

To Hear the Wind



The colony, sprawling, foreboding, nestled in a great crater on the planet's surface. The Australian flag waved, towering above its segregated districts, its foreign, imperialist power an all-pervading presence in the goings-on of the small, insignificant people of the colony. Hungry aliens lay on its outskirts, trying to find shade beneath the fake gumtrees, these beings the first to be swallowed by the inevitability of the human army's power. Its great **canvas** would soon be unburdened by those unmatching the immense possibility of its beauty. Yet encroaching upon the city, encircling it, was a dark, brooding building, a military establishment. The military base was a terrible presence in the city, and its presence was felt in all of life upon Aristaeus IX.

4:33 - *Energy sufficient; estimated of 14.85 working hours remain*

I wake to the cries of Shane, my llama and my sole companion.

A soft beep echoes in my ears, reminding me to eat. I must eat before tending to him.

I pour myself one cup of milk before opening the first kitchen drawer, revealing rows of scrupulously arranged sachets of hormones. I pick up the red packet and watch the dopamine fall from its grasp before sipping on the cocktail. Like **magic**, the government-rationed-dopamine has given me the opportunity to seize the day ahead.

4:56 - *Hunger has been tamed; dopamine levels have risen to 28 mL/pg*

A crimson sun envelops our planet, the shadow leaving the military base in the distance as a protective silhouette. They surround us, a maternal embrace keeping our **community** from a world of crime and fear. Because they can keep me safe, I can keep Shane safe.

Fastening my space helmet, I step outside, the dew settled on the grass glares in the garish morning sun. Shane, my llama, peeks his head over the chicken wire enclosure I built for him. A squat wattle-tree grows in the corner of his pen. It has its struggles, growing in the foreign climate, but still flowers in the wetter seasons.

4:58 - *External temperature has decreased to 12°C; oxygen tank reads 38.63mL*

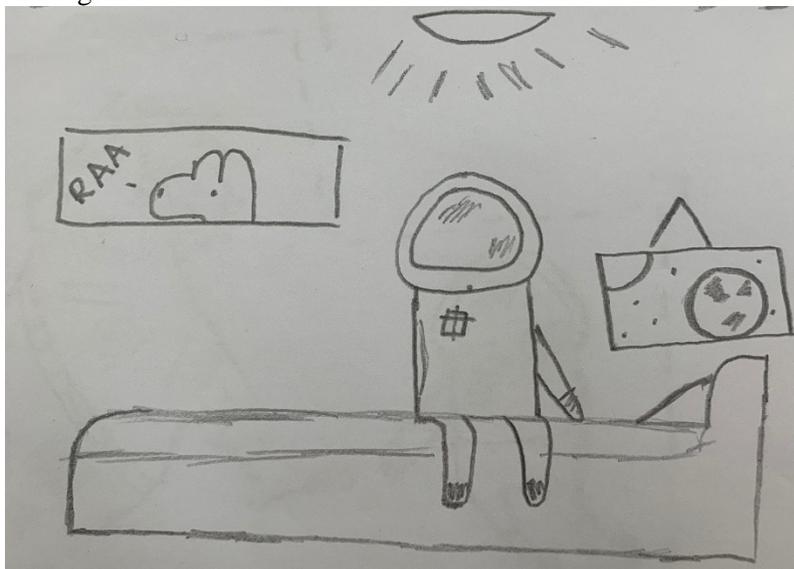
Shane clicks his tongue in joy at the sight of the hay bale resting under my armpit.

“Morning Shane,” I yawn, “I got your brekky!”

A wattle petal danced on his eyelashes as he scoffed down the hay.

I laugh, “Slow down buddy! You’ll get heartburn!”

An indignant grunt erupts from Shane’s mouth as he continues to feast. Nothing got between Shane and a good meal. “I was thinking that maybe later today,” I say, stroking Shane’s comforting pelt, “we could go for a walk around the farm. You’d like that?”



A clamorous cluck erupted from Shane in response.

Then, all went still.

The grass stands upright, like one million needles, unmoving in a stale breeze.

A booming voice crashes through the hush,

“Hey! Hey you!”

