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Hera: A Record of the End of Masculinity

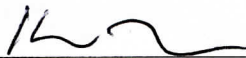
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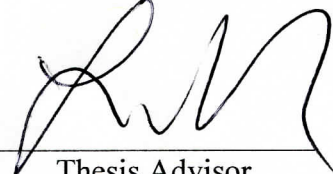
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Hera:
A History of the End of Masculinity

Jared Talbert
(Sample Selection Thesis Edition)

A long time ago, a little phenomenon called life decided to happen on a little blue planet filled with water and carbon. And life figured a way for it to most effectively spread out in all of its possible wondrous forms and configurations: by splitting up random assortments of genes and configurations and have them combined by two separate participants. This so called sexual reproduction caused many traits and configurations to blossom, and for life to spread.

This is not the story of life. But rather, this is the story of one type of living thing that assigned too much value to their genetic differences. This is the story of people, and how they placed far too much value and importance on an arbitrary thing that they called “gender.”

This is also the story of a country, a culture, and a society. But mainly, this is the story of how millions of people are part of a greater consciousness, that they don't even realize most of the time.

Unfortunately for all of us, it just so happens to be consciousness of something completely insane.

June 2024:

In the hot muggy air of mid-June San Antonio, many people were walking up and down the streets, looking for something to do. Of course, many other more sensible people were sitting down in the air conditioner finding plenty to do online; but many people still chose to embrace the nightlife. After all, what else was more human and invigorating?

And on this night, in the middle of downtown San Antonio, sitting among a crowd of college students, older adults not realizing how out of place they were, and people who did not have much of an identity beyond getting drunk and dancing in nightclubs, there sat a girl. She sat at a counter thinking about her mediocre week, and how she needed a change in her life. It was then, by comical coincidence she heard the words that sounded exactly like what she needed.

“So, why isn’t such a beautiful woman like you trying to fuck a beautiful guy like me?”

The girl hesitated for a moment, taking the time to roll her eyes before turning to face Mark. The blaring bass of the music making it hard to hear what he said, but she had been hit on too many times, and had learned to decipher sleaze in almost any setting. Before she could speak to tell him off, or decide to throw her drink in his face, he cut her off and continued, “I’m only kidding, don’t you just hate it when guys are like that?”

She was caught off guard; this wasn’t how things worked out anymore. Nervously she laughed, “Haha, yeah I really do.”

“Its just kind of sleazy and despicable behavior. But, in the interest of honesty and fairness, I think I should tell you that I think you are amazingly beautiful. I’d like to spend a little time getting to know you if you don’t mind?”

Normally, she'd just tell him to fuck off, she wasn't interested. But he managed to catch her off guard. Plus, a combination of alcohol, the fumes of fog machine liquid and sweat had started to fade her judgment. Plus, in the dim lights and soft ambient glow of the neon floor panels, he did look kind of cute. So she responded, "Yeah, why not?"

He sauntered over next to her and leaned against the bar facing her. With an eyebrow cocked he said, "Oh yeah, I'm Mark by the way."

"Well good to meek you Mark, my name is -----" Mark didn't bother to remember her name. It was unimportant trivia. What did matter was that everything was working according to plan.

This was the scene every Saturday night at STATEMENT, San Antonio's premiere nightclub. With no cover charge, overpriced yet potent drinks, and a bevy of strobe lights and fog machines, it was a popular place for all manner of people to go out and socialize and maybe dance a little. It had also become a preying ground for many people to try and woo vulnerable and inebriated girls into ill advised hookups. And over the past several months, Mark had become quite the predator.

The details of the seduction are not important. It is a phenomenon that too many people are familiar with. But what we should focus on is what happens after a regrettable act of carnality has been completed.

There, in a sparsely furnished bedroom in a small midtown apartment in San Antonio Texas lay a girl who was thinking of excuses to leave early without spending the night, and a man awash in an afterglow of hormones and psychological delusion. The open window let a hot, muggy breeze in the room; temporarily washing the musk of sweat and semen out of the room.

Mark looked out the window into the night sky as the girl whose name he didn't remember went to the bathroom to clean herself up a bit and dress so she could leave. No moon or starlight shone, it was the darkest part of the night.

While the nameless girl rattled around in his bathroom, Mark remembered that he forgot to take his pill for the day. With the small pressure of urgency, he fumbled around the piles of discarded clothing before finding the blue and black bottle with ADONISIS in large white letters. He fumbled the large orange pill in his hand a bit before choking it down with the vigor and greed of a junkie. He needed it in his system. It was the only reason he could live how he does. The secret of his seduction, without it, he'd be back to the nightmare of a scrawny little man too weak and tiny to talk to or impress any women. The memories of darkness and loneliness started to creep back into his mind, forcing him to shake his head to snap back into reality. That was all behind him. He was now the king of pussy, his life was completely fulfilled by that fact.

The nameless girl stepped out of the bathroom in her full clothing. A deep crimson strapless dress tightly clung to her tone and slender frame, the skirt stopping halfway down her thighs. Her hair was a dark red, with hints of brown showing through, her schedule too busy to touch up the dye. Her arms were adorned with a tapestry of cliché tattoos that middle class girls typically get, roses, feathers, birds, and mermaids decorated her upper arms and spilled over to her back. She started to make a brisk walk for the door, the goal being to leave without saying anything. But before two steps could be made, Mark asked, "You planning to sleep in that? Won't that be uncomfortable for you?"

The girl tensed up, before saying through clenched teeth, "Actually, I was thinking of heading home for the evening."

There was a moment of silence, Mark processing what she had said in utter disbelief. Tension strained his voice as he asked, “What? You don’t want to stay here?”

She turned to him, “Look, this has been great,” the tone of her voice betraying her lie, “But I really need to get home. My cat has been really sick, so I need to go check on him.”

Mark’s forehead knotted up, his eyes started to well up from the pain of this perceived betrayal. “What? I’m not good enough for you?”

She tried to reassure him, but simultaneously began taking slow steps toward the door.

His face contorted and he began to sputter out, “I’m never fucking good enough for you cunts!” He grabbed the first object in reach and threw it wildly. The lamp crashed into the wall several feet from the now terrified girl.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” She shouted, making a scramble for the front door.

“Apparently I’m not good enough to spend any time with for a fucking cockcunt like you!” Mark screamed with inarticulate rage, flipping over his own bed at the same time.

The girl made it to the front door, shouting out “You’re a fucking psycho!” before slamming it behind her and sprinting toward her car, the tenth girl to run away from Mark’s apartment in terror in the past month.

His mind a torrent of rage he spent several minutes tearing up his apartment while screaming a battery of inarticulate rage. “Bitch! Fucking cock-bitch-ass-fucking-fuck-cunt-bitch! They’re all the same, fucking sluts! Fuck!” After several minutes of thrashing, his apartment was thoroughly disheveled. With nothing to outward to focus his rage on, his mind took the opportunity to go inward.

There, in his memories flashed the images of himself not but several months ago. An overweight, weak, helpless person, completely alone, spending his days wallowing in misery and suicidal thoughts. All he did was make people's lives worse, to ease the pain he felt deep within. And his mind had the audacity to bring up the question: was he really any different now?

Mark soon began to panic. He needed to get away from his mind as fast as possible. He jumped over the wreckage that was once his furniture and ran toward his freezer. Flinging the door open he grabbed a bottle of cheap vodka, and began to gulp it down. In desperation he forced back the burning sensation and gag reflex, allowing swallow after swallow to seamlessly stream down his throat; a river in which he could run away from his thoughts and problems. He could take no more, gasping for air as remnants of it spattered on the floor and ran down his face and chest.

The sudden and large influx of liquor hit him hard and fast. He walked to his bedroom, trying in vain to step over his previous warpath. The mattress lay askew, half of it crawling up the wall, but Mark collapsed on what parts of it he could. His heartbeat slowing to a crawl after the exertion ceased and liquor steeped his brain, he managed to gurgle out "Fucking... bitches," before passing out.

