping the elastic band around the mass of multi-suckered tentacles on her head. With a series of satisfying *snaps*, the goggles were on, as well as two thin latex gloves. "There we go!" she said, pleased with her preparations. "I'm Octricia and I'll be taking care of you today. Nice to meet you...?" she said, extending an open, if gloved, hand.

Brook shook it hesitantly, not sure if that compromised the gloves in some way. "Uh, Brook," they replied after a moment.

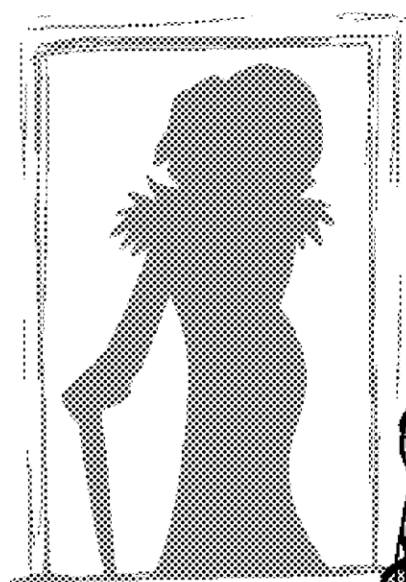
"Nice to meet you Brook! Okay then, displacement, possible ink contamination...is that correct? Anything else troubling you? Feeling okay? Lightheadedness, headaches, sensitivity to light and/or sound?" Octricia spoke as if she was reading off a checklist.

Brook shook their head. "I...I'm feeling fine, I guess? But..." They hesitated, caught between over-sharing and withholding important information. But they felt they should say something, at least. "...I don't really remember...a lot. About anything."

Octricia circled around Brook, inspecting them as they explained the situation. "I'm not sure I've ever seen something like this," she said, "but at least you're doing well physically from what I can tell. And you're remembering more things as you go, instead of the opposite! That sounds like a good thing! So let's do our best to stay positive about this!" The physician flashed a smile, and Brook did their best to return it.

Octricia handed Brook a clipboard. "It sounds like your memory needs to be jogged by specific things, so how about you fill out this patient info sheet? That could be a start. And just to be safe, please stick around for a day or two, okay? I want to make sure every part of you is doing well before I let you go. I'll put in a word with Luss and get you set up in one of the guest rooms, so don't worry about it!"

Brook looked at her, a little stunned. "Really?" they said. "That..."



that sounds like a lot. I mean, I just showed up, and...wait, who's Luss?"

Octricia beamed. "She runs the Cleanup!" she answered proudly.

Brook waited for the other part of that sentence, but it never came.

"...What's the Cleanup?" they asked after a moment.

Octricia was visibly taken aback. "Wow, Sandi really didn't tell you a lot, did she?" she said, dumbfounded. "Well!" she quickly exclaimed, "that's okay, I have a little bit of time right now. Let me show you!"

The Cleanup

Octricia made for a very excited tour guide. It turned out the Cleanup comprised the entire block. The restaurant outside, the clinic, the massive dorms, the surprising number of little shops and service kiosks...all were part of the same general structure, both physical and social. Brook nodded and tried not to be overwhelmed. It was much bigger than they thought. They'd seen a lot of new things today and were starting to reach their point of saturation.

The tour came to an end at one of many doors on the second floor of the main building. Brook peeked over the balcony railing, looking down at the large living area. Nicknamed "Chill Square," it served as dining area, meeting room, lounge and social spot—which were all very nice words used to mask the fact that it was really just a great big clearing cutting through floors and floors of dormitories that the residents had shoved assorted furniture and wading pools into.

"I'll be back with your keys!" Octricia said, gone before Brook could even open their mouth.

They leaned against the balcony, letting out a long sigh.

This day had been too much. Brook knew so little, but something inside them was telling them how strange and out of place this all was. Frustratingly, the rest of the picture never came into view. Out of place compared to what? Brook had no idea where they came from, or what their actual name was, or...anything. All they knew is that this wasn't it. So why did everything feel so familiar? It was as if they were living a dream that they'd seen night after night, only this time it was real. And everything certainly felt real; Brook was sure of that.

A whistle rang out through the mezzanine. Doors opened, and people in black and white frilly outfits rushed straight out of their rooms, leaping over the balconies and into Chill Square below. Brook gasped and looked down in a panic, then quickly found out what those pools were for. The residents would jump, become colorful squids in mid-air, dive right into the colorful tubs of liquid, and then hop back out on their feet as if nothing had happened. Brook was reminded of their own embarrassing introduction to this transformation earlier that day; the fact that everyone around them changed as easily as breathing made it all the more humbling.

One of the squids from a higher floor whooshed past Brook's head, brushing close enough that Brook felt a light *bonk*. They yelped; it hadn't hurt so much as startled them. They ran a hand over their head and found something there: not a bump, but some sort of accessory. A

frilly white headband, snagged from the falling figure. Brook could only stare at it.

"Hey!" a voice called out from below.

Brook leaned over the railing, still shaken.

"Hey," a young lady standing on the ground said, "sorry about that! Can you toss it down? I need it for my shift!"

Brook blinked a few times, then realized that the woman below, just like everyone else rushing out of their rooms, was dressed in a maid uniform—but this one was missing a key accessory. Brook tossed the headband below and the maid caught it expertly, putting it on in one fluid motion.

"Thanks!" she yelled as she rushed out the door.

Brook was fixated on the uniform everyone had been wearing; they knew it well. They'd seen it before, they were sure of it. Of all the pictures they had struggled to wring out of their stubborn memories, this one was the clearest and the easiest to hold onto. They didn't know why, but this was important.

"Here you go!"

"Wah!"

Octricia was back again, handing a once-again-startled Brook their keys.

"Uh...thanks," they managed. Their attention drifted back towards the black-and-white figures rushing and leaping from everywhere they looked. "What's this...what happened? Where are they going?"

"Oh!" Octricia said, "next shift is starting! The Cleanup is a lot of things now, but it all began with the squid maids. Luss really built her business up into a wonderful community." The physician beamed with pride. "I'm glad to be a tiny part of it! Oh and speaking of which, I really need to get back—please rest up and grab a bite if you need to! Like I said, you're a guest here, so no worries! Just take care of you!" Octricia yelled the last bit as she flew over the railing herself, taking the plunge before heading in the direction of her office.

Brook took the key, opened the door, locked it again behind them, and collapsed into the bed as soon as they saw it. Finally, after being bombarded with so much information and newness and uncanny confusion, they were alone, in silence, and had time to just...process it all.

Tears started flowing, and they weren't sure why.

Baby Steps

Brook had almost finished filling in Octricia's questionnaire. Some of the questions were easy—cleared up by a quick glance into the dorm room's wall mirror—but others felt like Brook wasn't answering them so much as making personal decisions through them. There had been a lot to think about. What do you do when you don't remember something about you that no one else would ever know? Can you just go with what feels right? Are you allowed to?

Brook sat up on the bed and looked in the mirror again, clad in new clothes—a colorful tee and a skirt—yielded by the room's pre-furnished closet. The simple act of picking what to wear had been so...liberating? Another thing that felt odd, that strayed from the usual, that didn't line up with memories that were still frustratingly out of reach. But this time, Brook didn't care.

She liked the way she looked, and that's all that mattered.

She had reached a sort of breaking point with her stubborn memories. So what if nearly everything she saw and did were met with a shame-soaked "no, that's not right, that's not what you're supposed to do?" Nothing she did was ever met with approval by that corner of her mind, so why pay attention to it? She pushed those thoughts aside. She was here, now, whenever and wherever this was—and she'd make the most of it. She had shelter and safety and...a growling stomach. Food. That's what she needed right now: food. She put some sneakers on and headed out the door.

Brook peeked over the railing, briefly wondering if she should try to squid-dive her way down, but quickly thinking better of it. She'd need practice. A lot more practice. Besides, Octricia wouldn't be happy if she got hurt. Stairs it was.

The restaurant's interior dining section was bigger than the terraces out front had suggested. No wonder, since most of the residents probably ate here. The menu was daunting but, judging by the multiple light-up arrows pointing to the '*FREE GUEST MEALS FOR GUESTS*' section, guests had a limited selection and that made things much easier. Brook got a platter of deep-fried seafood with an intoxicating smell and sat down next to a window, looking out. Just sitting there like this, alone in a tiny quiet bubble while a whole world busied itself around her, felt oddly calming. There was this itch in the back of her mind telling her that she ought to be preparing for something, worrying about this, being anxious about that, but...she had let go. If any of it was so important, then she'd remember it; but she didn't, so that was that.

There were screens set up inside the restaurant; the one Brook decided to idly look at was displaying a sort of sporting event where teams were splashing a large arena (and each other) with ink, using everything but the kitchen si—no, wait, there it was, used to great effect by one of the participants. Brook was surprised by how much she got into it; part of her seemed to assume she wasn't much into sports. So how was this any different? As the match went on, she found herself anticipating every little detail before it came up: the final minute timer, the whistle, the adorable (and befuddling) cat-based scoring system... she knew this. She'd seen this before. Everything here felt familiar but out of place, except for this. Sitting there and watching it play out on a screen was the most natural thing she'd done all day. She pushed aside the urge to question it. She'd had way too few experiences that felt *right* and she wanted to enjoy this one to its fullest.

Her stomach full, Brook wandered back towards Chill Square. Now that she wasn't being repeatedly ushered into strange new places, she had time to get to know her surroundings. Everything felt a little makeshift, like it had all been repaired just a few times too many, but there was enough charm to hold it all together. The place was practically deserted (perhaps that wasn't unusual for this time of day) save for a tall figure pacing rapidly back and forth in front of a store's locked roll-down gate, near the now-quiet pools of ink.

"It's almost ready," they said curtly into their phone, "but my assistant had to take a day off and I'm locked out. I know how important it is to you, I assure you." There was a pause; then they sighed. "Yes, I'll try. I shall let you know."

"Do you need help?" Brook asked almost despite herself, having eavesdropped only a little.