A tall human man stood a hundred metres away, donned in the khaki space suit mandatory for all military officials to wear. A machine gun rests on his hip.

I wave at him, “G’day comrade! Anything wrong here?”

I couldn’t help but stare at him in awe, for the military are our heroes. They hold us together with their brave acts of justice, they are the binding agent of our society.

He waltzed over, medallions and badges jingling against his chest, joined by a long chain swaying by his waist.

The officer grumbled, spinning the gun at his side.

“Are you 32L68-M?”

Each character of my name was declared with intense authority.

“Yes, that’s me comrade,” I reply jovially

“Oh”, He responds. I could envisage his risen eyebrows under his space helmet.

“I thought you’d be an Alien-fella”

“Oh, ok”

Shane grunts.

“Anyway,” he sighed “your friend over here”, the officer gestured to Shane, who was peering at the officer, his stare dripping with curiosity, “is needed elsewhere.”

“Excuse me, comrade?” I stutter.

Shane gave me a reason for my farming, he gave me a personal purpose, like a child to their mother. There was nothing other than Shane, he was my life's work. He lays embedded in the pink of my eyelids when I close my eyes, he gives me reason for my routine, he is my hobby, my family, my pride;

Shane is my best friend.

“Earth’s temperature has dropped again” The officer stated “We have to send them cloth. Little buddy over here is being taken to a better place, he is going to serve humanity in an honourable way”

“You can’t take him!” I cry, “He benefits my farm! Isn’t that helping humanity?”

“Compensation will be provided” The officer droned, opening the gate to Shane’s pen.

“You don’t understand!” I leap, running to protect Shane from the Officer’s toxic grasp. My ears begin to buzz once again;

*5:12- Interfering with military action is a crime. Please refrain from your actions.
Adrenaline levels have increased to 115 ml/pg; oxygen tank reads 34.75ML*

I watch as the officer leaves, a distressed Shane in tow, opening his mouth in anguish.

My space helmet begins to fog, the evaporation of my tears skews my view, as I watch my only companion shrink in the distance.

5:17- Your crops are ready to harvest, please do so for the most efficient farming. Oxygen tank reads; 34.74mL

We work for the nation, not for ourselves.

The strongest of bonds can be overturned at the benefit of of Aristaeus IX.

6.35- Energy overloading; work efficiency decreasing, estimating level of damage...

I blinked. A soft light intruded my senses as I opened my eyes, staring at the stained white roof of my bedroom. I glanced at the monitor on the side of my bed, and pinched myself to believe what I saw.

Every morning since my tenth birthday, I had woken at 4.33 AM sharp to tend to Shane. Every morning since my birth, my headphone implants had woken me, the government had woken me. Yet somehow, that fateful morning, I had not been woken, the headphones had not whispered to me a wakeup call. The monitor also showed a red, blinking sign, a sign of danger.

I pulled off my blanket, and out of the corner of my eye, saw a red tinge to my fingers. Looking at them more closely, I saw that my fingernails were crusted in blood. It was then that I started feeling the pain. I raised my hand to my temple, and felt a warm liquid, matted hair. Beneath the pain of my mysterious wound, a profuse itching pervaded my senses, originating from inside my ear.

Distraught, confused, I tripped on the washing, and caught the banister of the wash basin. Looking in the mirror, I stared upon my ravaged face, scratch marks etched deeply into my skin. I bled from my ear canal, and my usually handsome, sky blue eyes, stared hauntedly from my gaunt visage. Hanging from my ear canals, on both sides, were small, mechanical devices. My headphones.

It was then that I realised what had happened. My headphones had somehow been disconnected overnight, and I had, unfamiliar to air in my ears, scratched at my itching orifices until they bled. My disconnected headphones had failed to wake me, and I had slept in. I knew what to do.

Every month, the government handed out flyers describing what to do in various emergencies, and I knew that if my headphones disconnected for whatever reason, I was to report to the central building, the government headquarters. If I felt strange in any way, I was to call the ambulance.