A dark and dreamless sleep washed over him. No, that's not right. It wasn't dreamless, but rather, Mark refused to acknowledge the dream. His mind running away yet again, leaving his unconscious body to turn and contort while the hours slipped by. It was past noon when his eyes slowly crept open. His aching body and throbbing head crawled out of a puddle of cold urine and stared at the wreckage. He gave a small sigh before chuckling "fucking cunts made me do it again." He walked into the shower before making a mental list of what he needed to get in

order to repair the damage. “It’s honestly a shame. Pathetic cunts like that gotta try and tear me down because they’re so insecure about themselves. I guess that’s the world I gotta live in.”

After dressing, he was about to head out to the hardware store to get his repair supplies when he spotted a note on his front door. “Don’t forget Pill!” He stopped and turned around thanks to his reminder, looking around his tipped and splintered nightstand for the bottle. He found it, the ADONISIS label hanging off it like a flag of surrender, and remarked “Can’t forget you! After all, you’re what lets me deal with those bitches in the first place. I’d be nothing without you.”

Mark choked down the pill and walked out to his car. He drove down the road into town, as the radio crackled from the ending of a song into an advertisement. “Become a new you and try Adonisis today! 100 million men can’t be wrong!”

July 2024:

“Welcome back ladies and gentlemen to Nightline. As always I am your host Michael Hill.” The camera focused on a man in a blue suit, with stern, chiseled features looking directly to the audience. “Our guests tonight are Senior Vice President for Globex Pharmaceuticals Alan Johnson, and Stanford University’s Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies, Dr. Jessica Simmons.”

Nightline is America’s 17th top rated cable talk show. Struggling to compete with the slew of other ones out there, congesting the ever growing media behemoth. The fiber optic arteries of the information age, and Nightline was another clump of cholesterol clumping to the walls of it. What many of their viewers and staff were blissfully unaware of is that the parent company had very recently sold the network to the Globex Incorporated. This was part of their new campaign to increase awareness and media positivity of their incredibly lucrative product, Adonisis.

The camera pans over to the two guests sitting in the dark leather chairs next to one another, separated by a small table. One of them, Johnson, attempts to show both vigor and experience. He is wearing a tailored suit, one made to accentuate his large muscles, with several buttons open to show a large, hairy chest. His skin is a dark orange color, lined and leathered from age and a tanning bed. He is smiling a patient smile, but his eyes betray the anger he has at the fellow guest. “Glad to be on, Mike.”

The other guest is a small framed woman, wearing a black pantsuit and thick rimmed glasses. Her black hair, streaked with grey, is pulled back into a tight bun. Her makeup is

minimal, and her expression is that of a cool patience. Her hands are tightly folded in her lap, fingers lightly shuffling to ease her discomfort. “Thank you for having me Michael.”

Focus shifted back to Michael. “Now, our subject tonight is the product Adonisis. This product, made by Globex Pharmaceuticals is a breakthrough in genetic engineering and development. When taken, it causes rapid physical changes in men, most notably increased muscle mass, increased hair growth, fat loss, and larger penis size. It has become a bestseller, with approximately 75% of the American male population estimated to be regular users. But, there are a number of growing concerns with the product, and we’d like to address this tonight. Now Allan, have you heard of these allegations?”

“I have Mike, and it’s a dang shame that these unfounded rumors are getting pinned to our good name. All we are doing is making a quality product to improve the lives of American people. There is no foundation to the claims that Adonisis is associated with aggressive and criminal behavior.”

Michael turned to Jessica, “But Jessica, you claim that there is a link between the two”

Jessica gave a small nod before beginning “Yes I do Michael, I have done some extensive research on the subject. To begin, it is not common knowledge that since the product was released on the market nine months ago, rates of violent crimes and reported sexual assaults have risen over 900%. It simply-.”

“Now hold on there,” Alan interrupted. “Now, I’m not sure about that data, I have yet to see it myself, so I cannot say anything about it’s validity. However, it is an important concept that I learned in my schooling that correlation does not imply causation. These two things could be unrelated.”

Jessica gave a patient smile. “I could not agree more Mr. Johnson, which is why I decided to investigate further. In 90% of every drug test and toxicology report that was taken related to these investigations showed that the users had high amounts of Adonis in their systems.” Alan tried to interrupt but Simmons spoke over him. “In addition to that, interviews with the friends and relatives of those investigated noted a very distinct spike in aggression for several months before the crimes, beginning soon after they began to take your product.”

There was a tense moment of silence as Alan glared at Jessica. Clearly, she had said or stumbled upon something that she wasn’t supposed to. With carefully measured restraint he asked, “Just what are you implying Miss Simmons? That we’re trying to make people aggressive and crazy?”

“I am not implying anything of that sort. I am simply saying that there may be some unintended side effects of your product which may be dangerous or harmful. Medical studies have already shown that regular users of your product have testosterone levels much higher than anabolic steroid abusers.”

Alan rolled his eyes, “Frankly, I do see the relevance in this nonsense. I think a lot of this is coming from the fact we are finally making something by men and for men, and all these lady types are simply getting jealous. Which frankly, I don’t get. After all, this is turning men into what women want. Can’t you all just make up your minds? Or is it just female nature to constantly complain about everything?”

There was a silent moment. Jessica’s face tightened slightly. Her mouth contorted, quite literally biting her tongue before speaking. “Sir, I think your points you just made are erroneous in numerous ways. The pure and simple truth of the matter is that your product is not meant for

the benefit of anything but the self. You are playing off an age old insecurity of men that they are inadequate in one way or another, and using it to market something that they want. I could argue with you more, but I simply refuse because I realize that it would make no difference. So I will simply address Michael from here on.”

Alan chuckled. “Can’t handle an argument of facts so you’re just going to ignore it, huh?”

Jessica continued “Michael, my ultimate point in all the research I have done is that this product is harmful in countless ways. Not only is it greatly increasing rates of aggression and assault, but it has a direct focus on the mind. A small, but significant percentage of the users experience mental degradation and addictive tendencies. The users who don’t experience this though, they find themselves dealing with a bigger tragedy. They are seeking to change themselves into something they cannot possibly reach, an impossible standard put out there, and they will collapse and fall, realizing that everything has been for naught.” Jessica stood abruptly. “But I will say no more about the subject. Mister Johnson seems to be quite upset with the points I have just brought up, so I feel it best to leave.” With that, Jessica walked briskly beyond Alan’s glare of hatred and the range of the cameras’ sight.

There was a pause as Michael struggled to get things back on track in spite of the unexpected development. “Alan, how do you respond to what just happened there?”

Allan regained his composure and continued “It’s clear to me Mike that this is just someone that the world has left behind, and they’re barking in the dark as they fade into obscurity with the changing times. And this is something we at Globex have heard, and are

working on. Now, I shouldn't be talking too much about it because it is still in the development, but it's going to be the next big thing."

Michael cocked an eyebrow with curiosity. "Oh really? Please tell us more."

"It's a little something called Project Helen. It's our little gift to women everywhere, because they might feel left out, and we at Globex want to make everyone's lives better." Alan smirked and stared directly into the camera."

"Project Helen? Like Helen of Troy?" Michael asked.

"You are right on the money there Michael," Alan said with a grin. "Our goal is for Helen users to have their own faces launch a thousand ships!"

"So, what does Helen do for users Alan?" Michael asked.

Alan reclined back into chair, "Our primary goal for Helen users will be a much larger bust, increased metabolism to get rid of all that pesky hard to burn, fat, and increase their sex drive to help keep up with the demands of their man."

Michael took a moment to think before asking, "Alan, what makes you think this is a product that women want?"

Alan responded, "Oh very simple reasoning Mike. For instance, everyone wants to be well liked and popular. Right?"

Michael nodded, "That could be argued, yes."

"Well," Alan continued, "Half the population is composed of men. And men like pretty women with huge tits. And if we count in lesbians who like pretty women, that's well over half

of all people liking you. And if over half of the world likes you, you've got to be popular and well liked. So since people want to be popular, women want to use this product."