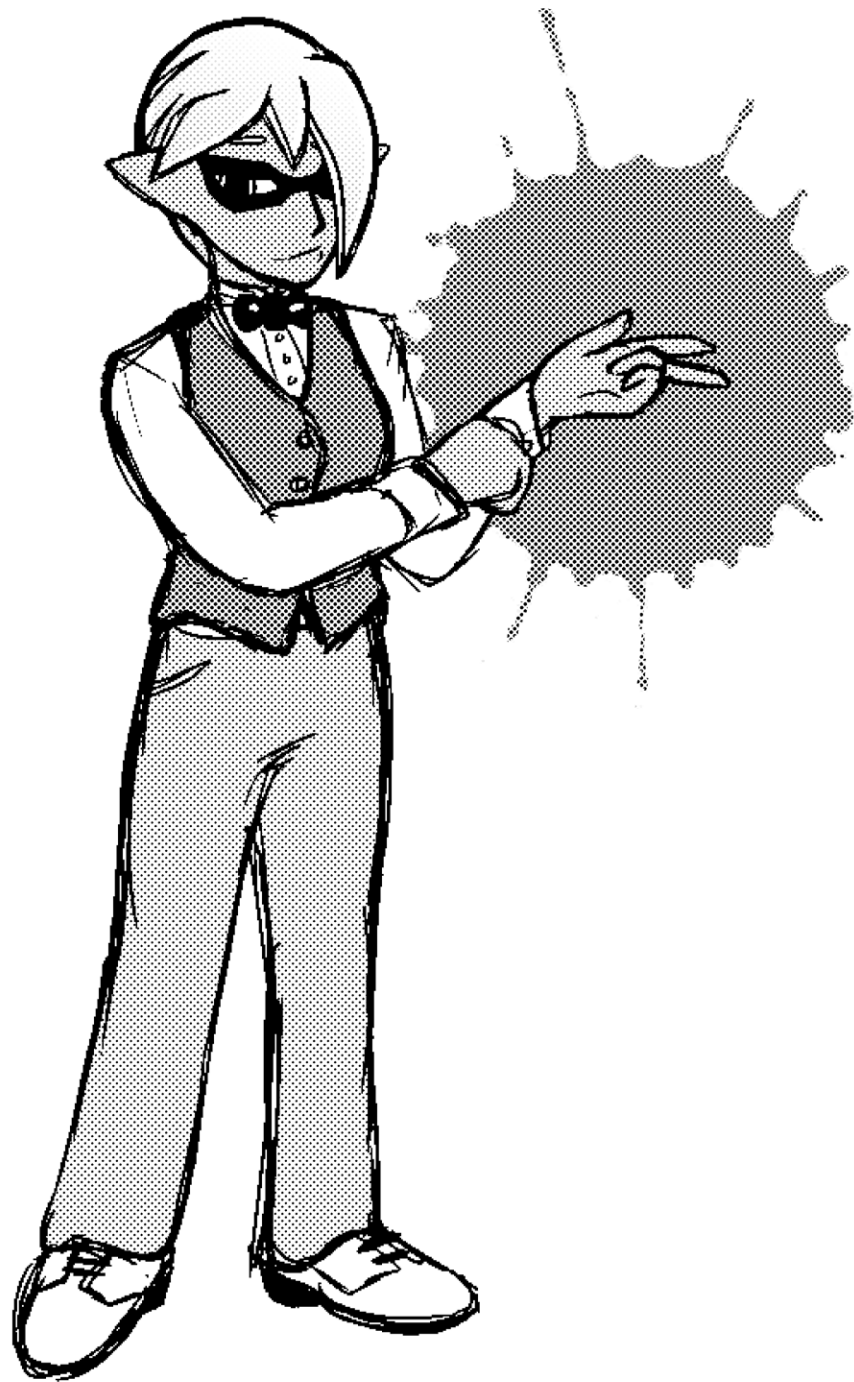
The person adjusted the cufflinks on their sleeves, turned to face her, narrowed their eyes, and then put their phone away inside their sleeveless vest's side pocket. They let out a sharp sigh, rubbing the bridge of their nose. "Yes," they answered. "I am loathe to owe favors, but I have a problem that a fellow inkling could solve. I'm locked out of my store and I need to get in. Can you swim through that gate and get to the security panel? I'll tell you how to open it from the inside."

Brook's blood ran cold. "Swim...through it?" she asked, looking at the gate. Even as a squid, she didn't think she was small enough to fit between those bars.

The store owner blinked. "...Yes?" they answered, puzzled—but then their gaze softened. "Wait I apologize, I didn't mean to be insensitive. Is this a problem for you too?"

Brook's mouth went agape. "Do you have amnesia too?" she asked.

But on those words, distance returned to the sharply-dressed inkling's eyes and they straightened up right away. "Ah, amnesia," they



answered. "No, but now I understand."

Brook was slightly crestfallen; she'd come so close to meeting someone else in her situation.

The store owner picked their phone back up, tapping quickly and glancing down. "Yes. Yes, I did see that. Brook, is it?"

She nodded.

"I see," they said as they put their phone away, "how rude of me. I am Salt; I help run things here. Nice to meet you." They extended a gloved hand, and no sooner had Brook shaken it than they were off to one of the ink pools, leaving her standing there.

"Now," they said, returning with a bucket of ink held carefully, "this is going to sound complicated but, in practice, prove to be very simple. It's all instinct and reflexes. Step back."

Brook narrowly avoided the large splash of ink that splattered across the gate, half of it inside the store, half of it outside.

"You can swim, right?" Salt asked. "Just jump in and swim to the other side. It's that simple."

Brook looked closely at the gate. The gaps were certainly too small for her; she could barely fit her hand between the bars.

"Trust me," Salt said.

Part of Brook wanted to back out, but she could tell this—whatever it was—mattered a lot to the sharply-dressed inkling. Besides, she had offered to help; so many folks had helped her today that she was determined to pay it forward. She held her breath, stepped into the ink, and...let go.

To her surprise, the change was easier in this direction. It was as if she'd been actively keeping herself together in this form all day; all she needed to do was relax. She splashed into the ink spill like it was the most natural thing in the world, her body returning to a malleable squid-like glob. She almost lost herself into the sea of color—almost—but she had a job to do, and her mind remained focused on it. She wriggled her way forward, surprised at just how much space there was for her in that thin layer of ink on the tile floor. Even the gate itself seemed like an afterthought; she flowed through the bars like they weren't there, and surfaced on the other side.

"Good!" Salt exclaimed. "Now just turn back and go to that panel on the wall, I'll tell you the code."

Brook looked around, having a bit of a hard time locating it from her vantage point. She eventually spotted it; out of her reach. She really would have to turn back, but could she? Last time, she'd needed help, but now she was alone in a darkened store. What if she'd done all this for nothing? What would Salt—someone important to this place, apparently—think of her? This was important. She mustered up her will and tried to get back into her body.

But nothing happened.

She was close to panicking. Salt had already gone through a lot of trouble and here she was, unable to follow through, and now they'd—"Hey."

Salt's even voice brought Brook out of her thought spiral.

"Stay calm. You've done this before, correct? Just go through the same motions. Your body knows who you are at your core, and it's ready to change accordingly. It'll wait for you; there's no hurry."

Brook nodded, or at least made the best approximation of nodding that she could under the circumstances. She had done this before; earlier that same day, even. She closed her eyes.

*Sandi loomed above, reaching down to her. "No no," she said, "give me your **hand**."*

Brook looked up. That moment had been burned into her memory and she wasn't sure why. There she was, back on the shore of that little stream, feeling so very small...but someone was reaching out to her, and so she reached back.

Sandi took her hand and pulled her up. "Good girl!" she said.

*No, Brook thought as she wobbled to her feet completely flustered, she had definitely not said that. Good **job**. That was the word she had used. Good **job**. What the ever-loving—*

"See? Easy as pie," said Salt, leaning carefully against the gate. "Now just go to the panel and enter these numbers..."

Brook scrambled over to the panel, hoping against hope that it was too dark in the store to see how red her face was right now. She followed Salt's directions and soon enough the lights were on and the gate began to slowly fold upward

"Thank you so much," Salt said as they strode into the store, headed directly to a back room. Now that the lights were on, this was obvious some sort of clothing shop...but there was also sewing equipment, so perhaps they did repairs, too? Come to think of it, most of the designs were—

"Here we go," the well-dressed owner said as they returned to where Brook was standing, a maid uniform draped over their arm. "Now I just need to make a few modifications, and..." Salt paused as their gaze went from a bare dress form to Brook.

She stared back, nearly withering from the eye contact but unable to look away, feeling that something like a trap was closing around her.

Salt took the uniform in hand and held it up in front of Brook. "Hm," they said, stroking their chin. "We made it this far. Would you have just a little more time for me?"

New Model

Brook couldn't back out now, could she? She still had very little idea of the kind of person she had been before losing her memory, but she was determined to help people in need when she could. So that's what she was doing.

By wearing a maid's outfit to a meeting.

She wasn't sure what the meeting was for, but Salt had emphasized—after making a few quick modifications to the uniform—that it was an important one. If they were part of the Cleanup's management, and they were doing their best to make a good impression, then whoever the meeting was with must have been pretty important.

As she followed Salt through hallways she hadn't explored yet, Brook tried not to focus too much on why her heart was beating so fast. This felt important—so important—to her, and she still didn't know why. It was a thrill to wear this uniform; it felt right, it flowed effortlessly around her, and it gave her a strange mix of confidence and elation. She had inherited a lifetime of yearning for this moment and now she was awash in the satisfaction of finally living it. She felt like she could take on the world...but every fiber of her being told her she should be embarrassed about it. And so, despite herself, she was.

At least she remembered what a maid was, Brook thought to herself. And with so much ink flying around, no wonder this place needed them.

During the elevator ride part of this mysterious adventure, Salt turned to Brook. "Can you dance?" they asked her.

"Uh," she replied, "I'm not...sure? Maybe?"

Salt tilted their head and, after a moment's reflection, extended a gloved hand. "Then I would like to try something," they said. "I practiced this with my assistant but I suspect you'd do just fine. Do you trust me?"

Brook looked at their hand, and then back to their face. Putting her stubborn memory aside, there had been instincts that she'd learned to trust, and the sharply-dressed fashion designer hadn't raised any flags so far. There was a foundation of honesty there, and a carefully-concealed vulnerability. That felt enough, somehow. She nodded, and took their hand.

"Thank you," Salt said, "I'll show you the basics. It should only take a moment."

"Is it dangerous?" Brook asked, a little nervous despite the affirmation of trust.

Salt gave a sly smile. "Absolutely not," they replied, "but it is *fabulous*."

Salt briskly walked out of the elevator, headed to a set of double doors, and threw them open. A broad gesture that, coming from somebody with Salt's long frame, gave Brook plenty of space to follow them in before the doors swung closed again.

On the other side of the door was a the large table, and on the other side of that, a tall figure looking out onto the city through a massive set of windows. she turned to face them and Brook immediately recognized her as the impressive-looking lady she'd seen in the clinic.

The woman turned around and strode over to one of many comfortable-looking chairs, pulling it away from the table and sitting down. Her cane made a loud *CLACK* as she set it down across the armrests. "Well then," she said, "let's see it."

Salt nodded with a slight flourish and stepped forward, reaching back to Brook with a gloved hand; she took it, held on firmly, and was whisked off her feet. The presentation of the new and updated model of the maid uniform had begun.

Brook got to learn *a lot* about the new uniform—and also about the old one, in contrast—as Salt conducted the show. The tall inkling led her on a well-practiced dance, drawing Brook into pose after pose while they paused to draw attention to the virtues of her outfit. The apron's storage capacity was almost doubled and—pirouette!—hidden side pockets now helped with smaller tools and—step, step, step—the new fabric no longer got caught in the wind as much and—twirl!—the multiple layers were now combined into one without sacrificing the design and—bow—the headband had been upgraded with a better communications suite in and out of ink.

"A sharper look and top-to-bottom improvements, ready to be put into production," Salt said, bowing as well.

The woman clapped her hands a few times, then shook her head with a smile. "Salt, dear, you didn't have to go to all this trouble."