I **skipped** my morning meal, deciding my condition was too important. I opened the door to my house, pulling on my coat and donning my helmet, and stared upon a familiar, but somehow abhorrent view. The cold, grey streets were far harsher than those that I knew. The wind howled, cold and bleak, through my raw ears, now bound with a white linen sheet. The plants in all the identical front yards seemed so plain, so perfectly terrible. I walked slowly up the street, and the guard looked at me strangely. The guard, the evil one, the one who had taken Shane. I was shaken from my reverie by his grating voice.

“What happened this morning, comrade?” he asked. He squinted at me, and suddenly his square jaw, his thick neck, the machine gun resting at his side, seemed not reassuring as normal, but terrifying. I ducked my head, mumbled a reply, and hurried down the street.

The buildings towering over me got taller and taller, and I started feeling dizzy with vertigo. People rushed past, men shouted orders. A chain gang dragged their exhausted forms through the masses, under the watchful eye of their warden.

No longer did I feel protection, but a deep, terrible fear. I felt I knew what I had to do, what I should do. I should have called an ambulance, been taken to the central building and had my lovely, reassuring headphones reimplanted. I should have done that. I didn't do it. The crowd crushed in on me, the voices in my head were gone, there was no more illusion, no more terrible facade, but only reality.

I rushed hurriedly through the seething mass, it was all too much. There would be no more compliance, for I had seen the real world, and I had seen that it was terrible. I had no idea where I would go, but I *would* go somewhere, somewhere not where I was. I ran. I ran on and on, strange looks following me everywhere.

The houses got nicer, larger, and it was too late when I realised where I was. This was a restricted district, an upper-class enclave. Somewhere that the working class were not allowed. I noticed a surveillance camera, watching me, blinking unnervingly, like the eye of God. It saw me, and it knew. It knew I was not allowed here.

In the distance, sirens blared, a searing strike into my mind. All thoughts vanished, replaced by a need to escape. What I wouldn't have given to have my headphones back on right then, whispering sweet nothings into my ears. Or the wind back, I now saw how its subtle whisper was the only thing to keep my upright.

Suddenly, my body was whisked away, taken by the night. I was never weak, but then I certainly couldn't be strong. I shook uncontrollably until I found myself upon the floor of a house.

It was without a doubt the house of a rich person, but a lonely person at that. Aside from high ceilings and nice cutlery, it was not far from my abode. Single chairs, single bed- at least I had Shane, whoever lived there had nothing and no one.

"Michael," a voice uttered softly from above me. I jerked suddenly backwards, my hand attempting to latch onto the door handle. I looked up, however, to see the only kind of man who could live here. He was just old enough to be on the brink of old and middle-aged, yet his eyes could have lived a thousand years. I could see through their soft blue, into an empty man. Maybe even a great man, but an empty one.

"Michael?" I whisper, staring through the ocean of his eyes.

"Your name," the man chuckles to himself, "that's why I chose you: it's the same as mine."

"You didn't choose me, I was just out here, and you grabbed me, and I don't really know why but you saved me, oh and my name's actually 32L68-M, not Michael, only superiors get names like that. But, I do get an extra letter because I'm a farmer, or was a farmer I guess..."

"No, everyone has a name, a real one, we don't deprive you of that- merely the knowledge. God, it feels pathetic to reveal it like this." The hollow figure was beating himself up. He felt stupid, looking back, this must have all felt pointless to him in that moment.

"I'm the Judge. I adjudicate peoples' lives, and in return, I gain knowledge. I do not wear headphones, for I need to adjudicate without the influence of the government. I took out your headphones, I'm sorry."

"You're... you're... no it's alright, I like having my headphones out. The world sounds so beautiful, do you hear it too? I could listen to the wind all day."

"I still must apologise, for it won't last. I demagnetised them, I just wanted somebody else to understand. We're the only ones."

"But you're the Judge, why don't you do anything?"

"You can't stop time; time destroys all things. Life is beautiful, full of beauty and illusions. Can't you be appeased by seeing it just once, before it all runs dry? Why can't people just be happy with that? Why can't ignorance be better than knowing what life feels like, only to lose it."

In the background, I could hear a soft static erupt into yelling, and screaming.

“What’s that?” I asked him.