Michael paused, an expression of confusion worked through his face as he tried to follow that line of reasoning. "Well," he said, "I can't argue with that logic I guess..." His voice trailed off for another moment to think about it before turning to the camera. "We'll be back after this break to talk about the Pope's latest press release on why Jesus doesn't mind if you beat your wife. Coming up here, on Nightline."

Michael's face faded to black, but before the commercials began there was a small blue square that appeared in the screen, with the Adonisis logo in it, a small recoded message read out, "Closed captioning and consideration for Nightline is brought to you in part by Adonisis. Become the man you deserve to be."

After reviewing the tapes, this edition of Nightline never made it to broadcast. It was dangerous information that was deemed a harm to profits if it ever got out. But despite this setback, Globex's plans to increase awareness of their product by buying out as many media outlets as possible was an unprecedented success.

Within weeks, it was impossible to hear a bad word about Adonisis anywhere.

August 2024:

“Hey, on your way over, stop by the store and get a case of beer,” Miranda said. “I forgot I polished off the last one the other day. Alright thanks boo boo.” Miranda hung up her phone and turned her attention to the pan full of sizzling meat and vegetables on the stove in front of her.

It’s Thursday night; just another evening for some, but for Miranda and her best friend Katy the night is special. The season finale of their favorite show, “Vulcan,” is coming on tonight, and they are performing their ritual of watching the show with tacos and beer. Both of them are excited. The season has been full of amazing twists and turns, and the hype for this finale has had them amped up. There are promises that something will happen that will change the show forever, and speculation for what it could be has filled many of their conversations for the past week. Rumors were that Vulcan might fight to the death with his father, or that his wife Venus might leave him. There was also that mysterious character Mister Pluto who seemed to have his hands in many of the crimes that Vulcan had foiled; he might finally make his move tonight. It was all up to their imaginations, and they could barely contain their excitement for whatever would happen tonight.

Miranda transferred the meat and vegetables to the serving bowl next to the tiny bowl filled with shredded cheese and the plate with tortillas stacked upon it. She walks over to the coffee table in front of her living room couch. She grabbed the copies of Scientific American and Newsweek off the table and set them aside to make room for the food platter. She took a moment to neatly arrange and organize everything in the living room, even though Katy had told her multiple times she didn’t need to tidy up on her account. She was carrying the serving tray over to the meticulously prepared table when Katy walked in, shouldering a large case of their

favorite beer. Katy dropped the case next to the table and wordlessly walked behind Miranda and hugged her from behind. Miranda, unfazed, kept preparing the serving table as she said, “Long day sweetie?”

Katy, with her head still buried into Miranda’s shoulder, said a muffled, “I want to shoot every customer ever.”

Miranda patted Katy on the head and walked over to get some glasses from the cabinet. “I’m sorry sweetie, but I have the cure for you. Tacos, beer, and quality television.”

Katy collapsed onto the couch. “Yesssssss. Kill my brain cells from today and replace them with good things.”

Miranda laughed and sat down. “So for real honey, how are you feeling?”

Katy gave a loud groan and flailed her arms in the air. “Everything sucks. And by everything I mean everyone. Everyone single. I hate them all.”

Miranda pulled a beer out from the case and poured it into a glass. “I take it last night’s date did not go well?”

Katy chugged a beer, holding up a finger to signal that she needed a moment. Seconds passed as the bottle slowly drained. When it was empty, Katy began to speak, but paused for a moment, thumping her chest before letting out a very loud and audible belch. After she regained her composure, she started again. “Another fucking meathead. It is nothing but those guys lately. Like seriously, for months now, not one guy that isn’t musclebound and talking about how fit and manly he is. Big fucking annoyance. But, I made a bit of a mistake though. See, I-”

Miranda interrupted her, “Oh shit, hold that thought, its time!”

Katy bolted up, “Oh dang, turn it on already!”

The show “Vulcan” had become quite the primetime hit with many fans loving it’s charm, wit, and clever writing. The show is a modern re-imagining of the pantheon of Roman gods, living in the modern day and age. The main focus of the program is Vulcan, a clever and kindhearted person, overcoming his physical disability with his own designed prosthesis, while ingeniously solving everything from corporate espionage to terrorist and assassination plots.

Vulcan’s character has overcome great odds numerous times, but this season finale proved to be the most difficult challenge yet. His murderous half-brother, Mars, seeks vengeance for Vulcan foiling his plans to take over Olympia City, and now holds his beloved wife, Venus, hostage.

The show had received great praise as being one of the last vestiges of the creative and scripted television format. It dominated the Thursday primetime slot because of the poor state of it’s competing shows. First was “Roommates,” a show consisting of three semi-photogenic actors working through the standard sitcom clichés and making so many jokes about each other’s inadequate manhood that it jumped the border from humorous to obsessive by the time the show’s opening credits stopped playing. The other was the latest reality/gameshow, “SmashoVision.” In this gameshow, contestants volunteered to engage one another in a large televised arena, beating one another to death on live television for fabulous cash and prizes.

When asked why these crude and horrific shows were allowed to be broadcast, the Chairman of the FCC, Terry, “Hulk Hogan” Bollea, punched the reporter and proceeded to

urinate on him. So it was no surprise that viewers flocked to watch “Vulcan” on Thursday nights. A fact that was not lost on anyone.

Miranda and Katy watched, enraptured, as Vulcan struggles to deal with his cybernetically enhanced limbs being sabotaged by Mars. In a moment of helpless desperation, he collapses onto the floor. All seems lost just before an idea comes to Vulcan, and the camera zooms in on his face.

The show fades to black, but before the commercials can begin, the Adonisis logo appears on the screen: “Closed Captioning and consideration for ‘Vulcan’ is brought to you entirely by Adonisis. Be the man you deserve to be.”

As the bevy of commercials began, Katy blurted out, “Oh my god if I hear another one of those fucking Adonisis commercials, I am going to scream and puke at the same time.”

“That... sounds really disgusting,” Miranda remarked as she stood up, carrying their empty beer bottles to the trash.

“Yeah, sounded better in my head,” Katy said while fixing herself another taco.

“But,” Miranda said sitting down, “I know what you mean. They are annoying and everywhere. I mean, its kind of pointless. I read somewhere that like 80% of American men are using it now. Why keep advertising it if you’ve already got them all in your pocket?”

Katy shrugged. “Same thing with soda commercials. I’m pretty sure there’s a hidden tribe of indigenous people out there who have never had any contact with the outside world, and they

probably still know what Pepsi is though. Why spend money telling us to buy it? Why not use those funds to hire mercenaries to run Coke trucks off the road?”

Miranda humored Katy’s flight of fancy as usual. “Probably a messy legal situation.”

Katy nodded, “Makes sense.”

“I was reading some articles about that Adonisis stuff though,” Miranda said.

“Apparently it is some wicked stuff that isn’t as good as everyone cracks it up to be.”

“Oh really? Like how?” Katy asked.

“It seems that-- Oh wait, it’s back on!” Miranda said.

On screen, Vulcan rips a sheet off a large strange-looking machine. “I had hoped I wouldn’t have to revisit this. But it is all I can do now. I was a fool to think I could find some other way around it.” A montage of Vulcan fumbling to assemble the mysterious device plays, interspersed by clips of Mars assembling a large army to take over Olympia city, and clips of a scantily clad Venus tied up. Her forced breathing sounded overly dramatic and slightly eroticized. At the end of it, the mysterious machine stood, glowing with a blue light. Vulcan struggles to get on the table and lock his arms and legs into the straps. With a pained grimace, he takes a deep breath. “What I do, there is no coming back from. Computer, activate the Adonisis device.” The machine begins to give a loud hum and bathes Vulcan in a bright blue light. He begins to convulse on the table. As the light and sound intensifies, he begins to scream in pain, and the screen fades to black. Another quick announcement told the viewers about Adonisis’ involvement in the program, before another commercial break began.