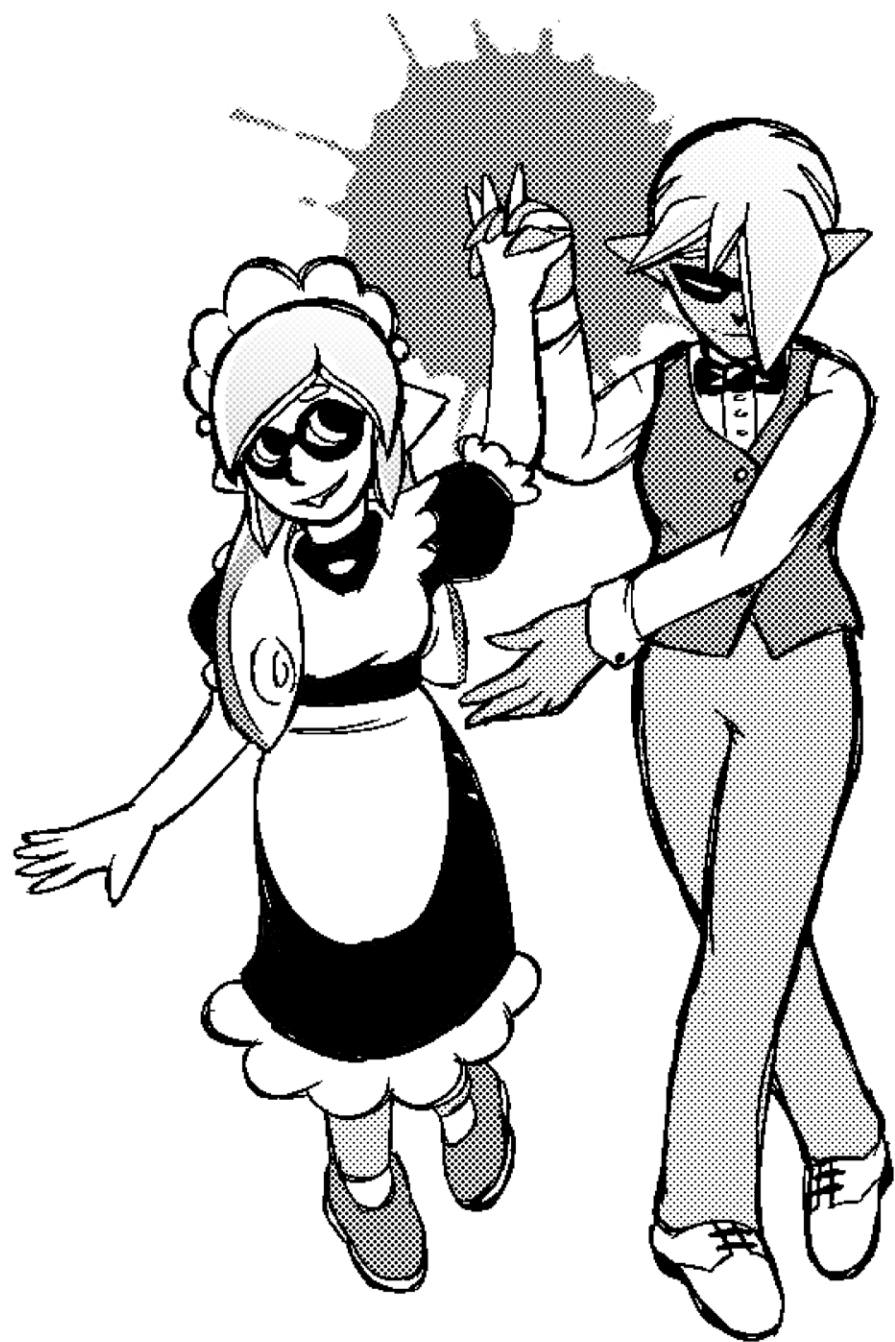
Salt stood back up and Brook followed suit after a moment, figuring that bowing time was over. "You deserve no less, ma'am," the designer said. "Does that mean we have your approval?"

The woman nodded. "Of course," she said, "fine work as always." She picked up her cane and stood, adding, "Who's this? Another assistant?"

"Brook, a new guest here," Salt replied, motioning to their spur-of-the-moment fashion model. "At just the right place and the right time to help."

Brook did her best to smile at the lady, feeling very intimidated now that the subject of discussion was her and not the uniform. This was obviously someone very important and she had an innate, pressing need not to disappoint her.

"Brook," Salt added as they motioned in turn to the woman, "this is Luss, founder of the Cleanup."



A familiar feeling returned to Brook, outnumbered and surrounded by people much taller and more important than she was.

"I see," Luss said. She reached up to her hat, tipping it in greeting. "A pleasure." The Cleanup founder then stood up and headed towards the door, pausing briefly before opening it. "Salt, dear," she asked, "would the next run be ready for the festival?"

"Of course, with time to spare."

"Then could you repeat your performance for the council?"

"Absolutely, ma'am."

"Good. I expect they'll be as pleased as I am."

That exchange done, she made her way out, the rhythmic tapping of her cane fading step by step until she reached the elevator. Brook could finally stop holding her breath.

"Good work," Salt said, smiling. "She may not look like it, but I can tell she was impressed. Thank you for your help."

Brook's eyes still lingered on the open door; she blinked a few times, then glanced back in Salt's direction. "I...I'm happy to help. What's...the council thing?"

Salt waved the question off with their hand. "Nothing, nothing; the city council likes to be kept in the loop when it comes to public-facing details. My assistant will be recovered by then, so we'll handle it from here. You did well. If there's anything I can do for you, please let me know."

"Okay," Brook said shakily, relieved that this was the end of her good deed, at least for now. She had helped someone, and made a good impression on an important lady. This was good; she just needed a little time to accept that it had really happened.

They both made their way back downstairs, Salt tapping furiously on their phone the whole way.

The Captain

The store was just as they'd left it. Salt led the way in, taking the 'back in five minutes' sign off the counter.

The honor system went a long way in the Cleanup, Brook figured. She knew it'd soon be time to give up the uniform and was almost sad to see it go. She was about to fall into another thought spiral on the matter when something caught her attention: the ink stain she'd used to get into the store before was gone. "Wait, where'd it go?" she asked, pointing to where it had been.

"Where did what go?" Salt asked before turning around. "Oh. It evaporates," they added after a brief pause. "Well. Not exactly, but the actual truth of the matter takes much longer to explain."

Brook gingerly put a foot on the ink-free spot as if to test whether or not it was really gone. "But wait," she asked, "then what do maids do? I thought they cleaned up the ink."

Salt looked at Brook and instantly she could tell she'd just asked a *big* question. She knew that look. At that moment, Salt was wondering whether they'd dismiss it entirely, give the short version, or give the long version. Brook wondered how she was so familiar with this situation; had she in the past been on the receiving end of it a lot? Or did she herself often have to decide how much to tell someone who was being nosy?

Salt put an end to her ruminations by clapping their hands down onto the countertop. "What do maids do, indeed!" they said.

Brook was about to get the long version.

"There's more that needs cleaning than just ink," Salt said, gesturing broadly for emphasis. "A city like this doesn't shine that brightly by itself! We have teams with overlapping shifts working around the clock in a complementary partnership with custodial and public cleaning services to make sure everything sparkles. We do house calls, we handle hard-to-reach places, we surreptitiously service social soirées; we do what needs to be done to make this city clean!"

While Brook did find all this interesting, she was starting to look for ways to escape this particular conversation she'd gotten herself into.

"Of course, we handle ink too," Salt continued, "because while it's very good at cleaning itself, it's not perfect, and the city's number one sport requires perfectly clean stages before every match. Therefore, we've developed the means to expertly and expediently clean an entire arena in the time it takes the teams to get ready." Salt leaned back against a display case. "It's quite a sight to behold," they said, ostensibly done for the moment.

Well, almost. "You're probably wanting to get out of that by now, aren't you?" they asked, pointing at Brook's uniform.

"I mean," she replied, hesitating, "kind of." Her eyes wandered again, looking at anything and everything that wasn't who she was talking to. "How, um..." she began to ask nervously, "how would someone join? If... if that's a thing."

Salt stared at Brook, looking a little taken aback. But they quickly recovered, raising their eyebrows and giving a sharp exhale through the nose. "Well. That *is* most certainly a thing. Caught the bug, have you?"

Brook's eyes were glued to her own feet, her face beet red. This felt like a reasonable thing to ask, so why was every fiber of her being freaking out about it? There was an overpowering feeling of shame, of inappropriateness, as if this was something she wasn't allowed to do; but the part of her that wanted this so badly won out in the end, despite everything. "Yeah," she responded quietly.

Salt seemed genuinely pleased. "Then I can certainly put in a good word for you! But the team captains are the ones who do the recruiting, so you'll have to take it up with them. They'll probably want to make sure you know what you're getting into; it can be strenuous work, but it is very rewarding. I think Team Lily has an opening; I'll put you in touch."

"Okay! Thank you!" Brook said perhaps a little too enthusiastically, eager to shed some pent-up embarrassment. She absent-mindedly straightened out her uniform's skirt, unsure of what she'd once again gotten herself into but somehow glad she had.

"Ah," said Salt, looking across Chill Square, "this is good timing, Team Lily's back. Come, I'll introduce you." With that, they led the way over to a group of inkings in maid uniforms who must have been returning from their shift.

Brook followed after the tall designer, trying not to think about how many people were going to be looking at her in a moment.

Salt waved as they approached. "Evening everyone," they said to the group, "I trust the day went well."

The group replied with an assorted variety of pleasantries.

"Captain," Salt said to the inkling maid in front, "I'll get right to it; if your team still has an opening, there's someone I'd like to recommend for your consideration." Salt stepped aside, allowing Brook—who certainly wasn't hiding behind the tall inkling—to come fully into view.

"Brook?!" the captain said, visibly surprised. Brook looked up. Her eyes widened.

Team Lily's captain was Sandi.

"Oh, you know each other already," Salt said with mild surprise, adding, "Well. That takes care of introductions. Suffice it to say Brook has my provisional support; I do recommend a tour first, though. I'll

leave you to it!" And with a clap of their hands, Salt was off.

Brook almost visibly shrank from the attention; she had rarely felt so inadequate. She was in front of a group, by herself, seeking approval, wearing a uniform she hadn't even earned—

"Oh," Salt said as if on cue, stopping mid-stride and briskly walking back to the group, "please drop the uniform off at the store when you can. Thanks again for the help!" The designer clasped Brook's shoulder lightly for emphasis, then walked off again.

"What did Salt rope you into?" Sandi asked as she shook her head; whether it had been intentional or not, that intervention had relieved some of the pressure.

Brook, however, was still having trouble looking anyone in the eye, much less responding verbally.

The captain turned back to her team. "I'll have a chat with Brook," she told the group, "don't wait up for me. Good job out there today!"

And with that, the team disbanded, leaving Sandi and Brook alone in their corner of Chill Square. The maid captain looked down at the nervous inkling, smiling at her with a mix of amusement and sympathy. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

They went to sit down on a couple of chairs in a quiet corner of Chill Square, surrounded by large decorative plastic plants. "So," Sandi said with good-natured curiosity, "you want to be a maid."

Brook stared hard at the table between them, her hands fidgeting with the apron of her uniform. "Yeah," she replied, her face still slightly red, "it's...important."

Sandi put her headband down on the table, taking off the band holding her ponytail together and shaking it loose. "Sorry for just dumping you on Octricia this morning," she said, "but I figured you'd be in good hands. And wow, you've been busy! Hanging out with Salt now?"

Brook looked up at Sandi for a moment, shaking her head and making large motions with her hands. "No, no!" she said, "it's not like that! They, um... they just looked like they needed help, and then one thing led to another, and...I helped them give a presentation. But it went well!"

Sandi smiled. "So now that you've tried on the uniform," she asked, "you don't want to take it off?"

Brook went beet red again, causing Sandi to grin—was she doing this on purpose? "I, uh, um..." the shorter inkling stammered, searching for a suitable response.