“My curse.” We walked over to it. It was like a radio, the way it **sings** so gently, I will always remember. It was terrifying, I’d never heard anything like it before. We stood in silence, my astonishment and his regret, as we bore account of a family, I guess one on the outskirts, until it made way for a silence like nothing I had ever heard before, although at that point I had heard very little. There was no God here but this listening device.

I wonder if Shane spoke to me, and I just couldn’t hear him.

The Judge stood expressionless. I think he knew it was wrong, but it’s hard to change when you’re that old and that blind. I left the same way I came in, hoping that he would recover from his illness, his obsession. Saliva started to flood from the back of my mouth to my teeth, my body wanting to throw up, to reject something, because I felt so powerless. I held it in.

I started to run, I’d lost my bearings, and my brain was turning around in my head, spinning uncontrollably. My feet blistered, a hole forming in on the sole of my left shoe. Fog began to form on my helmet. I thought I was coming closer to the outskirts as my feet were embraced by red sand- by now the scorching sun had begun to rise.

I’d never been this far out before, there were aliens everywhere. They lived atop and beneath each other in poorly constructed housing. It was strange to see a whole society without helmets on, who really belonged here.

I remember most of all how loud they all were. They all shouted at each other, I seldom spoke to another person, or alien, so I guess I’d never thought about the difficulties of talking with headphones in. They were all smiling and laughing. I walked through the lesser of two insanely busy streets, yet it didn’t help much. They started to quiet down one by one as they saw me, retreating from the rooftops where they jeered, the streets where they roamed, the glassless windows where they watched the world go by, unencumbered by layers of glass.

I hid away in beneath an artificial gumtree, before the noise picked up I could hear the nicest wind. A soft zephyr which held me like a mother. I wept for the first time in a long time. If I could have stayed in that alleyway, listening to the noise and it increased in volume forever, I would have. I could have stayed there, if it had stayed there for me. How could I know that this place was made to be loved, that this edge of the world, so close to falling off would fit me like a glove. How this home destroys me.

An alien sat next to me. He looked a little like a frog, with large purple veins curling through his body, but he stood on two legs and spoke as I did. He sunk down to my level in that alleyway, and tried to listen with me for a moment.

“G’day.” He shouted.

“G’day,” I replied, turning my head to look him in the eyes.

“Where are your headphones?” He seemed concerned, but maybe relaxed since we were alike- not normal.

“Fell off,” I laughed.

“Wish it was that easy. Sometimes I wonder if I could just run straight through the army base, to the outside.”

“I don’t know about that, the army base is there for a reason.”

“What reason?”

“To keep us safe.”

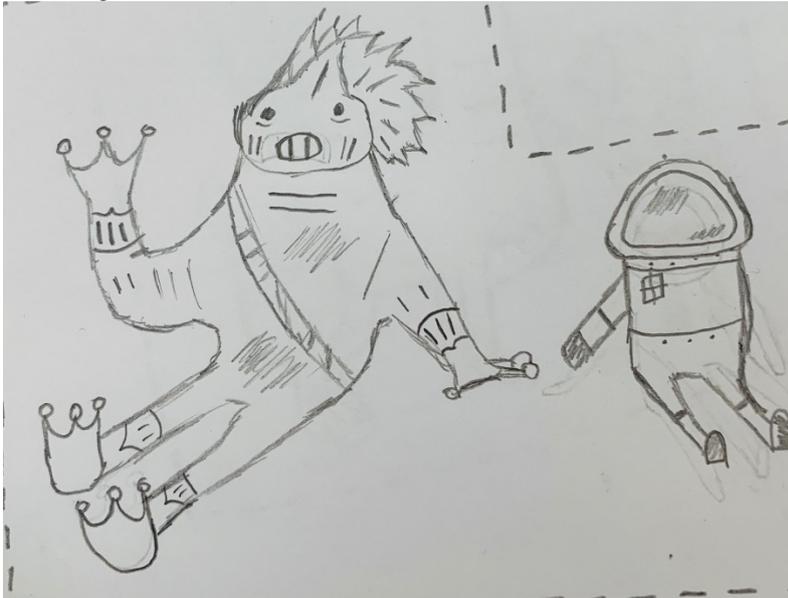
“From what?”

