

Swarm X1048 - Ethological Field

Report: Canis Lupus Familiaris, “6”

by F.E. Choe

[AUDIO VERSION](#)

You are born not long after the disaster. The city center has lain evacuated for two days by the time your mother makes her nest. She builds a small burrow from packing blankets, rags, her own sinewy body behind a row of waste containment units, and you are the sixth of your litter to slip out of her. A rubbery cord of pink flesh and matted fur, slick and slippery and new.

Your mother huffs the air around you. She licks at your face, your belly, your tiny paws.

And we watch, transfixed though we have watched countless births on this planet by now, your pinhead-sized nostrils, the soft pinches of flesh around your eyes, the line of your mouth. We watch and wait for your forehead to furrow by the slightest millimeter. Anything.

Our bodies thrum with anticipation. *Move, little one. Move.*

Do anything but lie there so stiff and still as you are.

Your mother whines. She pants. Labor pains wrack her ribcage, your siblings impatient to arrive. You are running out of time to begin.

Move, little one. We jostle against one another, flash with anxiety.

Some of the more heedless among us separate from our luminous cluster and sink down through the air to hover closer to you, small bodies of light which pulse with distress.

And finally, you move. A small twitch, a tremor at the base of your tail.

Life kicks across your spine, and an electric relief washes through us. It ripples through the synched network of our bodies, a burst of ultraviolet light.

We name you 6, and you are the most beautiful creature we have ever seen.

Between our other assignments, we monitor your growth. We log regular measurements of your bone mineralization, catalog each of your needle-sharp milk teeth, enter and track the fluctuations in your weight, your brain development.

In our years of ethological fieldwork on your planet, we have come across bidirectional attachment bonds before, of course. *But*, we relay to our supervisors, *this is an unparalleled opportunity to collect such data firsthand, to record our own experience as direct participants.*

Some among us feel strongly that you are an ethical gray area to be avoided. That our growing interest in you compromises us, the reliability of our research, the unity of our swarm, the nature of our work here. That our time on your declining planet would be better spent documenting the migratory patterns of birds, analyzing the density and growth rate of fiddlehead ferns, or decoding the frequencies of cricket song—all enviable assignments coveted by other collectives, but which would require us to move farther to the periphery of our assigned sector. Farther from the city. Farther away from you.

We can only observe, inventory, archive, we remind the most eager among us, even as we travel as one back to the city at night and watch the sweet pile of you and your milk-drowsy siblings rest against your mother's belly. *Such exogenous attachments are conflicts of interest and will present a significant challenge to our reassimilation at home.*

But you are in such desperate need of care, 6. When you run, your ribs are painfully evident against your sides. We cannot help but go back to you day after day, to flush and vibrate concordantly with affection as you begin to recognize and anticipate our presence each evening. Even the few anxious and dissenting among us go quiet when you lift your head in our direction and bound toward us open-mouthed with excitement.

In those early days, you are always wandering off, already too eager to roam desolate city streets with us as you grow stronger and faster. You are less wary than your brothers and sisters to leave your mother's side. And in doing so, you justify your existence to our superiors and the nature of our attachment to you, 6.

With your help, we record the final chemical messages transmitted by the brittle, dying city sidewalk trees, trace their vast mycorrhizal network under the asphalt before it withers to nothing. We secure the mating and signal calls of eighteen different species of urban-dwelling birds.

In your eighth month of life, you discover a way to the roof of a nearby abandoned apartment building. Its overgrown garden plots have gone wild, reckless, and the air is filled with the humming of bees. You doze in the sunlight as we scan samples from their hives, record the chemical composition of their honey and wax, attempt to replicate the exact ratios of hydrocarbons evident in their pheromones, and graph their complex dance maps.

We linger for much longer than we should in those evenings as we practice and inscribe in our memory the intricate choreography of bees. The pattern of our movements, our delicate, indulgent mimicry, stirs the air gently over your heads and lulls you and your pack to sleep.

We swarm and pull apart, circle and swirl, split and twine and regroup. We arrange our bodies along rows and columns to form a kind of glowing, beaded panel, stretch apart, then collapse inward. We move in unison, folding and unfolding, triptychs of light.

This is how you say *hello*.

This is how you say *hive* and *home* and *clover*.

This is how you say *My saddlebags are filled with pollen*. This means *The flowers in the field beyond have just reached full bloom, their heads chime orange-gold when they bow and bend in the field*.