"I'm just teasing," Sandi said, "It's perfectly fine. I got into a lot of things because I liked the uniform."

Brook looked up at her again. "Yeah?" she asked meekly.

"Sure did!" the maid captain replied, "there's a lot to do in this town,

you know? But I like this line of work, it's fun, the team's great, I get to do some high-flying acrobatics on the job, and all I have to do in return is clean up after the kids. I think you'd like it."

Brook's eyes lit up. "You clean after the matches?" she asked.

Sandi nodded. "Yeah," she replied, "Team Lily mostly handles stage cleanup for turf war and whatnot. We're pretty darn good at it, too." She beamed, adding, "I guess I've grown a bit attached." Then her tone changed. "Listen, Brook," she said, "are you sure you want to jump into this so soon? I mean, you've barely been here a day. It sounds to me like a lot for someone in your situation."

Brook picked a random plastic leaf and focused on it, using it as a visual anchor while she searched for the right words. "I know," she finally responded, "but...this is important to me. I'm not sure why yet, but I want to do this, and...I know it's weird, but I want to do this now because I'm scared I'm going to chicken out of it if I wait."

Sandi gently placed her hand on Brook's. "Hey," she said, "it's okay. I understand. Please don't stress about it too much, alright? It's just a job."

Brook nodded.

"Tell you what," the maid captain said, lowering her head closer to the table to try and make eye contact with Brook, "why don't you come along tomorrow? I'll introduce you to the team, you'll get to see what the work is like, and then we can all figure out if this is the right thing for you. But you gotta get a good night's sleep first, and you need to check in with Octricia to make sure you're in good enough shape for it. Deal?"

She lifted her hand, offering it to Brook, who looked at it for a moment before shaking it.

"Good," Sandi said, smiling. "Now you should probably go give Salt back that uniform."

First Shift

Brook walked briskly through the city streets, attempting to lose herself in the crowd of maids to avoid being noticed. There was still so much she didn't understand; as much as she was trying to let go and ignore the stubborn parts of her memory, they wouldn't let up on this point. Why did she feel such an intense desire for something that made her embarrassed? That wasn't fun at all! She looked at her potential teammates and nobody seemed to make a big deal of it. So what was the problem? Try as she might, she just couldn't shake the feeling that she was different, somehow.

She did like the uniform, yes. But the more she tried to pick away at it, the more there was. She liked making things...better. Somehow, deep down, she felt an appreciation for losing herself in the act of cleaning. There was something of a therapeutic aspect to the process. But also the uniform felt really nice. And it looked really pretty when she twirled—

"So what's your name again?" one of the maids asked.

Brook snapped back to reality. "Uh, Brook," she answered.

The other maid scrunched her face up in thought. "Alright. B. Easy enough, we don't have a B." Others nearby nodded in agreement.

"B?" Brook asked, feeling a little out of the loop.

"Giving everyone letters makes it quicker to communicate when we're working," Sandi said from the front of the group. "We have a lot to do in very little time, so syllables add up."

Brook nodded to no one in particular. That seemed to make sense.

"What's on the menu today, D?" one of the maids asked.

As Sandi started listing off tasks, Brook looked back to the inkling she'd been talking to earlier. "Wait," she said, a little confused, "why is Sandi 'D'? Shouldn't she be 'S'?"

The other maid shook her head. "Already had an S. Can't have two." She pointed to herself—"A"—then to a taller maid next to her—"S"—then to a shorter maid walking closely behind them both—"C."

S smiled. "I'm a stickler for seniority," she said calmly.

Brook nodded. Unusual formalities aside, she was glad to be getting to know the others a little better.

The group entered a building Brook didn't have time to identify, going through back hallways and ending up before a set of double doors. "Alright Team Lily," Sandi said as she addressed everyone, "the kids are gonna be holding matches all morning so let's alternate half-and-half. B's going to be watching and learning for now. Let's get ready!" And with that, the team started unpacking the wheeled suitcases half of



them had brought along; they contained what appeared to be cleaning tools—*big* cleaning tools—and some sort of plastic barrel, which Sandi popped open. “Sync up!” she said, dipping her hand in; a moment later, the bright blue color in her hair turned milky-white.

The other maids followed suit, everyone’s colors changing to match. Brook could swear that, depending on how the light hit their head, the maids’ white color would sometimes shine with a colorful spectrum as if it was hiding a pale rainbow.

“C’mon B,” A said as she motioned to the liquid.

Brook stepped closer to the barrel, looking in. “Do I...” she began, looking back at A, “do I just...touch it, or...?”

The experienced maid sighed, rolling her eyes. “Stick your hand in there, you big baby,” she chided, “it’s ink, not lava. Let it do its job.”

Brook looked back to the liquid, took a deep breath, and gingerly dipped her hand into it. She felt a shiver, then a tingle ran up her arm, and before she could understand the situation enough to panic about it, she saw in the corner of her eye that her hair was changing color.

“See?” A said. “Nothing to it.”

By the time Brook looked up, the first half of the group was loaded up with oversized mops, dusters, and other things she couldn’t readily identify.

Sandi grabbed the barrel and went to wait by the doors; after a moment, a loud whistle was heard, and the captain led her team through.

The stage itself was a gigantic fitness center filled with angled walls covered in colorful handholds. Brook marveled at the sheer size of the place; were there that many people in this city that needed to exercise all at once? The room was so big that not even all of it had been cordoned off for the match; some folks were climbing the far walls and generally enjoying themselves as the main attraction went on next to them. The match itself had just ended; two teams of inklings were making their way off-stage, having thoroughly soaked the place in two hues of colorful ink. Brook barely had time to wonder just how anyone was going to clean all this up before the maids leapt into action.

Their movements felt familiar to Brook, but she’d never seen them in person before. Sandi was first, emptying the rest of the barrel into the large circular plate that acted as one team’s home base. The liquid flowed into its machinery and spilled around it, mixing into the still-wet ink covering the floor, making it appear almost oily. As the maids fanned out, the captain shifted her grip on the barrel to hold it like a battering ram, then dove into the ink-covered ground. She emerged a second later, her barrel now full, and proceeded to splash its contents around.

Brook was so enraptured by what was happening that she didn’t notice one of the off-duty maids walk up and lean against the railing alongside her.

"Hi B!" the maid said cheerfully, eliciting a yelp from the skittish newcomer. "I'm M!" she continued, "welcome to the team!"

Brook got over her surprise—she really ought to pay more attention to what was going on around her, she reflected—and smiled awkwardly. "Hi! Uh, sorry, I was a bit distracted. What's the white ink doing?"

"Oh!" M said, visibly excited, "it's special! Ink used in matches evaporates quickly, but it can leave a residue if it was splashed on too thick; that happens a lot in spots where there's a lot of fighting. The ink we use mixes in and helps thin everything out so it breaks down faster. That way there's less time between matches and the stages can be used a lot more! It's very efficient." M nodded for emphasis.

"Oh wow," Brook said, genuinely fascinated. "That's really cool! Thanks for the explanation."

M wiggled happily. "Of course! I'm happy to help!"

Brook looked back at the stage; more than half the play area had been covered in the milky ink now, and she could already see large swaths of the color-stained surface returning to normal. Something caught her attention, though, and while she knew what the object was, she realized she's never learned how it worked. Her curiosity was again piqued. "Hey M," she asked, pointing to the circular metal plate, "how do those work?"

M looked. "Oh, the spawners?" she asked. "I guess everyone just takes them for granted! Did you know they're some of the most advanced technology ever made? We couldn't have matches without them! The science is really complex, but basically, if you're close to one and you're in trouble, they know, and they want to take care of you! So they make you really small, and pull you over to them, and give you enough ink to get back into shape. We don't really need them that often, though."

As M spoke an excited C slid up to the spawner, leapt atop it in squid form, was launched high into the air with a "wheeeeeee!" and then landed on the other side of the stage to help the others finish cleaning up.

"Oh, except for that feature!" M added.

A moment later, the first half of the team was back. Brook looked back at the stage; everything was spotless and the next match was already starting. The maids exchanged equipment as the next crew got ready for their turn.

"Wow," Brook said, "everyone's really good, like it's second nature."

Sandi, back with the group, nodded proudly. "That's our secret," she said. "We were all kids who learned to clean up after ourselves, and then we grew up."

Made For This

When noon arrived and the matches stopped, the team gathered outside in a nearby fast food terrace for a bite to eat. The afternoon shift would be at a different stage a little further away, so there was no time to waste. Brook was glad that the others were warming up to her, though she couldn't quite believe it had happened so fast and so easily. This was supposed to be harder, she thought—and then realized she'd started listening to her stubborn memories again, and promptly shut them out. All they gave her was anxiety, and...and then she noticed something.

Across the street stood a strange cylindrical tube with stickers and hatches. Barely anyone noticed it, so it was obviously part of the scenery, but she couldn't quite identify what it did. She knew it was important, however; she instantly recognized its shape and color, like it was burned into her mind. This was recent. Very recent. But lunch was over and she had to follow the group and she kept staring at the structure until the team climbed into a bus and she couldn't keep it in her line of sight anymore.

Brook found it hard to focus on anything else, but seeing her hair fade back to blue offered a bit of puzzling distraction. Looking at the rest of the team, she was relieved to see that she wasn't the only one this was happening to. "Um, are we...changing colors?" she asked no one in particular.

"Yeah, it's like the festival inks," S responded.

Brook gave her a confused look. "Festival ink?" she asked.

A, one seat down, leaned over with the most skeptical of looks. "Wait. You've never seen a festival?"

The maid-to-be looked down, unsure how to respond. She could feel everyone's gaze on her. She'd said something wrong. Something she couldn't get out of. And now everyone was wondering what was up with her, and talking among themselves, and spreading rumors and—"Uh... I...I have amnesia!" she blurted out.

Why had she just shared that? With everyone? They'd only known each other for less than a day! Why was she so quick to trust all of a sudden? She turned red, her heart racing, her outfit becoming unbearably warm, her eyes unable to look at anything other than her own trembling feet.

"Oh. Wow," A said, "sorry. That sounds pretty rough."

There were hums of agreement. A hand gently squeezed Brook's shoulder. "For how long?" M asked gently, "if that's okay to ask."

The shaken inkling looked up; everyone who had heard the conversation appeared to be sympathetic? She had said the truth, as outlandish as it was, and everyone believed her. "Since...yesterday," Brook answered, "I just...showed up outside town and Sandi found me."

That elicited a number of replies.

"Whoa, really?"

"You only remember a day and you're already trying out for the team?"

"How did you get Salt to recommend you so fast?"

"You're like a comic book character!"

"That's hardcore."

Brook smiled sheepishly, not used to the attention. Maybe this was the right decision. Maybe it was okay to trust them; maybe they could be friends. Maybe the stubborn, anxious ache of her missing memories was wrong. Maybe it'd finally go away.

"That's why you were so curious!" M said cheerfully. "We've got a lot to teach you, then!"

Brook's smile grew as she wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked up, finally having enough courage to see Sandi's reaction.

The maid captain's face was full of worry, but she smiled. Warmly.

The afternoon shift began much like the first, this time taking place in an outdoor area overlooking a river. The team went through the motions again; Brook was a little more used to them now, and was eager to see more of her newfound friends in action.