Miranda turned back to Katy. “Ok where was I... Oh right! So yeah, that Adonisis stuff. I was reading up on it, and it’s kind of crazy.”

Katy raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

Miranda took the now empty platter into the kitchen and placed it in the sink. “Well, the article I was reading said all sorts of crazy things. Like how a whistleblower revealed that it’s designed to actually be addictive, for one thing.”

Katy looked up from playing with Miranda’s cat, Pastrami, who decided it was high time he get his due share of attention. “Wait, so it’s made so that guys who take it won’t stop? That’s some sinister shit right there. Like old school tobacco company sinister.”

Miranda stepped out of the kitchen and said, “Totally. Hey, give me a sec.” Miranda walked down the hallway to her bathroom. Katy picked up the remote and flipped through the channels, scratching Pastrami’s head while looking. One channel up, a man had another pinned to the floor on “SmashoVision.” The man on top gave a loud howl as he drove his thumbs into his victim’s eyes. As blood poured out of the sockets, a buzzer rang and both were penalized for unsportsmanlike conduct. Katy flipped to another channel, trying to escape the bloodshed.

Katy rapidly flipped through the channels: nothing but sporting events and commercials for Adonisis. Katy huffed in disgust as she changed the channel back to the “Vulcan” commercials. She focused on Pastrami as Miranda walked back to her.

Miranda sat down and said, “Where was I? Oh yeah, not just that, but it’s changing people’s minds too. There’s a research group that released a statement that it can cause IQ loss of

up to 20 points. And men who take it are something like 80% more likely to commit a violent crime or sexual assault.”

Katy looked shocked. “Holy fuck.”

“I know, right?” Miranda responded.

Katy, face still filled with disbelief, said, “No, you don’t understand. Like, the last seven dates I’ve been on, they’ve all been on that stuff. One guy in particular started screaming obscenities and throwing shit around. I thought he was just a random psycho. Holy fuck. One of those guys could have killed me.”

“Jesus,” Miranda said with surprise, “Why didn’t you tell me about that?”

Katy shifted uncomfortably. “I did, just left out a few details. Mainly passed it off as a joke, you know?”

Miranda nodded. “Hiding behind humor as a defense mechanism. Instead of dealing with your problems.”

Katy’s expression turned slightly gloomy. “Yeah. I need to stop doing that.”

Miranda leaned over and hugged Katy. “You don’t have to stop, it’s good you’re recognizing it. Besides, that sense of humor is one of the reasons I love you.”

Katy smiled. “Thanks Mirandy.”

Still hugging, Miranda replied, “I thought I told you not to call me that.”

Katy said in high-pitched and squeaky voice, “But Mirandy, you can’t deny our love for each other!”

The both of them broke the hug, falling back into the chairs and laughing at the terrible joke a little too hard, thanks to the beer in their systems. When they heard telltale sounds of commercials ending, they turned their attentions back to the screen.

“Now witness my dear, as everything you hold dear becomes mine!” Mars boasts to the incapacitated Venus. In his penthouse office in Olympia’s highest tower he stands, overlooking the chaos that is about to ensue. He turns and struts toward the vulnerable Venus, the camera lingering slightly too long on her breasts bound in rope. It snaps back toward Mars. “And your pathetic whelp of a husband, Vulcan, will perish in the process.” He grabs her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze, “And you shall finally be mine, just as you always should have.

Venus shouts at Mars, “You’ll never win Mars. Vulcan is the owner of my heart, and you’ll never win as long as he breathes!” He only responded with a laugh.

Miranda leaned over to Katy. “Is it just me, or does something not seem right here?”

“Yeah,” Katy whispered back. “What’s with that ‘owner of my heart’ stuff? That’s completely out of character.”

Mars reaches down between Venus’ legs, hesitating a moment before grabbing the chair right in front of her crotch. He pulls her over to the penthouse window overlooking the city. The camera pans and focuses on the building that houses Forge Labs, the company Vulcan owns and where his workshop resides. Mars wordlessly gestures toward it. Turning and glaring at Venus

with sadistic glee, he says “Your precious Vulcan still lies in a huddled heap upon the floor after I trashed his fake limbs. And now, you will get to watch him and everything he stands for die.”

“No!” Venus screams. “Leave him alone you monster! I’ll do anything!”

Mars erupts into a dark, menacing laugh. “My dear, you’ll be doing anything for me soon enough. But your begging will do nothing for me. This is personal.” He picks up a radio communicator and talks into it “Initiate phase one.”

The camera snaps back to Forge Labs. For a second, nothing happens. But soon the building erupts into a massive explosion. Mars begins laughing manically as Venus lets out an inarticulate scream in between her sobs. Mars begins striding over to the door to his office. “Well my dear, I’ll leave you to sit and think of where to take your life now that you’re suddenly single. As for me, I’ve got a city to take over.” Mars is straightening the collar on his suit, almost reaching the door when it splinters and bursts open. Mars stops in his tracks, stunned and shocked at the sight of Vulcan walking through the now empty frame.

This wasn’t the Vulcan that the viewer was used to seeing. The lithe, slender frame held up by chrome limbs was gone. What the viewers now see is a hulking mass of muscles, a frame that would put every entrant in a body-building contest to shame. Vulcan now stands as a heap of muscles, trembling with rage. Mars takes a bewildered step back and said, “You! How?”

“By doing something I should have a long time ago Mars,” Vulcan barks. “The Adonis device has made me better than I ever could have been. I now see that any pity I once gave you is not deserved. That all ends today!” Vulcan jumps forward and crashes a massive fist into Mars’ face. Mars didn’t have time to react before Vulcan is upon him. Vulcan’s massive hands wrap around Mars’ throat, strangling the life out of him. The camera focuses close on the gasping and

bulging face of Mars as each second he fades closer into death. After far too long of the camera focusing in on the shot, Mars's corpse collapses on the ground. Vulcan stands over the body, his massive frame heaving with great labored breaths. He rushes over to Venus and with one swift motion rips off the knots tying her to the chair.

Venus jumps up now that she is free. "Oh my darling, I thought you were dead! What happened to you," she asked.

Vulcan looks down at his new body, "This was something I was working on when I first met you. Something to fix my limbs naturally, so I could be a better man for you. I abandoned it a long time ago because it was unsafe. But now I realize I should have done it a long time ago. Not only so I could protect you, but so I could be worthy of you."

Venus looks at him up and down. "Oh Vulcan," she exclaimed as she embraced him. "I didn't think it possible, but I love you now more than ever!"

From their embrace, she cranes up and they began to kiss. They continue kissing, for far too long, getting increasingly more sexual as it went on. Just as the kiss became too erotic to show on television, the image faded to black. Before the credits could roll, a small message appeared on the screen. "Consideration and funding for 'Vulcan' now provided by Adoinisis."

Miranda and Katy sat there in silence as the credits rolled. Both girls were trying to process what they had just watched, both of their mouths slightly agape in shock. After a while, Katy broke the silence with an articulately worded, "What... the...actual... fuck?"

Miranda agreed with an equally flabbergasted "Just... what? I mean... what?"

A sudden flash of anger overtook Katy. She jumped up, shouting “Ok seriously, what the fuck? What the fuck was that bullshit? I mean fucking really?! What the fucking fuck?! That was fucking bullshit!”

Miranda stood calmly. “I am kind of amazed. In one hour they managed to completely undo two seasons of what they had established and changed it into... I don’t even know what that was.”

“You know what that was? It was a fucking buyout. You saw that fucking thing at the end. They got bought by that fucking Adonisis bullshit and were forced to change the entire show into some bullshit male pandering product shilling fucking nonsense!”

Miranda looked at Katy questioningly. “You don’t honestly think that is what happened do you,” she asked.