“What’s out there.”

“And what’s out there?”

“There’s...”

“Nothing.”



For a minute, a great silence enveloped us.

“What do the aliens do here, it doesn’t look like you’re working?” I asked him.

“We’re not aliens. You’re the alien. We’ve lived here, we can breathe this air without a helmet.”

“Well you’re the aliens to us.”

“You’re not the only ones here. I just don’t see any purpose working when this is all gonna be gone pretty soon.”

“What d’you mean by that?”

“Have you ever thought that the walls were closing in around you? Well the military base is slowly closing in on us to remove the ‘less profitable’ members of society. We’ll be soon.”

“Why don’t you move further in?”

“If it were that simple I’d be living in luxury and riches right now.”

We began sinking beneath the silence once again, yet around us were cries of joy, cheers of glee.

“So what do they call you?” the man asked me.

“Michael.”

“Oh, so you’re a rich guy then, eh?”

“Oh no, I’m a farmer.”

“Ah yeah sure, well that explains the no-headphones then.”

“I promise, it’s a long story, but I’m just a farmer. Believe me.”

“I trust you.”

“So, what do they call you.”

“Around here? They call me Xal, but I’m supposed to be 389%2-9.”

“Ok, well, I’ll see you around Xal.” I told him, standing up. I put my hand out for him to shake, as he began to stand.

“On the outside, let’s hope.” Xal replied, shaking my hand.

I began to walk away, turning the corner. Something told me that I would see him once more.

I wandered through the streets as quietly as I could, shrinking to make space for this side of the world they didn't want me to know existed. The wind propelled me from the back, leading me towards a place I could hardly imagine. It would be beautiful.

Projected upon walls and streets and the sky, my image appeared. I heard a siren blare once again, and sprinted away from footsteps and fast breathing. I jumped through an open window on ground level, dashing upstairs. At the third floor, I jumped out of the window and climbed upon the roof, away from a family blocking their ears beside me.

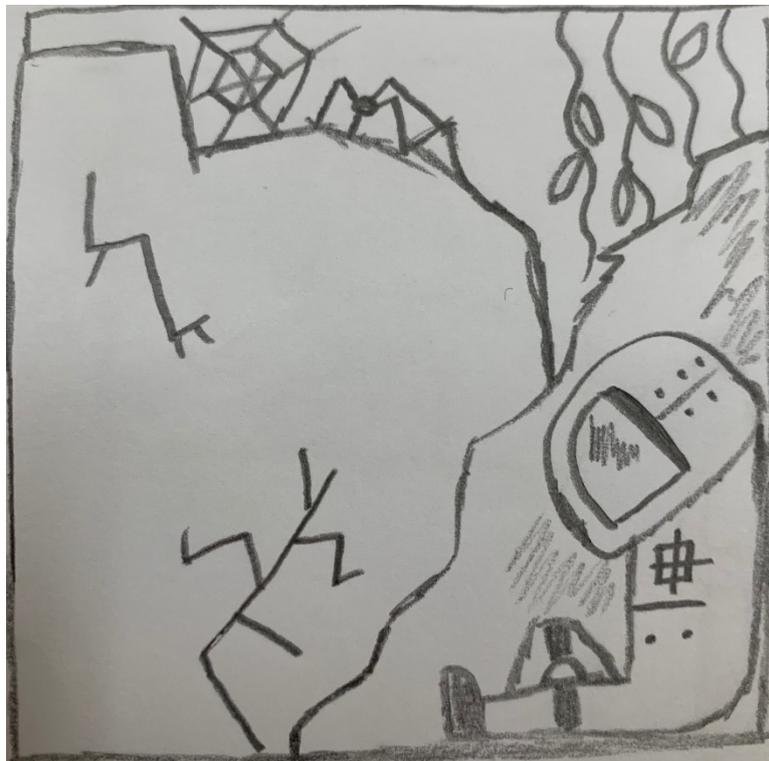
I leapt from roof to roof. I was getting the hang of this, I could get away. This would be easy. I looked back and saw nobody in pursuit of me, yet as I turned forward, I realised I had miscalculated my distance to the next roof. In fear, I jumped, yet lacking the momentum, I slipped, holding onto the next roof with the tips of my fingers. I looked backwards to find that government officers had caught up to me, for up to that point they had been pursuing me on the ground level- unbeknownst to myself. I desperately urged my body to find a surge of strength.