Soon enough, the first match was over, and the first group rushed into the arena, ready to clean it faster than nature intended. Sandi walked up to the fascinated inkling looking on from the sidelines and handed her an oversize feather duster soaked in ink. "Here you go B," she said, "you're up next."

Brook looked up at the maid captain with wide eyes. "...me? Next?" she asked nervously. "Already?"

Sandi nodded. "I think you learned all you're going to from the outside," the taller inkling said, "time to dive in. But don't worry; you're going in with a full team. You'll be helping out and doing some spot cleaning, nothing major. Just keep your ears open and you'll be fine."

Brook nodded, trying to calm herself down. She felt this was way too fast, but the way Sandi looked at her somehow kept her bigger fears at bay.

The maid captain put a comforting hand on Brook's shoulder. "You got this," she said with a smile.

The junior maid took a deep breath and nodded. She'd wanted this; time to show everyone she was up to the task.

The next match began in a flash as soon as the first group returned, exchanging gear with the second. M stepped up next to Brook, wiggling

with excitement. "We're going to work together!" she exclaimed, "that's so great!"

The newcomer smiled sheepishly. She didn't want to let anybody down, much less her new friends. Suddenly, her headband buzzed and she began hearing the voices of the other maids as they began coordinating.

"They're really fighting over the statue side," A said, "so let's make a path there first. M, this side's really eager to ink their spawn so see if you can do a home circuit. B, you're on support duty, so we'll poke you if we need you. Until then, head to the bridge and take care of any stubborn spots you see. Alright, let's go!"

The whistle sounded, and they leapt into action. Brook scrambled to follow the others; she hadn't expected it all to happen so quickly! She looked to and fro, unsure where to go, when M's voice rang out.

"Excuse me!" the maid said as she rushed past with a large roller, causing the newcomer to take a few steps back.

Brook took a deep breath and found her footing. The bridge; that's where she needed to go first. She spotted it and dashed over, her shoes splishing through ink that was already on its way to disappearing.

The bridge had been hotly contested, but Brook's teammates had given it a proper once-over. She did spot some corners caked thick with ink and thrust her duster into them, soaking them in rainbow-white; it was amazing how quickly the solution did its work. She only had a second to admire her handiwork before her headband buzzed.

"B!" a voice said, "go help out C on lower shop side."

Brook shouted "okay!" as she turned around and rushed over, not quite sure how the communicator worked in the other direction. She hopped down to the stone platform on the riverside, where C was dealing with a tenacious spill. Unfortunately, the junior maid took a spill of her own; she landed on a patch of already-treated ink, not used to how slippery that made the surface. With a "whoaa!" and some frantic flailing, she slipped, fell to her side, and slid right off the platform into the water below with a *SPLASH*.

She tried to swim, tried to remember the motions, but nothing worked; her body felt so different in the water. It was a superhuman struggle to remain afloat and she had no idea why. But before things got any more dire, before she had the chance to panic, there was a bright flash, and her world faded to white.

Like a Splash

It felt like easing out of a deep sleep. Everything was coated in a thick, numb fog. Limbs slowly made themselves known as feeling trickled back into them. Sights and sounds were muffled, then exploded back into being. Brook opened her eyes, disoriented; then in a second, she remembered. She'd fallen into the water, panicked, then there was a flash, and she felt like she was flying, and...there was someone looking down at her.

"Are you okay?" M asked, looking concerned.

Brook tried to answer, but quickly realized the shape she was in. This was the moment of truth; she had to change back, and quickly. Gosh, how much time had she wasted already? She focused on M and reached out, going through the motions that had worked for her before... and stood up, taking the confused maid's hand.

M, unsure what to do, completed the handshake. "Hello!" she said, "glad you're back! Can you help me with the back corner?"

Brook nodded hurriedly, made sure everything was in the right place, and rushed to help M finish covering this part of the stage. It felt like ages, but only took seconds, and soon enough they leapt back to the rest of the team, their job done.

The whistle blew, and the next match began.

Brook sat down, taking deep breath after deep breath.

"Woo!" C yelled excitedly, "B had her first fall!" Other maids echoed the cheer as the junior maid became rapidly flustered.

"See?" M said as she sat down next to her, "that little spawner was so eager to help you! They did such a good job!"

Seeing this as a rite of passage—and not as a mistake to be ridiculed for—Brook began to calm down, in time to be ready for her next turn. Thankfully, the rest of the day went by without incident; despite the few stumbles, she was beginning to get into the groove. She really liked this. She liked it a lot.

When the shift ended, Sandi took her aside as the team made their way back to the Cleanup. "Good job out there," she said, "it looks like you got to try a little bit of everything. And you're getting along with the team, too; that's a big plus."

Brook looked up at her, having forgotten that this was after all a tryout. "Yeah?" she asked, a tiny bit meekly.

"Yeah," Sandi said, grinning. "You did good. I think we can set you up on a part-time basis until you get settled in." Then her look took on a more serious, but still very caring tone. "Listen, Brook," she said, "You

didn't just appear downstream from Phil's place. Right? You must come from somewhere, even if you don't remember. That means there's a chance somebody's missing you." She gently put her hand on Brook's shoulder. "If things work out and you want to stay, that's great! But I wouldn't want to keep you away from something more important. So keep that in mind, yeah?"

The smaller inkling nodded, suddenly deep in thought. She hadn't thought about that, not really. But where did she come from? Were there people missing her right this moment? It was certainly possible, she conceded. But it was still so hard to remember. Nothing outside the city walls meant anything to her; it was a big blank slate.

"I didn't mean to bring you down," Sandi said, "sorry about that. We all had a good day so let's do our best to enjoy it, yeah?"

Brook gave her captain a little smile. "Yeah" she said, "that sounds like a good idea."

A walked back toward the two, as the rest of the team had gotten quite a bit ahead of them. "Yo! D and Mini-D, hurry up or you'll miss the bus!"

Brook was hit with a sudden rush of emotion. "Mini-D?!" she asked nervously.

"Yeah," A replied, pointing to Brook's head. "You got the same hairstyle and color and everything, it's cute. C'mon." With that, she turned around and ran back toward the group.

Brook looked down, suddenly fussing with her pliant hair. "Is that... something you can just change?" she asked without daring to look at Sandi. She wanted to keep her furious blushing to herself.

The maid captain chuckled. "You can totally change it," she said with a smile, "it's easy. I'll show you later, but we really should catch that bus." She led the way to the rest of the team, catching up with them just in time.

The sun was setting as the maids made their way through the downtown square, eager to kick back at the Cleanup. Brook, however, stopped dead in her tracks; she'd spotted the red pillar again. Now she wasn't in a hurry. Now she could find out what it was. Now she could learn why it was one of the clearest memories she had. "I'll catch up!" she shouted after the group, "don't wait up!"

By the time some of her teammates looked back to see what that had been about, she was already across the street.

Brook stood in front of it. The shiny red object looked like a giant red pipe with a horizontal slot and a square hatch. Was it a mailbox, she wondered? She hadn't really seen any around here, and wouldn't a single giant mailbox be pretty weird? Everyone seemed to get by with cell phones, anyway. Speaking of which, shouldn't she have one? Had she lost it too?



A young inkling brought her back to reality as he snuck in front of her and threw what looked like a postcard into the slot; he then tossed a pen into a side bin and walked away.

Brook looked; somewhat hidden next to the mailbox was a container with lots of wide blank postcards and extra pens. Did people...just write those out and send them? Where were the stamps?

Brook stepped back and looked around her. Then she saw them; lots of folks had customized postcards somewhere on them, either as phone charms, or showing through clear pockets in their bags, or just hanging around their necks. Was this some sort of fashion? A popular fad?

CHUFF! went the mailbox, causing Brook to yelp and hop back a couple steps. The top of the pipe had just spat out a small cloud of... postcards? They fluttered down to the ground slowly; another passing kid snatched one out of the air, looking it over. Others soon followed to look at the new communications. "Who are those for?" Brook asked the nearest kid.

"Nobody," the latter replied without looking up, "it's today's special delivery. They just come from wherever and usually they're meh. Sometimes you can get a real funny one though!"

The young inklings picked through the cards and left, one of them sticking around a little longer to dutifully pick up the rest of the discarded paper and dump everything into a side bin.

Brook looked inside; the plastic container was full of white postcards, most with scribbles, some with drawings, all of them addressed to no one in particular. This felt familiar. She crouched down and started leafing through the pile, not sure what she was looking for—

Then she found it.

She sat down onto the ground, her eyes wide, her hands shaking. She recognized the postcard she was holding.

She was the one who'd sent it.

Like a splash of cold water to the face, it brought everything back. She remembered. Suddenly, she remembered everything.

Tears started flowing, and she finally knew why.

The Impostor

The sun had gone down, the nightlife was starting to quiet down a bit, and Brook was still downtown, postcard in hand. She had found a quiet place in a corner where she could just sit down and be alone with her thoughts.

She wished she hadn't remembered. She wished she'd never seen the mailbox, never seen the postcard that she'd sent. What were the odds she'd find it? Why had luck been so cruel to her? The tears came back. They didn't leave for very long anymore.

She didn't belong here. At all.

She was supposed to be studying for her final year of college and sending applications to potential employers and looking at graduate programs as a backup and taking care of her duties at the fraternity and—

And she wasn't a girl. She wished she could be; she'd spent long nights awake in bed hoping against hope that come next morning she would be, and her time here had felt so wonderful and so natural and the happiest two days in her life...but she wasn't. Part of her kept telling her, repeating over and over the fact that deep down she wasn't. Would the others be able to tell? Would they know?

Brook looked down at her body, then her hands. She reached up to play with her hair a little, make sure it was real. It took her so much effort to change into this form. What if what A said was true? What if she was just a smaller version of Sandi? The latter had been the first inkling she'd seen. Maybe when she'd changed, she had just copied her, down to the hair. Now that she knew who she was, maybe she wouldn't be able to do it anymore. Maybe this body would go away, replaced by...

She curled up on the chair. The tears had come back again.

It took her a while to recover. She gathered up her courage and looked down at the postcard again. It was a drawing of an inkling girl startled to be in a maid outfit; the whole thing was drawn to look like the cover of a book. It had been an inside joke between her and some friends. But it meant something more.

She'd asked for this. She had wanted this so much that she drew this postcard for a video game and sent it and now...now she was in that world. But it didn't feel like a game. It didn't feel like a dream. It felt real. She had gone to sleep and woken up at least once, after all; and a lot of the things she'd seen hadn't quite lined up with what she'd played. What had happened, then? Was this a parallel universe?

She shook her head. Maybe she was in a coma. Maybe she'd fallen

and hit her head and now her mind was stuck in this imagined place.

But the one certain thing was that she didn't belong. She was a human going to a college on Earth and...and she wasn't a...

She tried not to think about it. Sandi's words echoed in her mind; she had a family. Folks were missing her. She had a life to get back to; she wasn't supposed to be here. *When life doesn't give you what you want, you're not supposed to escape to a fantasy land. No, she thought, you face your responsibilities.*

She had to get home somehow. Before the others found out the truth. Before she ruined the best memories she'd ever had. It had gotten late, after all; maybe everyone had gone to bed. Maybe she could just sneak up to her room and not talk to anyone ever again. Who could she go to now, though? Who could help her?

With an "Oh!" she realized the answer. Running back to the Cleanup, she tried to remember where she'd seen a side entrance; she didn't want to risk running into any of her teammates. Or, well, former teammates. She tried not to think about that.