Katy took a deep breath, and tried to articulate her thoughts. “It is hardly coincidence that the episode where things suddenly go to shit is the one where they start pasting their shitty advertisement all over the place, and butcher the character into a cheesy metaphor for people who use their product. This kind of shit happens all the time. Fuckheads get pissed off when they find out their show’s actual demographics is mostly women, because for some reason they think women don’t buy the right merchandise. So clever and well-written shows get flushed or changed because of women not wanting to buy action figures or branded backhair razors or whatever bullshit. This has been happening since entertainment media was a thing. And it just caught up to our fucking show! It got bought out to play on the insecurities of the last segments of men who haven’t bought their dick pills in order to make a couple more bucks. There’s no

escape from the fuckheadery bullshit!” Katy inhaled deeply after her litany, too excited by her speech to breathe during it.

Miranda took a moment to process Katy’s tirade. Katy was breathing hard, a little too worked up. She walked over to the case and grabbed another beer as Miranda said, “That’s actually amazing logic and well thought out.”

Katy popped open the top and quipped, “Well, my specialty at the Police Academy was deduction.”

“I thought you when to college for a degree in Computer Science?” Miranda asked.

Katy shrugged. “Oh who remembers?” She then began to inhale the beer in one long dreadful pull until the can was empty. She flopped down in the chair next to Miranda and overdramatically emoted, “Our favorite show now sucks. What are we going to doooooooooo?”

Miranda patted Katy’s head and said, “We could just switch to watching bad movies? Like we do when the season was on a break?”

Katy groaned, “That’s not the issue though. This was the last show I actually enjoyed watching. Everything else out there is either written for the dudebro market and has gotten so ridiculously sexist it’s starting to get scary, or its garbage that is ‘written for women’ and is utterly failing at it.” Pastrami gave a loud meow, which sounded like an agreement, but was actually just a plea for more attention. Katy appreciated the voice of support, and started scratching his ears just how he liked it.

Miranda paused to think before saying, “I don’t know what to say.”

Katy sulked and said, “Yes you do. You know that you should say, ‘Katy I am going to make you cookies.’”

Miranda laughed a bit and said, “Sorry sweetie, tomorrow is my shopping day and I am out of a couple necessary ingredients.” Katy pouted a bit at this news. There was a moment of silence as Miranda’s thoughts came together in her head. “You really think that Adonisis junk is behind this stuff?”

Katy was unusually silent for a moment before saying, “I do. And honestly, I’m kind of scared.”

“Why are you scared? Because of TV shows getting messed up?” Miranda asked.

“Not just that. Everything is shifting, getting more aggressive and guy-centered and I just feel... out of place. Not to mention unsafe. That guy I went on a date with last night got super aggressive with me. If we weren’t in public, I don’t know what would have happened.”

Miranda wordlessly leaned over and hugged Katy. She knew that she was much more scared and insecure than she would ever let on. Katy leaned into the hug and sighed, a small look of worry appearing on her face. For the next while, they sat there comforting one another in silence. After a while, Miranda spoke, “No matter what the world throws at you, I’ll always be here for you sweetie.” Katy’s tension relaxed a bit upon hearing this, but Miranda thought to herself that if the world really was changing so it was against them both. She had no idea how they were going to survive how they did.

September 2024:

Alexandria Café and Bookstore was one of the last independent bookstores remaining in San Antonio. It offered a unique experience that the competition could not seem to match. Or at least, that is what Mark told himself as the reason he frequented there. In actuality, the reason was his infatuation with the cashier Gale Jones. Her arms and chest a canvas for a myriad of tattoos, bright blue hair in a neat short cut, and a loose collection of piercings decorated her face. There was something about her style that appealed to a weakness in him. Every week Mark visited the store for the opportunity to talk with her again, making small purchases to give a plausible story for his continued presence.

On this day he entered the store as he usually did and began his routine. First was the “New and Notable” section. Mark looked over the arrangement of titles. First was the bestselling How to Learn to Please Your Man by Doctor Albert Lobo, primarily given to women by their husbands and boyfriends. There was also the recent Pulitzer Prize winner The History of MANKind: The Importance of Male Influence on History and Society by Richard Dickson; a historical critique and retrospective which took the brave task of exemplifying all the accomplishments Men have made for society despite the efforts and advances of women to keep them down.

Mark wandered the aisles idly looking at the books in various sections, trying to look cool and casual just in case Gale looked over his way. A stream of titles ran by his eyes, a cascade of meaningless words to wash over glazed eyes. When he reached the psychology section, one title made him stop dead. A small blue cover with plain letting simply read, Rescuing the Inner Child: Learning to Heal from Parental Abuse.

Mark stood there looking at the title, body locked up except his lightly trembling hands held by his pockets. Flashbacks shot through his mind, echoes of his father's voice reverberating from deep within his subconscious. *You are thinking of wasting your money on that pansy bullshit, are you, faggot?* Mark shook his head, trying to get the voice to stop. He looked down at the ground in shame. Something in him wanted to buy the book, if anything to see if his childhood was as bad as he thought. But Mark began to think. If Gale saw what the book was, she might think less of him. He idly began walking around, trying to construct a reasonable alibi for why he would be buying it. He tucked the book under his arm and headed to the coffee counter. His preoccupied mind made him miss when the barista called his drink order, and his heart began racing as he approached the register. *Yeah, no lie you could think of would save your pathetic ass from getting turned down again.*

Gale's eyebrows rose as Mark walked up to the register and remarked, "If it isn't it the frequent reader. How are you doing?"

Mark puffed out his chest and responded "Pretty good, pretty good. How about you shopgirl?"

Gale shrugged as she began started ringing up his things. "Ehh, reading that new Mallory Killinger book, trying to accomplish my goal of beating all the classic Final Fantasy games. You know, keeping myself busy and entertained."

Mark perked up, "Oh you like video games?"

Gale nodded, "Yeah, totally. I'm kind of all about the classics right now though. Modern games have kind of gotten either boring, repetitive, or- its \$20.73 by the way, or they're just kind

of creepy for my tastes. So whatever I can dig up in pawn shops or online is what I'm focused on now."

Mark actually started to relax. This was something actually within his comfort zone. He replied as he started digging out his credit card, "Oh yeah, I know what you mean. I'm all about the classics. PS4 all the way."

Gale smiled and said, "I know what you mean man. Much better games than those clunky holo-projection rigs they're trying to push these days."

Mark's faux-confidence blossomed into actual confidence on their single mutual interest. He took a deep breath and said, "Totally, yeah. Hey listen, would you like to talk more about games and stuff over a drink sometime?"

Gale's smile quickly turned to a neutral expression as she handed his card and receipt to him. "Oh that'd be nice, but I'm kind of already seeing someone."

Mark nodded and said "Ahh alright, just thought I'd give it a shot." He walked away with his book and drink in hand calmly. In his mind though, he was devastated. His father's voice screamed in his head. *Told you no one could a pansy faggot like you. Look at your pathetic life, everything you've amounted to is utter shit. You fucking waste of life.*

The drive back to his apartment was an ordeal, trying to fight away the voice in his psyche tearing him apart from the inside. On the radio the DJs chattered about the new Michael Bay movie "Titsplosions: Rise of the Boobinator," and how it was now nominated for seventeen different Academy Awards. Mike turned into the parking lot, having to fight to hold back the tears as his father's voice kept lashing at him. He charged up the stairs into his apartment, not

even stopping to close the door. Instead he charged straight to the refrigerator and grabbed the vodka bottle, chugging it down. Through the burning he heard one last taunt from the voice. *Pathetic faggot needs to stay drunk so he can't realize how pathetic he is. You're a fucking waste, and you'll always be one.*

Drunkenness crashed over him like a tidal wave. The sudden inebriation hit him so hard he stumbled to catch himself while standing still. Mark made his way over to the couch in the living room, one hand constantly on a wall to steady himself. When he reached it, he collapsed like a mobile home in a tornado; the flimsy identity he had constructed blown away by a mighty gale. He lay there in misery, letting the hours slip by as he wallowed in self pity and misery.

After the sun had set he lay in darkness, wondering intensely about how his life could end up this way. There as every night his mind turned inward, letting him feel hollow. There was something missing in him. He knew that for every day since his teens. But what exactly it was eluded him. Up until months ago, he always thought it was lack of sex. Memories of himself as an overweight, insecure man trying to fit in and belong came back to him. Every attempt at seducing a girl failed utterly and miserably, making him feel like a helpless wretch.

