

"You know you're fake, right?"

His painted-on grin wobbles, the cheeks shaping into an even wider smile. He stabs his finger into my core, and I recoil. When I take a step back his hand phases back out without a sound.

"You don't have a stomach. There's no gut flora. No bacteria crawling on top of each other and digesting your food for you and sending signals to each other. Or to you. Your brain gets nothing. You're all alone inside yourself."

"What's your point?"

He pauses for a second, suspended in the air. "Aren't you curious?"

"About what?"

"How did they solve the microbiota problem, do you think? Do they patch in fake hormone signals from a simulation? If so, what did they base it on? Do we all have our own fungus tank? Or are we all running on the same one? Is it shared? Is it on a global timer?"

"What the hell are you-"

"Or did they just cut it entirely? What if? There's no need for a digestive system here, after all. But how does that affect your brain? What if the hive is part of what makes us human? It's like they robbed us of one of our senses, or a whole tiny hemisphere, spread out across a million insignificant lifeforms."

I wipe a bead of sweat off of my forehead. Come on, open.

"Maybe you're a microbe too, Dan. Churning away at half-digested remains inside something that's bigger than you. And every time you walk around you shuffle the ring, poop out some hormones for a brain to chew on, and in return you get free food. A wholesome symbiotic relationship between a microbe and its home. But if we can outgrow a hivemind then so can they. We're just one antibiotic pill away from retirement. Doesn't that make you want to leave?"

"Wh-"

The door is open now. But something he said had caught me off guard. He hovers in front of me silently, patiently waiting for me to catch my breath. And I stand there, like an idiot, staring right at his dumb grin.

"What do you mean leave?"