She successfully evaded everybody on her way to the clinic. But when she reached for the door, it was locked. She tried the knob again and again, to no avail. Could she find Octricia? Did she even live in this building?

Clack. Clack. Clack.

Brook heard the telltale sound of Luss's cane get closer and closer but she was frozen in place. She couldn't just run away, could she? That'd be weird. So she kept staring at the door, hoping that the Cleanup elder would just pass by.

But of course she stopped. "The clinic is closed at night," Luss said. Brook dared to take a look at the towering figure.

"Unless this is an emergency?" Luss asked, raising an eyebrow. Her face was perfectly neutral, her emotions imperceptible.

In comparison, the inkling girl was visibly distraught and barely holding back tears again. She'd figured she could hold herself together until she got to the clinic, but now she had no backup plan and was so close to being overwhelmed. She didn't want to have a breakdown in front of the owner of her temporary home but she didn't know how she could avoid it.

Luss raised her hand. The multiple tiny tendrils making up what looked like a feather boa around her neck wriggled in wavelike patterns, flowing like water; from parts unknown, a key was produced, making its way into her waiting fingers. She grasped it, unlocked the clinic door, and returned the key to her living collar, which gently tucked it away. "Let's get you a seat and some privacy, hm?"

She ushered the nervous inkling into the clinic, closing the door behind the two of them.

Confessions

Luss took a seat opposite Brook in the waiting room of the small clinic; even when both were sitting down, the inkling had to look considerably high up to meet the elder's gaze. Not that she wanted to do that a lot, especially now. She wasn't sure it was a good idea to open up to someone so important, and somebody that she'd barely interacted with, besides. But part of her suspected that Luss genuinely cared—even if she didn't show it all that much—and that was enough to make her want to open the floodgates. But still she hesitated.

Luss herself remained silent, as if she was confident that explanations would be forthcoming and that all she needed to do was wait.

"I...I had amnesia," Brook finally said, "and everyone here helped me a lot, and I'm so grateful, but..."

"But?" Luss asked calmly.

"I just...I just got my memories back," Brook answered, her voice shaking, "and...and..." She shook her head. "No one will believe me."

Luss chuckled. "My dear girl," she said, "I'm positively ancient. I have seen things I'll wager most would have trouble believing as well. I'm not in the business of dismissing things out of hand."

Brook stared at the floor. "I'm...supposed to be a human," she said meekly, "I don't know how I got here, but I'm supposed to be back home, going to college, and I have family there, and..." She trailed off.

"Well," Luss said, "we've certainly had our share of time travelers."

Brook looked up, a little surprised. "Time travelers?" she asked.

"It's a bit of a long story," Luss replied, "but maybe we're not talking about the same thing. Do you remember how you got here?"

The inkling shook her head. "I...I woke up in an ink river outside the city," she said, "and Sandi found me, and...I don't know, there's a weird gap before that and back when I was...what I remember from before." Brook had quickly corrected herself; there was so much she wanted to share, but there were things she just wasn't ready to say out loud yet. Something stuck out in her mind, though; something Sandi had said about that little river. "When she found me, Sandi mentioned a...Phil?"

The woman blinked in a rare show of surprise before answering, "if she means the Phil whose house produces that stream of ink you were just talking about, then that would be the Postmaster. His experiments with the mail are a bit messy, so he relocated outside the city."

Brook thought back to the postcard that started all this. Surely the Postmaster would know how it got her here. If anyone knew how to send her back, it'd be him. "How can I meet him? It's very important."



Luss looked to the side, as if trying to find the best way to sugarcoat her response. "Postmaster Phil is a busy man and is constantly traveling. I'm afraid he's notoriously hard to pin down outside of council meetings."

Brook's eyes suddenly lit up. "He's on the council?" she asked.

"Yes," Luss said, "but council meetings are closed affairs. I'm afraid plus-ones aren't en vogue."

Brook stood up suddenly and bowed. "Thank you," she said, "I feel better. I, uh, I need to do something." And with that, she ran out of the clinic, leaving Luss sitting by herself.

But, as she had said before, the Cleanup founder had seen a lot of things in her time. She smiled and stood up, making her way out as well. She had a lot on her plate, but she did appreciate when things got interesting in her little corner of the world.

On the other side of the building, across Chill Square, Brook ran into the gate of Salt's store. Of course it was closed; it was already so late. She cursed herself for having taken so long to come back. If she'd figured all this out earlier, maybe she would've run into Salt again. But then she wouldn't have seen Luss, who wouldn't have been able to help, and—Brook snapped out of her musing; there were people talking nearby. Maybe they could point her in the right direction; she didn't know anything about Salt's whereabouts outside the one time she'd met them at their store, after all. She peeked over some discarded holiday decorations at the people having a discussion.

A, C, and S were lounging on a comfortable-looking couch, watching a program on one of the multiple screens that had been installed around the square. Salt was up on the screen, talking with the host about some clothing they were artfully gesturing towards.

C sat up and leaned forward. "Who the heck called them Experienced Fashion Designer Salt and not Seasoned Salt," she said, looking expectantly at her two couchmates.

"C'mere squiddo," A said as she rolled her eyes and pulled C to her, ruffling her hair affectionately. "Frickin' adorable," she added.

"I enjoyed that one on many levels," S said with a calm smile.

Brook took this opportunity to step in. "Uh, hey," she said, "have you seen Salt around?"

S waved toward the television, leaving Brook a little perplexed.

"Uh, no, I mean in person," she added.

"It's a live show," A said with a tiny hint of annoyance in her voice, "they tape it downtown. Salt's probably gonna be there a few more min—" A stopped, turning around. Brook was already gone.

There was no time to waste. Brook, still in her uniform, ran as fast as she could; thankfully the downtown square wasn't so far. She needed to talk to Salt before it was too late. She didn't know how long she had, but an opportunity like this might not come around again for a long

time. By the time she made it to the studio's street-facing window, the host inside had moved on to another segment. In a panic, Brook looked for the door, tried to figure out where the exit outside would be, and took a single step before running directly into Salt. "Aah!" she yelped, "Salt! Hi! I need to talk to you!"

The designer looked down at the surprised inkling. "Brook. Hello," they said, motioning down the street, "walk and talk?"

"Please," Brook begged as they both walked back to the Cleanup, "let me be your assistant again for the uniform presentation to the council. I need to see the Postmaster. It's very important."

Salt gave the shorter inkling a sidelong glance. "It's short notice," they began, "and I'd have to make sure my assistant is alright with it. We'd also need to get more practice in the morning; the presentation is tomorrow, after all. I don't know, this is cutting it very close."

Brook tried to hold back the tears as she gently took Salt's hand. "Please," she said.

"I can see this is important," Salt said, a look of concern on their face, "but why the hurry? You're still in uniform so I'm assuming things went well today. Did something happen?"

The younger inkling looked up, tears streaming down her face. "I love it so much," she said shakily, "but I can't do it anymore. I remembered and it...it made everything worse. The next time I change, I..." She sniffled, looking down at her feet. "...I don't think I can change back." Standing up from her squid form had been hard every single time, but it had always been worth it. She loved this body. She loved it so much, and she was so afraid to lose it. But chances are she wouldn't be able to keep it for very long, and she desperately wanted her last memories here to be good ones.

Brook was caught by surprise by an unusual feeling; Salt had bent down to one knee and taken her into a firm hug. She hesitated a moment, then buried her face in their shoulder, returning the hug.

"I shall have a talk with my assistant," Salt said, "and tomorrow morning you and I will meet up at the store for practice. We'll make it work." They both stayed there for a long moment before Salt gently stood up again.

"Thank you," Brook said. She didn't know how to feel about Salt's sudden support, but she was incredibly grateful for it.

"It's only natural," Salt said, leading the way back to the Cleanup. "And if you need help keeping things together," they added, "let me know. I've picked up a few tricks."

The younger inkling nodded, slowly getting her feelings back in order. This was going to work out. She'd be able to meet the Postmaster, and he'd explain what had happened. And then she'd go back home, like she was supposed to.

What You Are

Brook miraculously made it to her room, and to her bed, and collapsed. She didn't have the strength to get out of her uniform. She didn't have the strength to turn off the lights. She didn't even have the strength to—*knock knock*—to lock the door.

"Brook, is that you?" asked a voice on the other side. "Are you okay?" It was Sandi. Of course it was Sandi.

Brook rolled over to her side. She wanted to get up and lock the door, but she couldn't. She was spent. Utterly exhausted. She just wanted to stop existing, to vanish without risking harm to the wonderful memories she wanted to keep safe. She tried to tell Sandi she was sick, but all she managed was a loud whimper.

"I'm coming in," Sandi said, opening the door. "Oh Brook," she added as the smaller inkling tried to cover up her face, "have you been crying? We lost track of you when we came back, I was getting worried. Did anything happen?"

Brook heard Sandi get closer, then felt her weight shift the bed as she sat next to her. Part of her wanted to keep everything inside, to make sure the woman she admired so much never caught a glimpse of the truth because it could shatter every good moment they'd had together. Part of her wanted to find the perfect thing to say to defuse the situation and make her leave and then quietly escape in the morning, maybe leaving a thoughtful note. Then her memories would be safe. Part of her wanted to say nothing. But the rest of her knew that Sandi deserved to know the truth, and that was stronger than anything else.

She told her everything. About the postcard, her memories, her real home, her world, her family, her obligations, her plans, and...what she really was. And Sandi listened.

Brook finally dared to look her in the eyes. She was wearing different clothes, she'd changed her color to a hot pink and her hair was in a different style, but it was almost exactly like the first time they'd met; Sandi looking down from above, concerned and sympathetic. "I...I copied you, didn't I?" Brook asked, choking back more tears. She could've filled an ocean by herself today. "I saw you and I didn't know how to change so...I just copied you. But now I know what I am, and the next time I change, I'm going to be different. Because...because now my body knows I'm not a girl." She broke down sobbing.

Her memories on that point were crystal-clear: she had wanted this so much. But she couldn't have it. There was always something there to remind her that she couldn't. She wasn't supposed to. It was impossible.

She felt Sandi's hand on her head, comforting her with gentle pats.

"Oh, Brook," the taller inkling said, "is this what's been on your mind?" She waited until the sobs subsided, then continued, "no wonder you've had a rough couple of days." She stepped off the bed, crouching down in front of it so she could see eye-to-eye with Brook. "Listen to me," she said with a hint of firmness.

The smaller inkling calmed down and opened her eyes. Her heart was beating so fast.

"Listen," Sandi said, "each one of us has had years to understand how our bodies work. A lot of it is instinct, but so much of it is what we make of it. It takes time to learn how to build a body; I'm surprised you pulled it off so fast, considering. But we don't learn by imitation, we learn by inspiration. And we do with it what we want; we're not bound to it."

Sandi carefully cradled Brook's face with her hands. "Brook," she said gently, "we each make the best body we can for ourselves. We don't make it for anybody else. You don't need permission, and it doesn't matter what you looked like before. Even if you've just been an inkling for a couple days, you made this body because that's what you felt was best for you."

Sandi leaned back carefully, gesturing to Brook with arms open.

"If that's what you want, then that's what you are."

Brook reached out to Sandi. The taller inkling gently put her arms around her, and they embraced. The smaller girl let it all out; years and years of pent-up yearning and anxiety and despair and sorrow, finally out in the open, streaming down her face.

