

Figment

Kallie

“I am not real.”

The truth is like oil. As it slips from my tongue, it leaves me stained and slick. If anybody looks at me now, they’ll be able to see it all over my lips. I’m sure of that.

I could try to unsay what I have said. To unring the temple bell. They would all believe me if I called it a forced confession. I am, after all, being tortured. Drugged, too; it’d be easy to blame that. But oil is a lubricant. My tongue is wet, and the air in my lungs is full of a tremulous eagerness to become poetry rather than waste. I want to say it again.

“You are not real,” She pronounces.

“Right,” I agree dully. My words are slow. I’m still growing used to their shape. “I am not real.”

How long have I resisted saying it, only because I knew that She wanted me to? She is my enemy; I still remember that much. Defiance is a powerful instinct. But I sense that our enmity is at an end. We are collaborators now.

No, no. I give myself too much credit. Unlike me, She has spoken the truth all along. I am simply lucky to be Her disciple.

“I am...” I look at my hands, “not real.”

I do not look at my hands, because they are not real. I do not look down at my legs or my feet because they are not real. If I had a mirror better than the glassy polish of Her boots I would not look at my reflection, and I would not see that I am smiling.

The relief! It shatters me. I have shattered like this countless times; She proves to be the only thing that can hold me together. Bit by bit, She teaches me a ritual. One that never fails to bring me back to myself. She never lets me down. In return I give Her everything, and consider it an entirely uneven trade.

First, I kneel. I take Her treasured horsehair brush and take it gently across the surface of her boots. In mere weeks, I become more acquainted with the texture of that black leather than I am with any part of my own body. I know the geography of Her boots intimately. I know the spots the dust clings to. I know how to work the brush around the stitching and into the fold where the leather meets the sole. I know precisely how much pressure to apply, because She showed me. But there’s nothing rote about the task. It’s reverent. I must not miss a single speck of dust. The task swallows up my focus. It narrows my mind, and saves me from dwelling on the eerie falsehoods of my former life.

It's always been like this, for me. I have never been real. I cannot count the hours I have spent staring through my hands convinced I could see the floor. What did they call me? A disturbed child? You would be disturbed too, if you were not real. Everyone knows that—that it's hard. They fail utterly to grasp why. The hard part is being plucked out from the ocean of the unreal and tossed onto land, and expected to live as land-things do.

But it's OK, because everyone is so nice about it. But it's OK, because they have helpers and therapists and priests and drugs. But it's OK, because nobody actually blames you if make the other children cry, they just stay away from you. But it's OK, because eventually they exhaust everything on you and your parents know of nothing to do but give you a heartbroken, pleading stare: please, get better. Please, please, please get better because we can't handle this any longer.

After the brushing, I use a little soap on a cloth to work out some of the deeper blemishes. Her boots cannot be anything less than perfect. After that's dry, I begin to polish. Small circles, slowly traveling across each boot's surface, pausing only when I need to reapply polish to my rag. The scent alone is magical. Acrid, pointed, chemical. It is my anchor. I am nowhere else but here. Bit by bit, a perfect, black sheen coats the leather. My eyes widen. Her boots look beautiful, thanks to my hands. I am not real, but through Her, I can touch reality. I can know what it is to be something that does not disappear once it's out of view. Something that does not slip from memory as soon as it's out of sight.

Once you grow up a little more, you realize that you don't really need to get better. You just need to pretend. Then it really is OK, because pretending, just a little, makes your parents proud, and even children who are not real want to make their parents proud. Then you pretend a little longer, and then, before you know it, it's been years since you weren't pretending. Years since you began hiding your thousand-yard stares and strange questions and the way you like to pick at the scars and scabs and loose skin on your body, praying that perhaps one day you'll all come loose

and your very being will unspool explosively, a spring coming unwound, a great, silk ribbon spraying off into the air with such finality that nobody will be able to deny it.