But then Adonisis came into his life, making him into a real man. His body became what it should be, and for the first time in his life he felt confident. He managed to lure quite a few girls into sex, so why did he still feel hollow? He was a real man right? Real enough of a man to seduce a woman, what else was missing from his life?

He sat up, the throbbing ache of his head interrupting any further thought. He turned on the television to escape his thoughts. The entire time his head continuing to ache, spreading down into his testicles. The pain continued to intensify, forcing Mark to take more swigs off of

the vodka bottle. Nothing was easing the pain, feeling like someone dug an ice pick into his crotch. The pain got so intense he felt his consciousness fading, with the last fading remnant of his strength he grabbed his phone and dialed 911.

October 2024:

“So Ms. Kane, what seems to be the issue here?” Doctor Criminski asked staring down at his chart as he walked into the examination room. Down on the table in the center of the room lie Miranda, weakly huddled into a ball. She was weakly rocking herself, causing that examination table paper to constantly make that insufferable crinkling sound. Sitting in a chair in the corner was Katy, amusing herself on her phone.

Miranda slowly uncrumpled, and looked into Criminski’s eyes, the weakness and pain evident in her face. She tried to speak, but all that came out was a hoarse incomprehensible whisper. In frustration, she shook her head and gestured over to Katy. There was a second where Katy kept staring at her phone before jolting to attention and said, “Huh, what? Oh yeah sorry. She can’t exactly speak. But she’s got intense full body pain, hoarse throat, and is really dizzy. Can barely stand up straight.”

Criminski nodded, marking down the information in the chart. He looked back up to Miranda, “I see. Well, it’s definitely something that’s going around. We’ve actually had a lot of women come in recently with the same symptoms. Seems to be some kind of virus, we can’t exactly pin it right now. But the good news is that it typically runs it’s course in about a week. How long have you had the symptoms?”

Miranda raised a hand with three trembling fingers on it.

Criminski nodded again, “Three days? You’re at the worst part of it from what we can tell. It’ll start easing off as soon as tomorrow.” He turned to Katy and started to ask, “And you Miss, are you her...” he realized that he was about to insinuate they were in a relationship

without knowing anything. Jumping the gun like that already led to one sexual harassment suit by his co-workers, so he opted to remain silent.

The awkward silence in the room continued until Katy broke it “Her friend. I’m her friend.”

His tense shoulders relaxed and said, “Friend, right, okay. Well just keep an eye on her today and tomorrow and she should be strong enough to take care of herself past that. If her condition doesn’t improve or worsens by then, come back and we’ll investigate more. By then the labwork on her blood will be completed so we might have more answers.”

Katy nodded, wrapped a coat around Miranda and escorted the huddled shuddering girl out the door. Criminski sighed at his near faux pas. His mind wasn’t in the right place lately. Working on call five nights in a row in the ICU would do that to anyone, but the peculiar state of his patients lately also had something to do with it. Every single bed in the ICU was filled with men of all ages with very aggressive cases of testicular cancer.

There was something unnerving about making his rounds through those patients. Maybe it was the high aggression that this strain of cancer was, frequently causing the patients to crash and be revived by the frantic staff. Maybe it was the fact that it reminded Criminski about how he was susceptible too to this terrible ailment. Something which he wouldn’t wish on his worst enemy; except for maybe Jerry, because fuck Jerry. Or maybe it was because in the course of only a couple of weeks since being admitted, several patients’ testicles had swollen to absurdly large proportions.

Criminski walked into the first room and grabbed the chart, glossing it over for the important information. In the bed lay Angelo Chimendez, an unfortunate young man only in his

early twenties. Chimendez was weakly looking off to the side of his bed at the television, mind too hazy by the morphine in his system to deal with the incredible pain. His legs stretched wide, each hanging over the sides of his bed. Between them was a set of massive bulges under the covers, each the size of a basketball.

Angelo was one of the later patients admitted to the ward, the one where they finally established that this was some kind of related epidemic. What caused it, was still unknown. The labs were still researching this. But there was definitely some connection between it all, and that was the most frightening. It seemed like a fatal strain of cancer had become some kind of contagious. It was most everyone's nightmare come to life.

Criminski snapped back to reality and resumed his routine. "Well Angelo, it seems like the lab is saying they're close to finding a cause for this epidemic. But in the meantime, I really think we should discuss your surgical options."

Angelo turned his head to face the doctor. His face was utterly devoid of any energy from a combination of morphine and chemo. He struggled to say "No... cut. Not losing them."

Criminski sighed and furrowed his brow. "Angelo... chemotherapy simply is not working. Your tumorous growths have continued to increase in size and the cancer cells are spreading all over your body. If not removed--"

"Bigger is better," Angelo interrupted. "Besides, can't lose them. What kind of man would I be without these bad boys?"

Criminski placed the chart back in its slot and replied, “Angelo, you’re dying. There is no other way of putting it. Your testicles are killing you, and if you don’t have them removed, you are going to die.”

Angelo slowly shook his head. “Nah, not going to die like that. That’s a pussy way to die. And have you seen these balls? I’m no pussy.”

Criminshi sighed. “Alright Angelo, we’ll keep doing your chemotherapy for now. And hopefully the lab will have some results that might help you soon.” With that he walked out of the room. It was the same story for all of his patients. Their testicles were killing them, but all of them were flat out refusing to do the right and lifesaving thing. Each held on to their testicles, some quite literally, too afraid to lose them. Too afraid to lose their manhood, but not their lives.

The pager at his belt chirped, with the message of “LAB” scrolling across the screen. They must have had a breakthrough. Criminski walked, then started jogging to the elevator. He didn’t know why he was in a rush. Maybe it was just that he was tired of seeing these people suffering. Or maybe he was just tired of dealing with their stupidity. He didn’t know. But the results from the lab might mean the end of this epidemic.

The laboratory occupied an entire floor of Ebongrove Research Hospital. Medcial and biological researchers of all kinds rushed around the various rooms and equipment, experimenting and trying to find and perfect cures to all that ails humanity. Criminski dodged the flow of rushing researchers, making his way to the room where his materials were being researched. He walked into the room, only to find it empty. This was strange. His samples being analyzed had been processed in this room for the past several weeks. Criminski made his way to the central information desk, where he asked, “Where are Mallory and Victor?”

Jane, the lab technician, jumped at the question. She looked up at Criminski, her hands still jotting down information as she did. “Oh, hi Arthur! Didn’t they tell you? Their work and sample have been moved to the Biohazard Containment wing. Room 315 I think.”

Ciminski tightened. Having blood and tissue samples moved over to Biohazard was not a good sign. This could be much more serious than he thought. He gave a quick, “Thanks Jane,” And walked over to the secure wing of the hospital. He gave a nod at the security guard posted at the entrance to Biohazard Containment, and found room 315. The small grace was that this wasn’t one of the labs at the back of the wing, the High Risk rooms. Each of those had rows of ominous containment suits hanging outside the doors to decontamination chambers. But 315 was in a standard lab near the front, with some extra safety and protection gear stocked in the room; meaning that whatever they discovered was a threat, but not that virulent or contagious.

Criminski reached down into the box of sterile gloves, stretching to put them on as was standard procedure. He stepped into the room, a blast of cold air hitting him and making his body tense up. Walking over to the lab table, he asked, “So, what did you find?”

In front of him were Doctors Mallory Gibson and Victor Stone. Between the two of them, they were experts in the field of cancer research and viral pathology respectively. And for the first time Criminski could remember, the both of them looked worried. Mallory spoke first. “We think we have found a source. What is causing the cancer in your patients, and the origin of it.”

“But,” Stone continued, “if we are right, then this is some serious shit.”