Final Performance

Brook woke up in Sandi's arms. Enveloped in warmth, her head nestled under the taller inkling's chin, she wanted to stay like this forever. But she could tell it was morning; Salt would be waiting for her soon for some last-minute practice, and then they'd be off to present the new uniform to the council. And then she'd meet the person who could give her a way back.

What would she do now, though? The stubborn part of her brain was still resisting last night's revelations. But she didn't want to listen to it; not now, not ever again. She knew who she was and nothing could change that now. Once she got back home, she...she'd just have to show everyone else there, too. She nodded to herself.

"Morning," Sandi said softly, causing the smaller inkling's face to redden. "Feeling better?" she asked, leaning back gently to give them both enough room to talk face-to-face.

Brook nodded, focusing her gaze on the taller inkling's chin. "Yeah," she answered, quietly adding, "thank you so much...for everything. You didn't have to keep me company all night."

Sandi gave her a quick hug. "Hey," she said, "when I'm off the clock, what I do with my time is my business. I'm not gonna let a cute girl all alone to cry herself to sleep."

Brook immediately curled up, hiding her face as best she could. Compliments were new and wonderful and terrifying and she did not know how to handle them, especially when they came from Sandi.

The latter chuckled, adding, "sorry, was that too much?" She carefully sat up, stretching a little.

Brook sat up, looking at her uniform; she'd been wearing it for almost a full day now, maybe that wasn't very good for the fabric. Something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye, and she reached up to fiddle with her hair. It had turned pink overnight to match Sandi's.

The latter smiled and said, "See? Told you you could change it."

Brook shook her head in response, adding, "no, I...I didn't do that! At least, I don't think I did..."

The taller inkling stepped over and put a gentle hand on her shoulder to calm her down. "That happens too," she said, "sometimes folks just sync up when they're close. It's like a reflex. It's perfectly fine." She stood back up, a thoughtful look crossing her face—along with a hint of concern, which had become a common sight. "You gonna be okay today?" she asked.

"Yeah," Brook said hesitatingly, "I...I'll do my best. I have to go

practice with Salt, and then we're going to go see the council, and...I'm going to meet Phil. And he'll tell me how to get back home." Her voice had stopped shaking mid-sentence; she was sure of herself now. No matter what happened, she knew who she was.

Sandi was a bit taken aback. "You're going back? Today?" she asked.

Brook's heart sank. "Yeah," she replied "I...I might not get another chance." Her resolve was so strong earlier and now she almost didn't believe the words she was saying. She didn't want to go, and the part of her that felt she had to was growing weaker by the minute. Could she really just abandon an entire life, though? There were people back home who cared about her, who counted on her. Could she live with herself if she decided to forget about them?

"I...I don't know what I want now," Brook blurted out. "There's people waiting for me back home, and that's important, but...I like it here! And I like being me, and being on the team with you, and you're important to me, and..." she trailed off.

Sandi sat down next to her, reaching up to stroke the smaller inkling's hair; whether that was intended to comfort or fluster her was unclear to Brook, but she instantly froze up, blushing furiously. "You're important to me too," the taller inkling said, "but the most important person in your life right now is you. Don't get me wrong, it's not every day that the world drops a cutie from a parallel universe right at my feet during a morning run, and I'm very grateful for that. But there's a lot I don't know about you, and there's a lot you don't know about me." She leaned down to look Brook in the eye. "Don't go living your life for someone else, yeah? That never ends well. Go with what's best for you."

The smaller inkling nodded. "Yeah," she said before taking a deep breath. "That's what I'm gonna do. Thanks, Sandi." They hugged, and then hugged one more time for good measure, and then Brook was off.

Salt was where they'd promised they'd be: standing in front of their store, putting some finishing touches on the new uniform prototype. There was little time for words; Brook quickly changed into the new outfit, they both practiced the routine a few more times, and then they were off—Luss had arranged for transport, and neither she nor the rest of the council would wait for very long. They got into the car with seconds to spare, the Cleanup founder already sitting comfortably. Luss gave Brook a long look, and suddenly the inkling realized yesterday's conversation and felt like a criminal. Council meetings didn't allow plus ones, yet here she was, defying some sort of authority in a way that made her want to shrink and disappear. She tried to avoid panicking by taking a sudden and deep interest in the folds of her uniform.

"So she *is* your new assistant, then?" Luss asked, raising an inquisitive eyebrow at Salt.

"Not exactly," they replied, "this is another one-time arrangement.

My assistant would rather devote her time to her current project and Brook here has already put in more practice for the presentation, so she's the safer choice."

The woman looked at the nervous inkling. "I see," she said, smiling imperceptibly, "then I suppose everything is working out, isn't it?"

The young lady dared to look up, finding complicity instead of scorn. She returned the smile. Maybe things were going to be okay.

But first, she had a performance to ace. Their transport dropped them off in front of an important-looking building and they headed in, Luss front and center. Brook had no idea what the council even looked like, or what this meeting was about, but that mattered very little to her; she was there to meet the Postmaster, get some answers, and maybe—just maybe—find a way back home. She didn't know if she'd be happy with that last bit. Out of all the possible ways this could go, she didn't know which one she wanted anymore.

But there was no stopping her now.

The elevator hummed as it lifted everyone toward one of the most crucial moments of Brook's short time here. Would she get to stay after the presentation? Could she just walk up to the Postmaster and say hi? How was this going to work? But before she could dive too deeply into this line of thought, she felt Salt's hand on her shoulder. "I'll introduce you during the break," they said softly, as if reading her mind.

Brook looked up at the designer and nodded, reassured. She was going to miss them. Gosh, no matter how this would end, she was going to miss so many people.

The doors opened not into a meeting room, but a cozy-looking penthouse suite. Instead of a table and projectors and rows upon rows of stiff chairs, there were comfortable sofas, a kitchenette, and even what looked like an entertainment area. Important-looking people of all shapes and sizes were lounging about; the closest one looked at the group as they entered and waved them in. "Right on time," they said, "Good! Let's get started." And with that, the group gathered in a central recessed pit of couches and a surprisingly relaxed meeting began.

Brook sat the furthest she could from the proceedings while still being part of them, Salt shielding her from attention. There was talk of new umbrella regulations, of city zoning changes, of clothing partnerships, and tons of other issues that flew over the inkling's head. "So let's take a look at that uniform," someone said, snapping Brook back to attention.

This was it. She stood up in unison with Salt, who then led her to a suitably open area a few feet away.

"I hope it will live up to your expectations," the designer began, "as we have put our all into it. Let us begin."

Salt and Brook flowed into action; the morning practice, hurried as it was, had made a big difference. The duo once again became a pair

of dancers, with the shorter inkling—more artfully this time, and with much more confident flourishes—striking poses while her taller partner extolled the virtues of the new uniform’s upgraded features. There was less hesitation, a lot more style, and everyone—audience included—looked like they enjoyed themselves a great deal. After the final twirl, both presenters bowed, eliciting a round of applause from the council members. Two well-dressed inklings in complementary outfits seemed especially appreciative of the performance.

Brook could finally breathe again. She’d made it; now, the rest was up to chance and hope. No matter what happened now, she had done her best. There were more words exchanged, more questions asked, but her mind was elsewhere, awash with relief.

Then Salt took her by the hand and led her to a rugged-looking inkling. “Brook,” the designer said, “this is Postmaster Atelly. Sir, my associate Brook has something important to share with you.”

She tensed up again. *This is it*, she thought; *this is where I find out what happens to me*.

The Postmaster grinned, reaching up to scratch under his cap. “Please, Phil is fine. Nice to meet you Brook! Let’s go talk over there.”

Very Long Distance

The balcony overlooked a nice part of the city but was in a quiet enough spot to offer a tiny bit of privacy. Phil leaned back against the railing. "So, what can I do for you?" he asked, giving Brook his undivided attention.

She took a deep breath. "I, uh..." she began, then realized she didn't really know where to begin. But then it came to her; she reached inside her uniform's apron pocket and pulled out the postcard she'd made sure to keep close to her at all times. She handed it to Phil carefully.

"Oh, you got one of those! I'm glad they've been getting around alright, it took a long time to get that whole system up and running."

Brook took another deep breath. "I didn't get it," she said before correcting herself, "well—I mean, I got it, but...I'm the one who sent it."

The Postmaster blinked, puzzled. "You sent it?" he asked, "oh, did it get mixed in with the others? That's not supposed to work like that—"

"No," Brook interrupted, "I sent it. I'm...I'm supposed to be a human." She winced at how silly everything she was saying sounded, but continued, "I come from Earth. I sent it through the game, and then I woke up here, in the ink brook near your place outside the city."

Phil blinked, taking off his cap with one hand and scratching his head with the other. "Oh," he said after a long while, "you sent it through the...*game*?"

Brook nodded.

Phil put his cap back on. "You're sure?" he asked, still visibly processing the information in his head.

Brook nodded again.

The Postmaster let out a long sigh. "I think I know what happened," he said, "but...wow, it ain't supposed to work like that." He stood up, motioning for the inkling girl to follow him. "Hey folks," he said to the rest of the room, "I'm going out on a quick ride, go on without me. I'll be back before we close up." This was met with an agreeable response.

Brook looked to Salt, seeking some sort of confirmation; the designer nodded in Phil's direction. Satisfied she wasn't getting in over her head, Brook followed the Postmaster to the elevator—this time going up to the roof.

The helicopter ride was quick and thankfully uneventful, because the noise inside the cabin meant Phil couldn't quite pilot and carry on a conversation. All Brook could do was sit, take in the sights, and let her anxiety run wild with the possibilities. Phil looked taken aback and worried. That wasn't good. But, was it? What outcome did she want for

herself, anyway? By the time they landed the nervous inkling had gone through a reasonable amount of nightmare scenarios; she did her best to regain her composure as they both stepped out onto the landing pad outside what looked like a small factory on stilts, topped with a series of radar dishes. Peering over the railing, Brook could see the ink runoff from the place stream down the hill and run alongside the shoreline below. She saw the spot where she emerged a lifetime—but really, just a few days—ago.

Phil led her inside; the small building was cramped, filled to the brim with strange machinery and endless pipes. Next to a workbench and behind some sort of large printing press was a spawner; Brook recognized the device from the stages she'd visited with the maid team.

"You have matches here?" she asked, pointing to the circular plate.

"No, no," Phil answered, "but you can never be too careful. We're away from the city here, and accidents happen, so it's always good to have something that can patch you up if you take a spill while revolutionizing the postal system. Gotta stay current, you know? That press over there next to it is hooked up to the sensor system on the roof. I just got it all up and running recently. Still a bit messy; it spills way too much ink."

Brook looked at him quizzically, not sure where this was going.

"It's a long story," Phil continued, "but hear me out."

The younger inkling nodded.

"We have local mail," Phil explained, "which handles this region. We have long distance mail, which goes to and from other islands, even far away. Then we have *very* long distance mail, and that goes...well, very far. I was real proud of it; it's what uses that postcard system. It's simple to just turn beeps and boops—which the big dishes up there send and receive—into dots and naughts on a standard-size postcard. Don't need computers or phones or any of that expensive stuff; it's its own system, and so far it's never had an outage. Kids really love it, it's sort of a fashion thing now, they send 'em to each other."

"Anyway," Phil continued as he picked up a handful of postcards with random lines and dots all over them, "I started getting some odd ones. Like, *real* odd. They didn't make any sense. But I could tell where they came from, so I rigged up a new system to hone in on them, and I sent some of the kids' postcards back their way. I figured, you know, to say hi. And I started getting more back, this time making a lot more sense."

