



COARSE

HARVEST

A still life.

A tale of noop and paw!

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PROLOGUE

Once a year the harvest comes.

It is the moment on the planet known as the Elastomer when all the noops, who have lived one year of loneliness, are taken away by an unknown force to an unknown fate.

No noop has ever escaped the harvest, and no noop has ever returned from one to tell the story.



CHAPTER ONE

It starts out with a subtle breeze, the air picking up speed in the lowlands of the Elastomer. The wind lifts the planet's iridescent gossamer and electric dust, scattering it for miles, creating an air so thick it disorients every noop who tries to run from it.

Soon, a wall of vertical clouds descends from the sky and sweeps across the planet, collecting every noop in its path. The vapor creeps into the caves and crevices where noops might be hiding, but it swirls safely around the pawls, the nisms, and the Locks, for their souls are of no interest to the forces behind the harvest.

The wall of clouds expands further, filling the planet like an ocean. As the world darkens, it is impossible for the noops to imagine that the sky has ever been blue, the air calm, the days easy. In a way, the worst part of these final moments isn't the harvest itself, but the doubt it creates: In the overwhelming darkness of the violent winds, the noops wonder if the good days weren't just something they had imagined, if the beauty of the Elastomer ever existed at all.

noop, our noop, sits at the edge of a mountain not far from the sea, watching the clouds rush towards him. There are only a few seconds now before the vapor will lift him to the sky.

There has to be a way to escape this, he thinks. I can't let this be the end.



CHAPTER TWO

It has been a long year, a long life, but in noop's mind time has passed too quickly. It feels like yesterday that he was a nut-like fruit on a branch, waiting for his shell to fall to the ground and crack open. In just four seasons, he has done so much more than the noops who fail to venture far from the trees that spawned them. He found a shark helmet and hunted the lakes and seas of the Elastomer for a friend; he outran the terrifying Locks who create earthquakes with every step they take; he found a paw! suit and wore it so that paw! would accept him as a friend.

Those were better days.

But when paw! realized noop was not who he said he was, he attacked noop and abandoned him. noop spent his remaining months on the Elastomer wondering why friendships can't last forever, why all good things must come to an end. It was as if paw! was holding a cloud above his head wherever he went. Even as noop tried to befriend nism, a curious tentacled creature, he saw paw!'s face everywhere: in the clouds above his head, in footprints left on the sand, in the kite nism gave him to cheer him up.

As autumn's rains pour down, giving this year's crop one final burst of growth, the harvest grows on the horizon, and noop hears a noise behind him.

It is paw!. Even though noop knows it is impossible, he wonders if paw! is here to save him. But he can't bring himself to look helpless and ask.

"You're too late," noop says. "It's time for the harvest."

"I know," paw! replies.

noop glances at paw!, but to look at his false friend would bring back a wave of memories, so noop turns his head away and closes his eyes.

"I didn't think the harvest would happen so soon," noop says. He waits for paw! to say something, a single word of comfort, but paw! just looks into the gathering storm.

noop knows what paw!'s silence means.

paw! is not here to save him.

He is here to say goodbye.

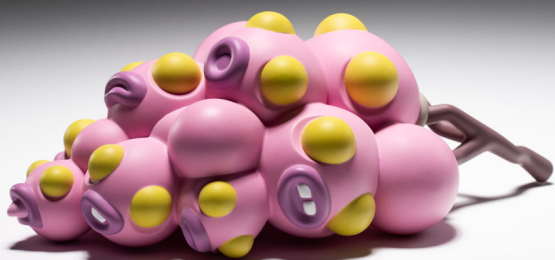


CHAPTER THREE

As the wind picks up, noop looks down at the orchards below, where the seeds of the fruits are already starting to grow so they can be harvested one year from now. Trees full of acor[n]oops and noo[p]ods are sprouting from the branches alongside juicy Locks berries. Further away, he spots a !, a w!, and an aw!, progressions that will all grow into ferocious but lonely paw!s. It is strange for noop to think he and paw! could have ever been so small.

He feels haunted by his past, by all those versions of himself that seemed so permanent while he lived them, but which are now just distant memories, the detritus that comes with being alive.

His body has endlessly been evolving all this time, from minute to minute, from month to month. A chill passes through him like a shockwave as a single question echoes through his mind: *If my body is not what it once was, then what has happened to my soul?*



CHAPTER FOUR

The pollen—those ethereal particles that had once filled noop with wonder—now pummel his face and sting his skin as the harvest speeds in his direction.

“Do you know what will happen to me?” noop asks as he shields himself from the violent winds. He curls up with his knees close to his chin, just like the small oops still in their shells, waiting to live the life noop has already lived. He wants to be one of them. He wants more time.

“Nobody knows,” paw! says. “The harvest comes every year. But nobody knows what it means. Nobody knows where you will go.”

The wall of clouds sounds like thunder now. Inside, noop can see the bodies of other noops, their hands reaching out of the vapor before being drawn back in and upwards towards the sky.

It seems impossible to noop that despite the complexity of his life—an endless sea of emotions he has tried and failed to navigate—that he is nothing more than a fruit in a crop, flesh and bones grown for reasons he’ll never know.

But there is no time for questions now, and he won’t be getting any answers either.

In a few seconds, the clouds will wrap around him to take him away from the only place he has ever called home.



CHAPTER FIVE

This is it.

He thought his life had been on a path to so many other dreams, but this is the moment it had been building towards all along. He is not an individual. He is just another noop among thousands. He wants to believe he is special, but the clouds are so close he can almost touch them now, and soon he will be inside them, unidentifiable from all the other noops swirling up into the ether.

But then paw! speaks.

“I think I can save you,” he says.

noop hugs himself tighter and closes his eyes. He knows he can't be saved. He knows no noop has ever withstood the forces of the harvest. He can feel himself weakening, the wind rushing around him, the vortex pulling him away from the elastomer.

“paw!s don't get harvested,” paw! says. “Remember?”

He unfurls something from his hands.

noop can't believe it. He should have known. The answer was here all along.

It is the paw! suit, the very one that noop had worn in his search for friendship. There is no time for him to ask how many months paw! must have spent trying to locate noop to bring this to him, or why paw! has saved it all this time.

So, noop puts it on. He feels like he is stepping into the noop he once was, the one who didn't know he could hurt others, who thought a simple trick could create a life-long friendship. He likes this

feeling. He wants to be who he was, all the versions of himself that ever existed. He wants to live life again the way he always should have: filling each day with joy instead of sadness, knowing the harvest would eventually arrive.

As he pulls up the zipper and flicks up the hood, the wind blows back the two artificial paw! ears on either side of him, and the force of the harvest surrounds him.

He waits to be lifted up, to join the chorus of noops screaming above him, each one asking for more time.

He waits for his body to become immaterial, the final consequence of a ripening fruit.

But that doesn't happen.

The clouds lift, and noop stays on the ground.

The storm rises higher and higher, until the sky is blue again, and a calm settles onto the planet.

noop can't believe it. He doesn't know what this means, to be the only noop who has ever survived, to experience life on the Elastomer after the harvest.

Slowly, he takes off his hood.

He knows that life will be different now. He needs to hug paw! and let him know how sorry he is for everything that happened between them. It is time for a new beginning. They don't have to be false friends anymore.

But when noop turns to say thank you, paw! is gone.



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