This is how you say *I have missed you, you have been gone such a long time*.

This is how you say *friend* and *foe*, *wildfire* and *disease* and *danger*.

In your tenth month, human cleaners reenter the city center. While we have been busy collecting and sampling and archiving, processing our detailed reports of life on this planet as efficiently and accurately as we can, they have been slowly sweeping along the coast of the country to you. They systematically and methodically break cities into grids, assign teams to sweep through abandoned buildings, exterminate pests and any animals that cross their path, anything capable of carrying particles and contaminates to other territories.

These cleaners stink of fear. They sour the air with their presence. By the time they reach the city of your birth, one of the last urban centers to be cleared, they have been salvaging and repurposing unauthorized material to supplement and replace their standard-issue equipment for months. They do not realize that they have been spreading the very poison they have been sent here to contain.

And you detect this poison too from across the street as you pick your way back to your den. It stops you in your tracks, mingled with the blood and machine oil the cleaners' boots track across the concrete as they approach the warehouse in which your mother and your siblings wait.

The building once housed a praline company, and when your pack first discovered the hole rusted through its steel door there were still boxes full of the confections. We watched you tear through the cardboard and plastic sleeves, dumb with delight and excitement, and gorge yourself until you were sick. And even now, as a group of cleaners enters the building, layers of residue remain on the brick from butter and sugar cooked in copper bottomed pans.

You do not understand the language that follows, cannot differentiate it from the static crackling of their radios, 6.

—Jesus, it's a whole litter.

—Do it quick, then.

—All of them? Fuck, man, they're not doing anything—

—You get used to it the longer you do this.

—She's in bad shape. I really don't think she's going anywhere—

—It'll be nothing in a few months, you'll see.

You cower, shake underneath a car with your ears pressed flat against your skull. You want to run to your mother, your siblings, to find comfort amid warm bodies which smell and move so like you own. Fear, the only thing that keeps you rooted to the spot outside on the street, the only thing that keeps you alive.

We cannot bear to leave your side, 6. But if you run to them, we cannot follow you either.

We are not to interfere.

You press yourself flat against the concrete, and we shudder and dim by your side when the first shot rings out, an interrupted, broken yelp of pain.

In your seventeenth month, you are living at the edge of what was once an industrial park when you encounter a coyote for the first time. The dust storms and wildfires have put so much ochre into the sky this season that sometimes you sleep through an entire day. When you wake, it is to a cloudy, stifling half-light, gritty discharge crusted down your face from the corners of your eyes.

She is wild and canny, an animal that has never had to unlearn domesticity. You lift your head from your paws and stare at her flat forehead and sharp snout, her thin, sleek body and long limbs. She meets your gaze and pauses only long enough to confirm that you are no threat to her, before skimming past, a flash of ruddy gray-brown against sand and red clay.

We depend on you more and more as you progress from juvenile to adult. You help us locate the spores of three species of mushroom, one of which has been dormant for over two hundred and sixty years. We record the flight of geese, the crashing sound of their wings as they leave the water. We study the predatory strategies of herons and egrets, the spawning behavior of blue catfish.

But you are reckless sometimes, and there are so many things you do not know. You drink from polluted streams. You think nothing of scavenging from the rotting, bloated carcasses of other

animals. You are too trusting of coyotes, coydogs, and feral animals when we encounter them, and we watch, mute with dread each time teeth sink into your ear, your muzzle, your side and you stumble away wounded.

You are five when we stumble across the path of a bear. He is starving. His pelt is dull and mangy. And he is much bigger than you.

You bark, startled, your hackles raised.

He stretches to his full height, majestic and imperious before swiping at your flank.

You yelp, a high-pitched wail of pain before leaping away, sprinting madly away into the woods.

He barrels after you.

We search and search, skim and cover the area for hours before we circle back to hover restlessly by your latest, makeshift den in a half-rotted hunting blind. We draw close together, collapse our bodies into a small, singular, bright ball of light. You might find your way back eventually. Surely, there is a chance.

We lose track of you.

It is not long before our supervisors send us an updated timeline. Your planet is deteriorating much faster than we initially predicted. *Get what you can over the next sixteen months, they say. Collect what you can. Then, get out.*

We ask if there is time to prolong the search for you before we move on to a different area. But the directive from our superiors is clear.

Leave it alone, they tell us. Focus on what can be salvaged. Or have you forgotten what it is you are here to do?