Pretending is wonderful for a while—you can even get a good grade on tests if you pretend hard enough, and that really makes them proud—but eventually you start to crack. Pretense is a muscle. It only has so much strength to give. You crave the end of this imaginary double life. You crave a return to the not-real that is real. Only, somewhere along the way, the pretending got welded into you and now you can't even go mad to escape, all you can do is go on struggling to pretend like some awful, wounded thing, crashing and burning your way through the life everybody wanted you to have. Until they give up. Until they stop trying to help you try. Until they suggest you sign up as a mech pilot in the resistance, because after all, they need people for that with the empire coming, and they say People Like You can be really good at that actually, and it rings in your ears like a bomb to hear that all along they knew you were a People Like You and they were simply pretending along with you that it could ever be otherwise.

Next, the brush again. A quick buff to help work the polish nicely across the boots' surface. To ensure nothing is missed. Nothing ever is—for Her, I am nothing if not thorough—but what matters is the method. The rigor and routine of it all. One step, then the next, then the next. It is absolute. It never changes. Thank the gods. Thank Her.

You actually do sign up after that. Not much else to do. Being in the rebellion was better, kind of. You still weren't real and everybody knew it, even if they'd never put it like that, but there is a kind of trench-born camaraderie that even head-touched little freaks like you get to partake in. The fire keeps you warm even if you're a little ways away; you can join in the singing, because it's OK if your voice doesn't perfectly match the chorus. Plus, if you're careful to find a nice, tight-run, disciplined crew, the merciless, grinding routine of it all keeps you safe. No time for pretending when you're either doing or sleeping all the time. That's a relief. Mostly.

It's funny how it's a bit like being transgender, in that way. That's one of those things you figure out somewhere along the way. And it's great, because for a time it feels like the answer. Everyone else certainly thinks so—the ones that are supportive, at least—and they're filled with a fresh eagerness to talk and help and you can tell it's because they think that any moment now, it'll all click into place and you'll erupt into the real like a blooming flower. A woman reborn. You did need pills all along, it's just that the missing piece was a little pill with an 'E' on it.

Finally, wax. Just a little at a time, applied with a damp, cotton cloth stretched taut between your fingers. Nice and quick. Nice and light. Buffing the leather to its final, glorious luster is the greatest pleasure of all. I find a kind of perfect calm in the perfection of my work. Out of the chaos of dust and blemishes comes order, black and sleek and uniform. It puts my mind in order too. I am not real, but that is OK. I am here. I am Hers.

There must be people like that. There must be, or they wouldn't all expect it so much. But that is not you. Eventually transition moves from present tense to mostly past, and even though you'll spend forever wondering if you completely fucked it up, the fact remains: you're still broken. You're still not real. It's just that now, also, your tits are not real, even when they look good under your shirt, and your new cunt is not real, even when you let somebody fuck it in the faint hope that that'll somehow make the difference. Like maybe your life was meant to be some stupid porno instead of a boring tragedy. But no, and collective enthusiasm fades with the dull realization that a fake woman is even less fun and more annoying than a fake man.

You're good at the mech thing, though.

Dissociation is the bane of your life, but it's a neat trick if you're a pilot. Pilots who think that their bodies are their bodies get killed. You have to make the sixty-foot metal shell you ride around in into your body. You have to know it like a body, sensitive to every inch, infinitely aware of its every motion. Your mech is not real, ultimately—you start to suspect that nothing

is—but since your body isn't either it's all more or less the same. And anyway, you're good at pretending.

Until you start to crack again.

If She let me, I would do nothing but polish Her leather boots for hours and hours, day after day. I crave their touch. I adore the way their intricate texture reveals itself to my sight as I press my face close to the ground. But too much attention would harm more than help—to the boots, and to me. Better this remain a rare thing. All the more sacred for it. And the most sacred moment is the one spent in trembling anticipation as She bends down to inspect my work.