Criminski took a moment to process that. Mallory and Victor were always calm and collected, no matter the circumstances. Two years ago during an Ebola outbreak, a contaminated patient vomited on Victor, and the only thing he worried about was how he was going to get his

new shoes clean. Criminski mentally braced himself for the worst before saying, “Alright, what is it?”

Mallory turned and pulled up a screen on the lab computer. She began to explain “First we wanted to find anything in common that your patients had and looked over everything in that regard. It was difficult, because they each ran the strata of all different kinds of lifestyles, but last week, we got a match.”

Victor flipped the switch to activate a digital projector, blowing up the image on the screen. It showed scans of the blood samples Criminski collected from his patients, with small sections of them digitally highlighted, and a large flashing banner that said “MATCH.” Victor walked in front of the screen and began speaking. “From the blood and tissue samples you collected, we found elevated levels of certain chemical compounds, many of which were pretty unusual. So we ran tests to find any substances which contained all of them. It took a while, but we got a match.”

Mallory opened a desk drawer and pulled out a large black and blue bottle, setting it on the lab table so Criminski could read the white lettered label that spelled out Adonis.

Criminski stared in disbelief, “You’re kidding me. Adonis? That male enhancement product? It’s causing the cancer?”

“I wish it were that simple.” Victor started. “Individually, all these compounds we found are either completely benign, or actually beneficial. Clinical trials of several of them show they actually have cancer-fighting properties. But there was one substance in the samples we couldn’t identify. We tried isolating it in order to analyze it. We noticed peculiar behavior when we did. And that’s when we discovered the link.”

Mallory pressed some keys and brought a new image on the screen. There was side by side images of two tissue samples. “We introduced the mystery substance to tissue samples similar to the ones you collected. Specifically testicular tissue. Immediately the tissue began to change and rapidly multiply, but after a day or two it became aggressive and actually started attacking the tissue, causing the rapid growth to become cancerous.”

Ciminski took all this in, before asking, “Wait, became aggressive? So is this mystery substance a virus?”

Stone took a deep breath. “Unfortunately, you’re right on the money there. We had the same thought and compared it to virus samples. We had a partial match, suggesting a mutated strain. But the source material... its bad news.”

“What’s the source material?” Criminski asked.

Stone gestured over to a digital microscope on the edge of a table. Criminski walked over and looked through the eyeholes. He saw the greatly magnified image of two samples in glass slides. The two pathogens looked incredibly similar. Under the lefthand slide he read a label “Adonisis sample.” His eye shifted over to the righthand sample and read the label underneath it, bolting upright as soon as he read it. “Are you absolutely sure about this?” He asked with trembling voice.

Mallory nodded. “We’ve triple checked, and are running more tests. But we’re positive of the match.”

Criminski, overwhelmed at the information stepped backward and eased himself down into a chair. His mind still reeling from the label under the righthand slide, the near perfect

match, the viral source material of the mystery substance in a product over 80% of American men had been taking. The label typed out in neat letters, which read, “Human Immunodeficiency Virus.”

Crimisnki met the worried looks of Mallory and Victor, taking a deep breath before saying, “Well, it looks like the country is completely fucked.”

November 2024:

Allan Johnson was a nervous wreck sitting in the semi-comfortable chair. He sat there rocking nervously, too scared to keep up his façade of masculine confidence. Anyone would be nervous when called for a meeting with the President; but Allan was much more terrified. He had been slammed by calls and messages for the past month, he had seen the news stories, the entire jig was up.

Allan sat in that sterile waiting room. Only a chair and dusty, wheat colored wallpaper in it. The scent of cleaner and air freshener hung thick in the cold, damp air. It was a room incredibly uncomfortable to wait in; and was that way by design. Hanging in the corner was a large television monitor which displayed the Presidential Seal. Every television feed and channel in the country displayed that seal right now, every couple of minutes repeating in a dreadful monotone, “Please stand by for an emergency announcement from the President of the United States.”

Allan didn’t know that the television in the corner was not a regular fixture. It was installed for his visit. So he could watch the President’s announcement to the nation, right before he was called to meet with the President. The room he was in was empty. The entire wing of the White House he was in was unbearably still and silent. Not another sign of life could be detected.

The television feed suddenly blinked and flickered, and cut to an image of President Jethro Robinson sitting behind his desk, looking straight into the camera. He took a deep breath, before beginning his address to the nation.

“My fellow Americans,” he started with a voice of eerie calm, “Over the past year there has been a product that has been marketed to men and sold in very high volume. It is something

we all are familiar with, Adonisis. A wide majority of men in America are users of this product, I myself was a proud user.

“Over the past months, Adonisis has been overwhelmingly accepted, but not without it’s criticisms. Many claimed that it causes people to become dangerously aggressive. In fact, my staff told me that when I decided to invade those pussies up in Canada. But none of us knew the real danger.”

“Last month, medical researchers investigating a drastic rise in testicular cancer made a shocking and disturbing discovery. They uncovered that the primary ingredient in Adonisis is in actuality, a genetically modified form of the HIV virus, designed to rewrite our DNA to become better men. What they also discovered is that prolonged exposure to a human host causes the virus to become aggressive, and attack the male sex organs and adrenal glands, causing rapid and fatal cancerous growths.”

“Research from the Centers for Disease control have confirmed this information, and has shown that this virus is spread through sexual relations. Even though it does not affect women, they can be carriers and spread it. At this rate, is estimated that over 75% of Amercia, is infected.”

A Secret Service agent walked into the room and gestured for Allan to stand up. Allan stood, knees almost buckling under the pressure of the situation. The agent walked out of the room, pausing at the doorway when Allan did not follow. It took a second to realize that the agent intended for Allan to follow him. He stepped to the door with reluctant, trembling footsteps, the agent leading him out of the room. From out of sight, another agent appeared and walked behind Allan. He was being led down the hall, utterly trapped.

The hallway he was being lead down was eerily empty. It was clean, sterile, and lifeless. There was no energy or life anywhere within the halls, utterly abandoned except for Allan and the agents. The only movement or disturbance was the echoing sound of the President's speech being broadcast from every speaker and monitor within the Oval Office, bouncing and echoing down the hallway.

"At this time, I am declaring a State of Emergency. As of now we will urge everybody to remain calm. Do not try and seek vengeance on the company or world that sold out your lives and played on your insecurities for a quick buck. Don't go out raging and destroying everything in sight at the realization that you have nothing left to live for. Don't come to the conclusion that your inevitable and looming death means you will essentially have no consequences for your actions. We urge everyone not to do these things.

The agents turned down another hallway with Allan in tow, before stopping in front of a set of double doors. Each grabbed a handle and stood still, their cold looks from behind their sunglasses freezing Allan in his tracks.

"Our nation's best and brightest are working around the clock to figure out a solution to this epidemic, using everything at our disposal, even the entirety of our military budget. Mainly because our entire military is infected as well and pretty much useless. But I wish to address the problem directly."

Both agents nodded at one another, and opened the doors. There, was the Oval Office. The agents both placed hands on Allan's shoulders and gently pushed him forward. He stepped in the office, the most timid he had ever been in his life. When the leader of the nation looked at him with a stoic, emotionless face and urged him to "Come in, come in," he was scared beyond

belief. Whatever was happening, he didn't know what it was. But he knew he was screwed. Screwed more than he could ever fathom, he was going to have to answer for what he did in front of the entire country.

Following the President's gestures, Allan walked into the office and took his place standing right next to the President. There, several feet in front of the desk sat a blinking camera on a tripod. The President turned and faced the camera again. "My fellow Americans, this man right here is Allan Johnson. He's the Vice President of Globex Pharmaceuticals, and the man in charge of their Adonisis project. Now Allan," The President turned and looked at him, speaking in a calm voice, almost gentle in a way, "Were you aware that this might happen to people who used your product?"

This was Allan's chance. An opportunity to explain it all away. "W-w-well no. You see, what had happened-."