In that final year, there are many things we are unable to collect. We lose the life cycle of paper wasps, all knowledge of the construction methods of their hexagonal nests. We lose the average gestational period of wasp larvae in the Brown Turkey fig, the Adriatic, and the Bourjassotte Grise. We lose the shell patterning of six species of freshwater turtle.

We lose the gold thread of orb-weavers, the structural complexity of their webs. We lose the precision and methodical, graceful endurance with which these spiders climb and mend their silks. How they pick and thread and worry the filament through their claws. How mechanically they unspool their homes from their bodies.

We lose the last of the milkweed in full bloom by mere days, fail to observe the monarch butterflies feeding, laying their eggs, the migrations and life cycles of subsequent generations as they retrace the paths of their ascendants for the final time.

Some of us are quick to blame the others. *We would have been here in time, gotten what we needed, if only it hadn't been for 6. Is this not what we said would happen? This is why we are dissuaded from forming anything more than a distant, professional rapport with subjects.*

Perhaps we have spent too much time here. Some of us begin to look forward to the possibility that our supervisors might pull us out of the project. Some of us wish to return home.

We have performed thousands of these archival acquisitions with unfailing accuracy in the past, and for what? One more data point, an entry in an index in the vast catalog of dead planets curated by our superiors.

The work here, it is warping our sense of time, of purpose, our sense of self.

Tonight, we are documenting the last display of a rare group of fireflies. They have exhibited anomalistic behavior for thousands of years, individually sending out yearning sparks of bioluminescence until they synchronize, beam in unison, light and dark and light and dark.

We cast our bodies in a wide, loose net around a dense gathering of them, ready for the moment they sync together. They flare quickly and subside, one after the other.

Something crashes faintly through the brush.

Between us the fireflies begin to sync.

Another crash, closer this time.

And it is you. Beautiful, barking, clumsy you. Breaking through the tree line and rushing toward us.

We hum with delight, glow so brightly that we disturb the fireflies. They dissipate, hover meekly lower to the ground, send out only tentative flashes.

We send out light. We scatter and collapse and unfold like the panels of a triptych.

Can you smell it too, 6? A chemical reaction as strong as the sulfur left by spent fireworks in the air.

The fireflies rise up and join us, and we are, for a moment continuous, a rippling, flashing wave of endless light.

Hello. We have missed you. You have been gone so long.

Weeks later we discover the tumor on your chest, detect the DNA methylation, the first signs of the cancer that will kill you. A cluster of cells, their division and growth uncontrollable.

They divide and divide and divide, insatiable, covetous, resolute as they slowly and steadily lay waste to your body.

You are almost seven when we follow you back to the edge of the city of your birth. You settle on a bank of soft grass by the river, too exhausted to move any further. You have traveled for days, stopping only to rest and drink a little water to arrive at this place, and soon it will be dark.

This is the end. We have seen it many times before in our time spent here on your world.

Like your birth, death is a phenomenon for which we have no innate vocabulary, no natural words with which to shape an understanding.

All we can do is flicker above you and watch as you pant heavily on your side, your chest rising and falling with irregular, ragged breaths.

We have no hands with which we can caress your face or head, nothing with which to comfort or hold you. We cannot nuzzle your forehead or stretch a soft, yielding body along your spine for warmth. We cannot rest an ear or muzzle against the bony ridge of your chest.

We cannot even weep.

We can only watch as your breathing begins to slow, note the heavy, pressing stillness that lengthens and lengthens and lengthens between each rise and fall of your chest.

You fix your eyes on some unseen place in the grass. You blink sleepily.

And then you stop.

6, please.

What we do next is not in any log or report. You will not find an account of it in the thousands upon thousands of fieldwork reports we submit over our shared life as a swarm.

We settle on your body, blanket you in our own glowing selves. We codify and imprint your genetic sequence into ribbons of light. We inscribe every micrometer of you into our collective memory.

One of us holds the first time you kick out with life under the wetness of your mother's nose. Another holds the memory of chasing a flock of geese as they take flight, the sound of their beating wings like drums, how they churn the surface of the water and find purchase enough to heave upward into the sky. Another holds the sensation of sleeping in a soft pile of your brothers

and sisters, of rest amid warm bodies so like your own, in a brick warehouse that smells faintly of sugar.

It is our final, solitary act of love, 6. All we can give.

We hope it is enough.

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