

Section 1:

Slim pickings, your old man would have said, riffling through this merchant's goods, and slim they were indeed. Lumpy, far too slender carrots, softened and yellowing cucumbers, half a hairy zucchini bleeding its juices onto the stained linen of the tray. Aubergines so thin you could hardly call them eggplants, browning at the bases. All prices high, inflated like warm air balloons about to burst.

"You buying any?"

The man stares you down levelly, leading you into the same old dance you shuffle through every day, but today the beat is off. His mask is askew. Wind's picking up early. Stands are getting torn already.

The rumble of a surveillance drone floats down from overhead.

Slim pickings, but pick you must.

1A: *[[Buy an aubergine, her favourite, despite the price.]]*

1B: *[[Buy the half zucchini, it'll leave some change for a smoke.]]*

Choice 1A: *Buy an aubergine, her favourite, despite the price. (set: \$produce to A)*

You pick out an aubergine, the most plump, least damaged to your eyes. The dark rind has hardened, but it doesn't matter, you'll carve it off. Enough garlic will cover the bitter taste. The man follows your every move with greedy eyes, and nods when you hold up the chosen vegetable. You hand over the coins.

The vendor short-changes you.

2A: *[[Let it slide. Times are tough on everyone.]]*

2B: *[[Press for it. It's not your money to give away.]]*

Choice 1B: *Buy the half zucchini, it'll leave some change for a smoke. (set: \$produce to B)*

You reach for the zucchini, or what's left of it, the one with pockmarked dark green skin. The noon sun has softened it to the consistency of an eggplant. The man follows your every move with greedy eyes, and nods when you hold up the chosen vegetable. You hand over the coin.

The vendor short-changes you.

2A: *[[Let it slide. Times are tough on everyone.]]*

2C: *[[Press for it. You want that smoke.]]*

Choice 2A: *Let it slide. Times are tough on everyone.*

The vendor will remember this.

The man smiles at you, as if to ask for your permission. You wink at him.

"A good day to you. Give the old lady my thanks."

Choice 2B: *Press for it. It's not your money to give away.*

The vendor will remember this.

The man squints at the change with a surly frown, then adds another grimy copper coin to the pile on the table.

"Look at that. Give the old lady my best."

Branches 2A & 2B merge:

There used to run a river here, once upon a time. Now a foul-smelling layer of strata covers the bottom of the canal; dirt, faded cans and milky plastic water bottles, the occasional carcass of an abandoned bike stripped for anything useful. Another drone buzzes past.

The vial burns in your hand. For something so small, it sure weighs on your steps and mind. Enough garlic will cover the bitter taste.

Choice 2C: Press for it. You want that smoke.

The vendor will remember this.

The man squints at the change with a surly frown, then adds another grimy copper coin to the pile on the table.

“Look at that. Must have done the sums wrong,” he lies through gritted teeth.

At the black market by the dried-out pond those three coppers turn into a skillfully rolled cigarette. You lift the mask and light it as you cross over Thome street, and by Peorie it’s gone, down to the rice paper. You stomp it out on the tarmac. Another drone buzzes past.

The vial burns in your hand. Despite the relaxant, it shakes.

Enough garlic will cover the bitter taste.

ALL BRANCHES (2A, 2B, 2C) MERGE:

The house is dark as you unlock the door, ascend the stairs to her floor.

Her voice carries from the living room, frail, barely louder than the crackling, rasping, clicking of the radio.

“Is that you, Leo?”

[[“Yes, miss Morgan.”]]

She turns the radio off.

“You went out so early today. Is it time for dinner already?”

“It is,” you reply and swallow the lump at the back of your throat.

“What’s for dinner?”

You pause.

“Au- aubergine,” you reply. // “Zu- zucchini,” you reply.

“Oh, how lovely,” she responds, and turns the static on again.

[[You head to the kitchen to make dinner.]]

The aubergine slices simmer (/) zucchini stew simmers on in the enamel saucepan. The purple carnations on the lid are stained yellow with curry powder, complementing the edges browned by rust.

The final ingredient. You uncork the bottle but your hands won’t stop shaking.

3A: [[You can’t go through with this, no matter what you promised. You tell her.]] -> page 3

3B: [[You have to go through with this, it’s what you promised. You add the hemlock.]] -> page 5

Ending - 3A: [[You can't go through with this, no matter what you promised. You tell her.]]

You set the bottle down on the stone counter, smooth down the front of your shirt.

“Miss Morgan?”

“Yes, Leo?”

“I need to tell you something,” you manage to say.

The clock ticks on on the kitchen wall.

“Leo, you'll have to speak up or step up.”

[[Turn the stove off. Walk into the living room.]]

Miss Morgan has shrunk with age to the point where the threadbare emerald velvet of the sofa swallows her whole. Remnants of the afternoon sun land on her sunken face, filtered through the heavy curtains. She sets the embroidery hoop down next to her on the sofa. She lifts her glasses to look at you, and her smile fades.