I noticed then that a crowd had begun to gather again, cheering and yelling, throwing insults at the police. It wasn't enough to save me, however, as I felt my right hand lose its grip, and my left losing the ability to cope with the additional weight.

Abruptly, I felt hands latch onto mine and pull me up. A family had come together to rescue me. I looked one of them in the eyes. Frog-like once again. Beauty, brown eyes, innocent lips tell no lies.

And I was off once again. I knew that it wouldn't last, like the eventual fall of this edge of the world, they would grab me, constrain me, and my life would lie in someone else's hand. But just for that moment, every second of freedom was worth it, so I didn't cry when they took me, I didn't wish for it to be undone.

When they grabbed me by the collar, and dragged me across the ground, a smile never left my face.



The faceless men cuffed my wrists, their hands passing in front of my eyes as they fixed a metal collar around my neck. I saw a fist fly towards me then back away, splattered with blood. There was a dizziness in my head but it was already numbed by the volleys of feet battering against my ribs. Booming laughter screeched out from behind me as I heard a crack in my ribs and I dropped onto my side.

“Comply,” a voice thundered from above, as if from God. The word bounced around my head, it’s meaning lost.

A pair of leather gloved hands gripped my arms, another taking me roughly by the legs as they begun to swing me into the cell. I could hear them howling with laughter, louder with every swing. I felt the air rush past my ears, lightly tapping it as I felt myself flying through the air. The floor ran towards me as a sharp pain split through my head.

The cold concrete wall propped itself up behind me, my eyes adjusting to the darkness. Soft moonlight filled the room, casting the shadows of iron bars against the ground. The metal bound around my hands cut into my wrists while my stomach ached from within. The endless cavernous feeling tore its way to the fore of my mind.

Laying on the ground in front of me was a limp figure, face bruised and blue. One of his legs was swollen and he seemed careful not to place his weight on it. His face was misshapen, his mouth a gaping hole of fractured teeth and slashed flesh. Water flowed down his face from his eyes, carrying grime and dirt with it. He was making a strange wailing noise, like a llama whose jaw was broken.

“What are you here for?” I whispered, curious yet not wanting to alert the guards marching up and down the hallway.

The man on the ground continued to wail, though it came out in hurried pants and sniffles. I sat there, against the wall, wanting to be away from the weeping body on the ground. Every one of the throes sent a shiver through my spine, a wave of unrelenting, numbing chill. Finally, it stopped as the waterfall of tears had died.

“My...” the voice wavered for a second before continuing. “My wife was bearing a child. It was my child and I was going to be a father.”

He took a moment to swallow back his saliva. He raised his head, looking me in the eyes. His were bloodshot, veins of blood tracing them, the scarlet against the white.

“She died,” he stated. “They died. They died in each other’s arms.” He went quiet and looked down, his hair falling down around his face, lank and unkempt. “I wanted to be there with them, to be their shield, to protect them as best I could. I didn’t follow the rules. I broke them and now I’m here.” He fell onto his side, hands bound behind his back. He emitted a dismal squeak, his shoulders shuddered twice and he fell silent for the first time.

The family that had rescued me passed in the hallway, defiantly shouting at the guards. They refused to let their heads hang low as the two women and the two men were separated from each other. I saw her again, brown-eyed, beautiful lips, we made eye contact once again. My only regret is that she, in her strength and her heroism, was forced to join me. Forced to suffer for me. There is no greater punishment than the knowledge that you caused pain to somebody else, believe me.