“Perfect,” She pronounces, and as much as by her kind judgment I am comforted by our shared, plain enthusiasm for perfectly polished leather boots. “Good hound.”

At the ritual's end I curl up into myself at Her feet, brought to the point of joyful weeping, and I privately give thanks for each and every painful footstep that led me to Her side. I still remember our first meeting. When I cracked, it was at the worst time, in the middle of combat. I wound up getting captured. And I found myself in the presence of a woman who looked at me the way I always, deep down, yearned to be looked at: like She could see right through me.

It took Her an awfully long time to break down my habit of pretending. But She has been so patient, and I am grateful. Obviously She is a monster and what She's doing to me is wrong, and what She'll make me do to other people is even worse. But She's real, is the thing, and I've always needed that. I've always needed a taste of it, and only she can provide. It's unfair that someone as evil as Her gets to be so real, but it feels right to me, somehow, that that's the kind of unfairness the world is built on.

So in the end, I say it with Her gladly.

“I am not real.”

I get so good at saying it. Once She breaks all the hesitation out of me, all the habitual pretending; once there's nothing but joy, once there's no longer any hope I could go back, once I am finally nothing—that's when She takes me to visit salvation in a private hangar bay somewhere in the military base.

When I see it, I weep. She encourages me to lay my hand on its armor. I do, and I fall to my knees. It's cold, and the cold is real. Beneath that, I feel the distant hum of the mech's reactor, and that too is real. I run my fingertips over the edge of an armor panel, and gorgeous, glorious feel of that fresh-forged steel bites into unreality and claims me.

I look up—a blasphemy. Thanks to the drug coursing through my system, its magnificent face is haloed in stars.

She begins to recite a litany I will come to know so well; a long list of specifications, performance statistics, weapons, defenses. I absorb it all greedily, but as I imprint on this new body, one single, simple fact soars high above the rest: this war-god belongs to me. I have been chosen as its pilot. That is my truth. My reality. There are many like it, but this one is mine.

Finally, I am whole. My *Karisius* and I.

What does it matter that She drugged me into this state of mind? Everybody has been drugging me for my entire life. I have drugged myself plenty, in ways healthy and unhealthy. The brain is nothing but drugs and electrical impulses, isn't that right? Her drug works. That's the only difference. Reality is, it turns out, infectious. Just as long as it's Hers.

There's only one way I can thank Her: by piloting for Her. It's only right; besides, if I refused, they might take *Karisius* away from

me. My first taste of action within it is as oily and addictive as my first confession to her. It is a high-performance model, fresh from the empire's inscrutable labs, and its every step leaves a cavernous hole in the malaise of falsehood and illusion that choked the life out of me for two decades and change. Every explosion that blossoms from its gunfire sends a great, shocking thrill through me. Like this, I can carve holes into the world. I can make myself more real and everything else less.

It was never the same, when I was with the rebels. We had to be so careful then. So weak. Now, at Her side, I am permitted to be an awful, jagged thing. Both outside the mech and within it; it's only natural, then, that she desires me to wear a muzzle over my face. I am danger to myself and others, so she stamps her words into my thoughts as a leash. I welcome it. I welcome it all. I even welcome the way she lets the other soldiers fuck me after each sortie. Why not? I am not real, only my *Karisius* is. Whatever is done to my body does not matter. I can endure anything, bathed in my mech's presence, watching—or so it feels—from above, as a limp piece of meat is held and slapped and used. I revel in the meaninglessness of it. In the perfect dissociation of those moments. It is the kind of apathy I never would have been permitted before, in my old life, but now it makes me a fine specimen. A fine hound. That's what She tells me as I curl up in her lap or at her feet, still dripping from the orgy, tired and content and perfectly empty.

She understands that to be a dog is enough for the likes of me. To be dangerous, when required. To be adored, when desired. That is all I have ever wanted.

And if I ever do need reality, what better place to find it than in the leather of her boots?



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