“I take it my morning test came back positive,” she says.

You close your eyes.

“Where did it come from?”

[[You tell her about the contagion in her son's letter.]]

“... He didn't, you know, do it. He was taken down.”

She buries her face in her hands. You draw a breath. The air smells of dead flowers, dust and garlic.

Home, home for just a few moments more.

“Why did you tell me?”

You have no answer.

“I thought I was crystal clear on what I wanted when I employed you.”

You don't reply.

“How long do I have?”

That you have an answer for.

“Two hours, then you become contagious. Six until transformation.”

She nods solemnly.

“Did you make the report?”

You shake your head.

“You have to make the report. Otherwise they'll think you poisoned me to rob me. Go on,” she shoos you, “make it now.”

[[The testing station is in the bathroom.]]

The hinges of bathroom door are still askew. You open the medicine cabinet and give the testing kit a shove. It whirrs into action, powered by the hairdryer outlet. The counter is cold against your back as you lean back and wait for the three beeps that mean the machine's monitor is on.

The same message you saw in the morning blinks in ominous red.

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Minutes until contagious: 114.

Your finger hovers on the button.
Except.
Miss Morgan is subject B45172.

[[Subject B6183: Harris, Leo A. - Positive result]]

You draw another vial of blood, wait with bile at the back of your throat for three quick beeps, one long.

It doesn't come. Instead you there's one drawn out tone, the blinking screen, red.
Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Minutes until contagious: 112.

"Is everything alright, Leo," miss Morgan calls.

[[You can't go through with this alone.]]

"Oh child. I am so sorry you were born into our cruel age."

"But where will I go? I can't let it- I have to end it myself. But I have no home. No family. I - I should just file the report and wait for the drones to shoot me down."

She speaks softly.

"Let's have dinner, Leo. There's enough for the two of us."

"But, your result was negative."

She sighs.

"There's nothing left for me, we scraped this world too thin. And now you, my eyes and feet are leaving. Let's have dinner. There's garlic?"

(if: \$produce is A)

"Enough to... cover the bitter taste. And aubergine."

"My favourite. You remembered."

While aubergine is her favourite, garlic is yours. There are worse days to die. Worse ways to go.

(if: \$produce is B)

"Enough to... cover the bitter taste. And zucchini."

"That will do, dear. That will do."

Slim pickings, but pick you did. There are worse days to die. Worse ways to go.

THE END.

Ending - 3B: [[You have to go through with this, it's what you promised. You add the hemlock.]]

The best way to keep one's word is not to give it, that was another of his sayings. But you did, and you keep yours. The drops are few, the liquid clear. Another stir. It feels wrong, the poison on her mother's old wooden spoon. The shakes in your hands are worse, the spoon clatters against the sink.

You can't watch.

You give her a quick smile, and she gingerly accepts the bowl of rice and stewed vegetables, doused in garlic.

[[You excuse yourself to clean up the mess in the kitchen, wash away the onion burning your eyes.]]

There's a clatter and a soft thud from the living room, the sound of a plate cracking and an old woman's head hitting a worn-out sofa. It leaves you cold. You close your eyes.

You have to leave.

Another hour, and this house will be a den of contagion.

[[You have to go through with this alone.]]

Technically, you promised to clean the windows before April, but something got in the way. Your right foot falls asleep as you watch the shadows grow longer across the tiled kitchen floor. You're not sure where you will go, but, you have to file the report. You have to send the results. Otherwise they will think you poisoned her to steal her money.

[[The testing station is in the bathroom.]]

The hinges of bathroom door are still askew. You open the medicine cabinet and give the testing kit a shove. It whirrs into action, powered by the hairdryer outlet. The counter is cold against your back as you lean back and wait for the three beeps that mean the machine's monitor is on.

The same message you saw in the morning blinks in ominous red.

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Minutes until contagious: 24.

Your finger hovers frozen above the button.

Except.

The late miss Morgan was subject B45172.

Subject B45172: White, Anne Morgan - Negative result

Below it, in red:

[[Subject B6183: Harris, Leo A. - Positive result]]

You draw another vial of blood, wait with bile at the back of your throat for three quick beeps, one long.

It doesn't come. Instead you there's one drawn out tone, the blinking screen, red.

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Minutes until contagious: 20.

Another. Another three minutes of waiting.

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Minutes until contagious: 17.

[[It must be a malfunction. You reset the machine.]]

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Minutes until contagious: 11.

What else is there to do? You draw another vial of blood, watch the blinking screen with unseeing eyes.

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Infection level critical. Transformation imminent.

[[Another.]]

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Infection level critical. Transformation imminent.

[[Another.]]

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Infection level critical. Transformation imminent.

[[Another.]]

Subject B6183 - Positive result. Inform authorities. Infection level critical. Transformation imminent.

An-

THE END.