I watched as a familiar alien, followed by a prison guard, trudged past in the hallway. The alien’s grey-green skin, raw and meaty, was choked in iron chains. Muted purple veins pulsed through his gaunt body, thin as a stick, his ghostly visage further exaggerated by his sickly green skin. Frills stuck from his piskan head, see-through and thin. Our eyes met, and I saw his distinctive face, his friendly smile. Then I realised; it was the alien I had met previously. Somehow, Xal had found his way into

the prison with me. Rushing to the barred cell door, Xal whispered at me, “Man, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell me what?” I whispered back, face only inches from that of Xal.

“You’re the reason that I’m here!” A dreadful feeling coursed through my body. His eyes told me the story. It was the accusing look Shane had given me just before he was taken away. That look that still haunts me.

“Association with an X-grade criminal is an O-grade offence. I was caught on camera talking to you. 23 years in here man, 23 years!” He breathed in to say more, but was bundled away by a burly guard before he could continue.

“Comply!” shouted the guard, spittle flying from his rubicund face. He grabbed Xal by the shoulders and bore him to the ground, before lifting him again, bruised and whimpering, to his feet. Then he was gone.

I was leaving a trail of destruction. Society was paying for my errors in this world. This little experiment of the Judge’s filled me with a burning rage. This man, this single man had harmed so many, and what for? And now, in some hours, he would condemn me, condemn me as he had done to so many others.

I could hear the measured steps of a guard nearing my steel door and the screeching of the door as it was flung open. Two steely eyes took one look at me, then the man on the ground.

He turned back to me and grunted, “Comply,” and took me gruffly by the arm. I tried to get onto my feet as he did so, but he merely pulled me further forward so that I was dragged on the ground. Another man clad in black uniform came to take my other arm as I passed from the threshold of the cell.

As I attempted to stand on my two feet again, to walk beside them, they again dragged me forward, off balance so that I would fall. Unable to stand next to them as equals, I looked forward, arms and legs limp. I was nearing the end of the hallway and as we arrived, they pushed them open and several rows of people, gazes expectant, emerged from behind them.

“Attention, all. It is the Judge. Residents of colony 106, I arrive to deliver the verdict for Mich- um... 32L68-M. He has discovered the means by which he could remove his headphones, and escaped past barriers which keep humans safe from aliens. To allow us to remain clean and pure, constructed upon our Australian values. I have read through his case over and over, and every aspect of it is abhorrent and destructive. Worse still, putrid aliens attempted to aid him in his actions. Subsequently, I have ordered the immediate eradication of the community which he found solace within. As for the primary perpetrator, his efforts shall be met with a fate worse than death.”

The Judge stopped for a moment to look over his notes. A soft wind blew through the faux-courtroom. I met the Judge’s eyes, and he met mine. I wondered what he saw, what my eyes looked like. I knew what his looked like as they sunk beneath the current, the inevitable flow of the water, and the breeze of the wind. Always returning, always coming.

Unstoppable forces connected him to this world, yet I was the only one he could truly feel with. I felt the sound of the wind in my chest and in my heart as it beat in my throat. I couldn’t quite make out what the Judge was doing until I heard sounds of bewilderment, and then sounds of wonder.

The headphones which had worked to repress every being on this planet, closed within a circle of power and violence. They dropped out, just like that. Nobody made a sound, for what a thing it was.

To hear the wind.

We listened, let it hold us as though there was no need to be scared, as though the world wasn't falling around us. As though we had life in abundance.