He held up a new selection of postcards, this time featuring inklings and what looked like children's depictions of the matches Brook had seen up close. "I never ended up getting a conversation going, but I figured these postcards could make someone smile, so I sent them to the mailboxes too. Give a random kid a message from a faraway place, you know?"

Brook held her breath. She almost could make sense of what Phil was describing, but it felt like a crucial part was missing.

"Then," the Postmaster said, "I started getting ones with words on 'em." He picked up a single card, showing it to the inkling girl; it was a 'catch-up' pun about a condiment.

She chuckled.

Phil put the card down, staring at the girl. "I knew it," he said, "this is my fault." He took a deep breath, shaking his head.

"Wait," Brook said with sudden confusion, "what do you mean it's your fault?"

The Postmaster looked at her with a serious stare she hadn't seen on him before. "You understand what that said, right? You got the joke."

She nodded.

He showed her the card again. "I can't read this," he said, "I don't know anyone who can."

Brook looked at the card again. Then her jaw dropped. It was written in English. She hadn't noticed it; ever since she'd gotten here, every single thing she read was in another language, but somehow she hadn't noticed. She'd just...understood it. "What..." she said slowly, trying not to panic, "what's going on?"

"I started getting cards with words on them," Phil explained, "so I made a few calls, got some friends together, and we modified my system to try and understand them. We upped the power a lot, you know, to pull real hard at the source of these messages. And in addition to the message itself, we were able to get the *meaning*, too. That took a lot of work, and some tech I'm not sure everyone involved understands completely, but we got it working. We got a much stronger signal, and this time the press could turn that into cards with proper words on 'em, puns and everything. They became a big hit with the kids."

He took a deep breath. "And then," the Postmaster continued, "a couple mornings ago, I was doing some calibration stuff and the system got *way* more power than it was supposed to. It was a huge thing and I was putting out fires for an hour, and—I didn't realize why at the time—the spawner fired up." He pointed to the device a few feet away. "I was fine, so I figured this was just part of the problem." Phil walked over to the spawner. "But now I get it," he said, "that's when you were born."

Brook coughed. "What?!" she exclaimed, "That's when I was...what? No! I'm...I'm from Earth, and..."

Phil held up his hands. "I know," he said, "it's...listen, it's complicated. The system got that card you sent. And there was probably a pun, or an inside joke in it or something, and it needed to know more. So it pulled in a lot—and because of my mistake, we're talking a *lot*—of information. It got the meaning, and what it referred to, and the context, and the context of the context, until...it had almost a whole mind's worth. And

that's what tripped the spawner; it sensed a person way too low on ink, dragged all of that out of the press, and...put you back together the only way it knew how. And because of the spill you probably just squished through a grate and fell into the brook." He paused. "Oh, *brook*. I get it now."

The younger inkling fell to the floor, shaking on her hands and knees.

"Ah, dang," Phil said, walking over and kneeling down next to her, "I'm sorry, this is probably a lot."

Brook's eyes were all over the place; this was too much. Who was she? What even was she anymore? "Can..." she said, forcing out the words, "can you send me back?"

Phil half-frowned, knowing he had a lot of bad news to deliver. "Listen," he said, "that's not how this works. I can *maybe* send a message with the meaning-interpretation thing, but no more—there aren't any spawners on the other side, are there? And even if there were...the *you* that all these memories came from is still there."

Brook tried to stand up. "Wait, I'm...I'm a copy?" she asked Phil, her voice cracking.

The Postmaster helped her up. "No," he said firmly, "you're not. A copy made it all the way here, but this thing," Phil pointed to the spawner, "this thing made an inkling out of it. You've been living since then, right? Making new memories, doing stuff—heck, you're giving presentations with Salt after two days, that's nothing to sneeze at! You've been living. You're alive. You're your own person."

The fresh inkling made it to her feet, slowly walking out the door with Phil close by. She leaned against the railing, looking at the ink brook below again. "What..." she said softly, "what do I do now?"

Phil walked up next to her and rested his arms on the railing. "Whatever you want," he said, as warmly as he could, "you're the boss of you. You do whatever you want."

The tears came back again, flowing freely. But this time, there was very little sadness in them. Instead, they were filled with relief, with a profound sense of finally letting go.

Sending a Message

"What have you got there, Bee?" Sandi asked, returning from the shop, two drinks in hand.

"A postcard," Brook answered playfully, "aaaand I'm almost done with it. It took Phil a while to get this working, so I want to make sure I get it right."

The taller inkling sat down next to her, putting the drinks between them. She poked at her phone, and—once Brook had stopped scribbling—took the opportunity to ruffle her hair playfully.

"Done!" the smaller inkling said cheerfully, blushing at the attention.

Sandi took a look at the card, then broke out into a wide grin. "You're adorable," she said, "and a good artist! Have you been practicing?"

Brook beamed. "A little," she replied, "this message is important, after all."

"Who are you sending it to?" Sandi asked before taking a sip.

Brook took a deep breath, holding the card up. "Someone close, but very far away" she answered.

"Do I know them?" the taller inkling asked.

The smaller inkling smiled. "Kind of," she said, "they're like...family. Someone I didn't want to leave behind."

The crowd moved around the both of them as they relaxed, taking in the sights and sounds. The morning had been lazy, but they were up for double shifts after lunch and they'd need to be in top form. Thankfully, that didn't appear to be a problem for either of them.

Their drinks finished, they stood up and stretched, ready to face what the rest of the day had in store. Sandi went to throw away the empty cups as Brook ran off to the big red mailbox.

"I hope this reaches you," she said aloud, "because you mean a lot to me, and I want you to be happy. You got this." She dropped the postcard into the slot.

"All done?" Sandi asked as the smaller inkling ran back to meet up with her again.

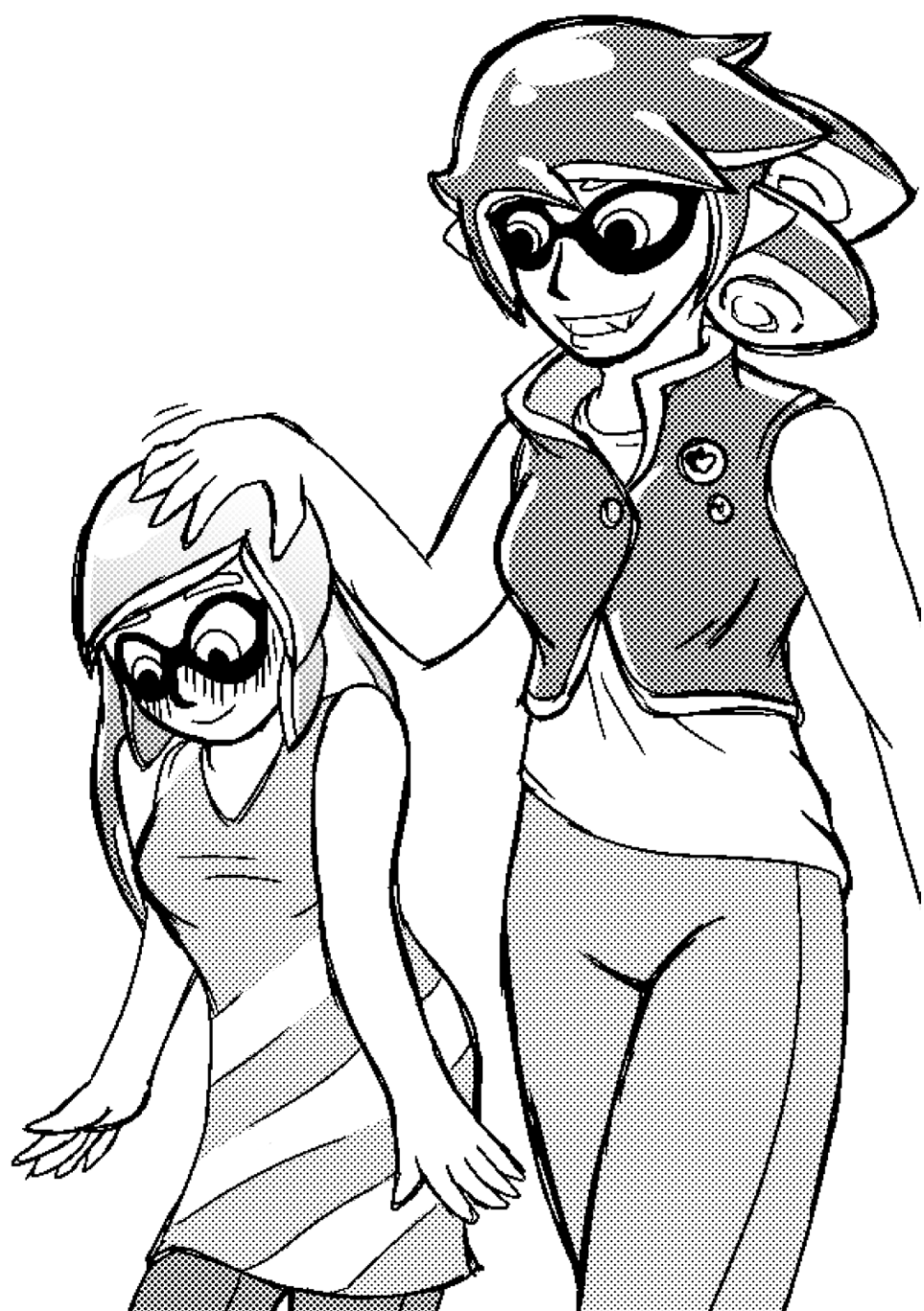
"Yup!" Brook said, walking alongside her on the way to the Cleanup.

"Did you prepare the outfits?" the maid captain asked.

"Sure did!" the junior maid replied, "I also studied the new routes A posted and did the equipment check with M. We're good to go, Dee."

Sandi smiled. "Good girl," she said, patting her partner on the head and making her blush furiously, to the taller inkling's great delight.

They held hands as they walked back home.



Epilogue

The last pledges had finally left the room, offering a modicum of privacy. With the screen detached from its dock and the beanbag set against the corner of the room, there would be no more eavesdropping for the day. Whatever there was left of it, at any rate—tomorrow was already too close.

But whatever minutes of comfort the game had to offer would be enjoyed to their fullest. There had been an update, after all, and the new equipment on sale looked especially good.

The square had generated a crowd of friends and friends-of-friends, all displaying their latest postcard messages. Jokes and amazingly-detailed art all around as usual, admittedly one of the best parts of the game. Sometimes messages from the greater pool of postcards were selected to be put up on the walls as graffiti, though, and those could come from further away—

The screen jostled, almost dropping to the ground.

The camera shifted to allow for a better view of the alley wall. A familiar message was there, but...familiar in an uncanny way. There was no memory of making it, much less posting it to the game, but what other explanation was there? Who else could imitate this style exactly, down to the signature?

It was a drawing of two inkling girls in maid outfits, one in the arms of the other, both smiling happily. One of them was instantly recognizable. The whole thing was drawn to look like the cover of a book, like an inside joke between some friends. The title was written in big bold letters:

"If that's what you want, then that's what you are."

Tears drip-dropped onto the screen; slowly at first, then flowing freely. But there was very little sadness in them. Instead, they were filled with relief; with a profound sense of letting go.

Fin