"Let me just stop you right there Allan." President Robinson interrupted. "Because I do not care. I don't think anyone cares about whatever bullshit story you can pull out of your ass. You violated so many safety and regulatory laws to get an unsafe product into market just to make a quick buck. But that's not why I'm mad son. Hell, that's practically as American as it gets." President Robinson swiveled his chair to face Allan directly, folding his hands in his lap and staring him down coldly. "I'm mad, because you gave America cancer. You gave me cancer. I'm going to lose my balls because of you, and I already get enough shit like that from Russia anyway. And I know the responsible and just thing to do is to lock you up and let the courts decide what to do. But my country knows me as a man of action. And where I grew up, we knew what justice was suited for the courts, and what needs to be handled personally."

President Robinson closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “I am the leader of these people and it is my responsibility to lead them through this crisis, and help them heal from it.” Allan began stammering, trying to formulate a rebuttal, but in one sudden and rapid motion the President reached inside his shirt, pulled out a pistol, and fired a round right between Johnson’s eyes.

President Robinson turned the chair to face the camera again as Allan Johnson crumpled to the ground. “Well America,” Robinson said with blood spatters streaking his face, “Let the healing begin.”

December 2024

The Seattle Police Headquarter's holding cells was a cold and unpleasant place for someone to spend their evening. Normally, it is a quiet, sobering place. The only thing in the air being the reek of urine and the buzz of the fluorescent lights. On this evening though, there was a unusual caterwaul echoing through it. A single figure sat propped against the bars, howling out some terrible racket. Hardly anyone knew that this was the single drunk woman's attempt at mimicking a harmonica and failing miserably.

After her harmonica solo had lasted long enough to her liking, the girl took a deep breath and started to belt out her attempt at a stereotypical blues song. " Well my baby done left me, so I went down to the bar. Some guy was being a douchebag, so I broke both his arms. Don't know how I actually broke his arms, I was pretty surprised when that happened. But the cops arrested me, instead of that pile of shit. The man done been keeping me down, 'cuz I got a uterus. I got dem living is a bullshit misogynistic society bluuuuuuuuueeeessss."

An officer down the hallway, at the entry to the holding department shouted at her, "Hey, keep it down in there!"

"You keep it down pigfucker!"The lone woman slumped down on the bench in the cell. This was a rough night for Miranda; and her buzz was wearing off making her having to think and face the reality of her night by degree. The urge to bang her head against the bars came, but she reasoned that the hangover she was going to suffer would do plenty of head pounding, and she should save it for then.

Time passed by in a haze, she wasn't sure how long she was in that cell, making herself as loud and annoying as possible. But after a while she heard footsteps down the hall heading

toward her there she saw a uniformed porcine asshole escorting her salvation, Katy, down the corridor. “Kane, your bail has been posted!” the pork-taint barked at her.

Miranda looked right at Katy, drunkenly emoting “Heyyyyyyy soul sista.”

As the curled ham-dick opened the cell, Miranda stared at Katy. The usually bombastic, jovial girl that was her friend was not there. Instead it was someone who looked very worried looking at Miranda. But, it had to be Katy. It was the same hair and Pac-Man tattoo on her left tit. Was it a doppelganger? No, she was sure this was the real deal. Miranda asked again, “Soul Sista?”

Katy faked a weak smile and said “Hey now, we can talk in the car. Too many nosy people around, you know?”

The still drunk Miranda nodded and stumbled forward. It made perfect sense to her and her inebriated brain, despite the fact that it was only the two of them and the officer impatiently standing by. Katy escorted the stumbling Miranda down the corridor and out the police station. Miranda stuck her head back in the Station’s closing door and yelled off one final “Fuck the Police!” before Katy tugged her into the car.

The first minute of the drive was uncomfortably silent. The starless and frigid Seattle night fogged over the windows, robbing Miranda of entertaining herself by looking out the windows. No, not entertainment, distraction. She was trying not to think about the night. But she didn’t have that luxury, Katy broke the silence, “I’m always there for you, I will bail you out with no question. But I have to know, what happened tonight? What did you do?”

Miranda gave a long exhale. “Pshhhhhhh, I fucking went Xena on some cockback, broke his arms and some other bones. Like a goddamned badass.” Miranda nodded to herself, agreeing with her assessment.

Katy tried to keep her eyes on the road as she pressed for details. “Yeah, they told me that. But how did you do that?”

Miranda shrugged, “Hell if I know. Honestly, it surprised me too. I’m like, a secret amazon ninja or some shit.” Miranda then began to flail her arms around in a faux martial arts fashion, making her attempt at “ninja noises.”

Katy turned a corner, slowing to let a group of homeless people cross the street before saying, “Okay, you’re going to have to start over from the beginning. Why were you even out drinking in the first place?”

Miranda slumped against the window, her head slowly sliding down it, leaving a trail in the window fog. “Valerie left me today. Said we weren’t clicking and she met someone new.”

Katy took a hand off the wheel and placed it on Miranda’s shoulder. “I’m really sorry sweetie. That’s rough. But why are you so upset, you haven’t been seeing each other that long?”

“We haven’t; but we were clicking so well, I really think I was in love. But she left. She left like the rest of them. They always leave.” Miranda gave a deep sigh and stared of into nothingness.

“Alright,” Katy responded. “So something bad happened, you went to get a drink because you were sad. We’ve all been there. But how did that lead to you attacking a guy?”

Miranda sat up and looked at Katy, “You know how it is. Lone girl at a bar, especially a pile of trash like me, the flies were swarming on me all night. So I stepped out to get some fresh air. And...”

Katy pulled into the parking space in front of Miranda’s apartment. “Miranda, what happened?”

Miranda broke down into loud sobs. She kept trying to run away from it all night but it finally caught up to her. Between sobs she managed to choke out, “Oh God, I was so scared.”

Katy set the parking brake and pulled Miranda in close, holding her. In a quiet monotone she asked “He tried to rape you, didn’t he?”

Miranda kept crying into Katy’s shoulder for several minutes, Katy not saying another word just holding Miranda and stroking her back, letting her know she was safe. After a while she tried to regain her composure. Between gasps of air she struggled to say, “It happened so fast. I struggled against him but he just kept coming. I tried to punch him, to get him to go away. He went flying backward and broke his arm against a dumpster. I called the police, but they arrested me.” Her voice changed from broken sobs to outraged yelling, “He fucking tried to rape me, and they arrested me! They fuckign let him go, treating him like damn victim. They locked me up because I was scared and trying to keep myself safe!” Miranda broke back down into tears.

Katy got out of her door and walked around opened Miranda’s door, helping her out of the car. Walking her up the stairs, Katy said to Miranda, “I’m staying with you tonight. I’m going to make sure you’re safe. I know what you’re going through right now...” Katy trailed off and focused back on Miranda.

Katy opened up Miranda's apartment with the spare key and walked her back to her bedroom. She eased Miranda down on the bed. Miranda looked up at her "What am I going to do? They want to press attempted murder charges on me. What am I going to do Katy?"

Katy sat down next to her on the bed and hugged her tight. "You're going to try and get some sleep In the morning, we're going to call my aunt. She's a lawyer, she has experience with situations like this. We're going to get this fixed, I promise you."

For the first time that terrible night, Miranda truly started to relax. "Thank you Katy," she mumbled into Katy's shoulder. "You're the only person I can really count on."

Katy stroked Miranda's hair and said to her "You don't have to thank me. I'd do anything for you. Even if I have to burn down that fucking police station myself, I promise you I will make sure this gets solved." Katy then gently eased Miranda until she was lying down. "Now, try to get some sleep. Its honestly the best thing for you right now. I'm going to be right here the whole time."

For the next hour Katy sat next to Miranda, stroking her hair with a gentle carefulness until she was sure Miranda was asleep. Katy stood up with great slowness, as not to wake Miranda, making her way into the living room where she flopped down on the couch. She tried to force her exhausted mind and spirit to fall asleep. Her mind drifted to something her grandmother said to her when she was little. "When night is at it's darkest, Lady Hera makes sure dawn will come. Dawn will come."

Katy took a deep breath. Dawn would come. As she faded off into sleep she resolved that she would make sure dawn would come.