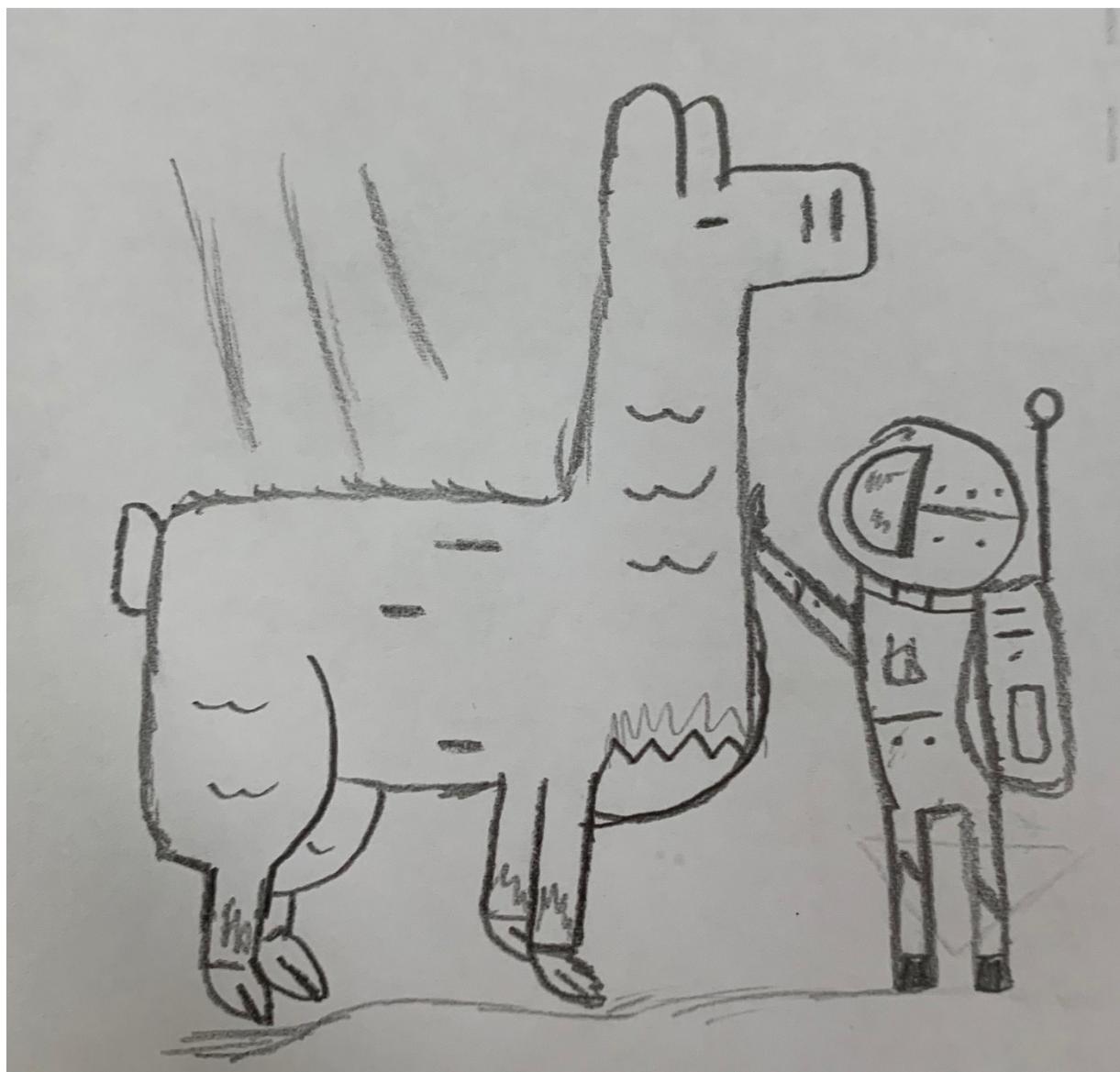
The Judge was teary as he went to speak, I don't think he had cried in a long time as its current washed over pale blue eyes.

"I removed his headphones, because I didn't want to live like this anymore. I thought that if I could live, if I could connect to another person for just a minute, I would be happy with just that. I can't do it. The walls of violence which surround our colony are fruitless, only trapping us inside." The Judge removed his helmet.

"The layer of glass which separates us from human and alien was just another pointless trick to control you. But that wind, until now I'd never listened to it. I'd never given it any thought, I don't think that I'd ever really opened my eyes before."

I took off the helmet, breathing the same air as the aliens- the people- still locked up because of me.

The Judge looked into my eyes, unobscured by the glass. "Can you hear it too?"



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I "glanced at the monitor on the side of my bed, and had to pinch myself to believe what I saw. Every morning since my tenth birthday, I had woken at 4.33 am sharp to tend to Shane. Every morning since my birth, my headphone implants had woken me, the government had woken me. Yet somehow, that fateful morning, I had not been woken, the government had not whispered to me a wakeup call."

